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FEMINIST STYLISTICS IN AHDADF SOUEIF'S AISHA *

Ahdaf Soueif'in Romanı Aisha'da Feminist Biçembilim

Rana NOORİ AWAD¹

¹ Zakho Üniversitesi, Beşeri Bilimler Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili Bölümü, Zakho, Irak, rananoori2020@gmail.com, orcid.org/0000-0001-9293-1360

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ABSTRACT

Deconstructing meanings and their accepted interpretations are the primary goals of stylistics. Feminist stylistics is mainly based on feminist theories, which are particularly interested in patriarchal norms that marginalize and degrade women. This study examines the feminist discourse in Ahdaf Soueif's short story collection Aisha, which is one of the significant works portraying Arab women in a patriarchal culture. Asian women's difficulties are covered in the feminist book Aisha. By putting gender issues at the center of the textual analysis, feminist stylistics exposes the untenable assumptions of traditional stylistics. This feminist approach highlights gender discourses in various texts, including linguistic and thematic disparities. In light of this, the study will explain feminist stylistics, provide a brief overview of Ahdaf Soueif's biography, and use a feminist stylistic approach to Soueif's stories. The author hopes to demonstrate how language's treatment of gender reflects patriarchal culture. In order to evaluate sexism and patriarchal issues in the stories and how point of view, agency, metaphor, or transitivity are tied explicitly to gender by separating women's writing habits from men's writing, this study will use feminist stylistics to analyse the stories at word/phrase, sentence, and discourse level.

ÖZ

Anlamları ve bunların kabul edilen yorumlarını yapı sökümüne uğratmak, biçembilimin birincil hedefleridir. Feminist üslup esas olarak, özellikle kadınları marjinalleştiren ve aşağılayan ataerkil normlarla ilgilenen feminist teorilere dayanmaktadır. Bu çalışma, ataerkil bir kültürde Arap kadını betimleyen önemli eserlerden biri olan Ahdaf Soueif'in kısa öykü derlemesi Aisha'daki feminist söylemi incelemektedir. Asyalı kadınların zorlukları feminist kitap Aisha'da anlatılıyor. Feminist üslup bilimi, toplumsal cinsiyet konularını metinsel analizin merkezine koyarak, geleneksel üslup biliminin savunulamaz varsayımlarını teşhir eder. Bu feminist yaklaşım, dilbilimsel ve tematik eşitsizlikler de dahil olmak üzere çeşitli metinlerdeki toplumsal cinsiyet söylemlerini vurgular. Bunun ışığında, çalışma feminist üslubu açıklayacak, Ahdaf Soueif'in biyografisine kısa bir genel bakış sunacak ve Soueif'in hikayelerine feminist bir üslup yaklaşımı kullanacak. Yazar, dilin toplumsal cinsiyeti ele alış biçiminin ataerkil kültürü nasıl yansıttığını göstermeyi umuyor. Hikâyelerdeki cinsiyetçiliği ve ataerkil meseleleri ve kadınların yazma alışkanlıklarını erkeklerin yazma alışkanlıklarından ayırarak bakış açısının, failliğin, mecazın veya geçişliliğin açıkça toplumsal cinsiyete nasıl bağlandığını değerlendirmek için bu çalışma, feminist üslubu kullanarak öyküleri kelime/anahtarlar analiz edecektir. ifade, cümle ve söylem düzeyi.

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Sorumlu yazar/Corresponding author: Rana NOORİ AWAD, rananoori2020@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

Wareing (1994: 1) claims that stylistics, frequently referred to as a subfield of literary linguistics, has prioritized the study and analysis of literary texts. The study of stylistics is crucial to literary analysis. It is acknowledged as a crucial area of linguistics and is necessary to literary studies as a single, coherent field. To illustrate the influences in the disciplines of structuralist linguistics and rhetoric, the historical roots and development of stylistics are explored. In particular, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and, more recently, computational corpus approaches and the domains of cognitive linguistics have been impacted by stylistics, a prominent subfield of linguistics (Stockwell, 2020).

Academics are paying close attention to modern stylistics, which is evident in publications, research journals, conferences, and seminars. In the early twenty-first century, stylistics is particularly important. As shown by the growth of sub-disciplines strengthened and made possible by discourse, culture, and social theories, modern stylistics is an active branch of study. Feminist, cognitive, and discourse stylistics are established as the schools of current stylistics that have been supported by the theories of feminism, psychology, and discourse analysis. Since this study has mainly specialized in examining the study of feminism, the focus will be on studying the feminist side of the theory.

The recent developments in stylistics have resulted in its merging with feminist theory in order to analyse literary texts related to the study of sexism and the distinction between women and men. Gender has become a crucial issue in studying texts written by women. Sara Mills associated style and feminist theory in her book *Feminist Stylistics*. She describes stylistics and feminism as complex forms that may have multiple meanings in the reader's understanding (Mills, 1995: 1). Therefore, the basic theory of Feminist Stylistics has become a preoccupation in the modern era. Thus, it is one of the primary sources for female novelists, writers, and critics to address women's issues, such as feminist identity, oppression, and injustice because of male domination. As Mills states:

The feminist analysis aims to draw attention to and change the way that gender is represented since it is clear that a great many of these representational practices are not in the interests of either women or men. Thus, feminist stylistic analysis is concerned not only to describe sexism in a text but also to analyse the way that point of view, agency, metaphor, or transitivity are unexpectedly closely related to matters of gender to discover whether women's writing practices can be described. (Mills, 1995: 1)

Furthermore, feminist stylistics theory has been concerned with studying how "discrimination," "racism" and "homophobia" may "overlap" and "interact" with different forms of "sexism" and how they are reflected in language (Mills, 1995: 3). Montoro (2017) has also defined feminist stylistics as a branch of stylistics which is interested in studying the language encoding of gender in texts by using some models related to the stylistics. Nonetheless, "gender concerns" in several meanings centred on the emergence of multiple perspectives bring a closer understanding of gender (Montoro, 2017: 346).

Because of the effects of postmodernism and poststructuralism, feminist stylistics that focuses primarily on the issue of analysing the post-feminist discourse in the twentieth century requires a more focused concentration than in past decades (Lazar, 2007: 150). In this period, language is accepted as a tool to support the ideas of feminism rather than as a "material entity" that may have a role in shaping those ideas. By examining male supremacy in society and literature, Arıkan (2016) describes feminist stylistics as a means of illustrating the role of women in language and society. In order to present a different image of women in language and social production, feminist stylistics seeks to do so.

Current feminist stylistics is primarily concerned with the assumption that there is a significant difference between "women's style" and "men's style" in writing. These linguistic and thematic distinctions in women's writing are called "genderlect" or "gendered sentence," and they are the primary focus of feminist stylistics (Arıkan, 2016). As Sara Mills points out, language is not a place where meanings are forced but where some meanings are negotiated or contested (Mills, 1995: 103). So, the first aim of studying feminist stylistics is described by Mills as follows:

Feminist stylistics aims to make explicit some of the untenable assumptions underlying conventional stylistics and, by not simply adding gender to its list of interesting elements to analyse, take stylistics into a new phase. It aims to lead stylistics away from analysis of the language of the text, as if that language was simply there, to an analysis of socioeconomic factors which have allowed that language to appear, or

which have determined its appearance, or which have determined the type of interpretations of that text which are possible. (Mills,1995: 13)

Besides the first aim of making the earlier assumptions explicit, the second aim of studying feminist stylistics is given as follows:

Feminist stylistics also aims to show that gender is foregrounded in texts at certain key moments and is usually dealt with in ways that can be predicted. These moments often appear to be common sense but foregrounding them enables us to read them differently. In this way, the book intends to look at texts which appear to be explicitly dealing with gender issues; for example, love scenes in books, differential usage of terms for men and women, sexism, and so on. But it will also analyse those elements which do not, at first sight, seem to have anything to do with gender; for example, metaphor, narrative, and focalisation. (Mills, 1995: 13)

Like every other sort of stylistics, feminist stylistics is based on linguistics' core concepts. The analysis of a text can, however, consider ideology and other aspects thanks to feminist stylistics. Feminist stylistics analyses power structures using tools like passivisation, transitivity, agency, and fragmentation from functional stylistics (Woldemariam, 2018: 33).

The studies on feminist stylistics take subjects of feminism and use stylistics analysis to examine texts. Sarah Mills (1995) considers language a tool for analysing ideas, and she examines the writing of men and women to identify sexism in literary texts. Mills, in her book *Language and Sexism* states that the issue of sexist language has been heavily debated within feminist circles since the 1960s. The desire to change the language that discriminated against women and appeared to belittle and dismiss those activities associated with women was a significant concern for feminist theorists and activists, who attempted to change the way women were represented in advertisements, newspapers, and magazines, as well as the way they were named and addressed in texts and interaction (Mills, 2008: 1).

Similarly, Litosseliti, in her book *Gender and Language Theory and Practice*, argues that the humanities and social sciences' "turn to language," as well as the development of "critical linguistics" and "discourse analysis," have all influenced a rethinking of gender and language concerns (2014: 1). The claim is that both "gender" and "gendered" identities are "social and individual," they differ between "generations," "situations," and among "language users" who belong to various communities and vary regarding their age, ethnic origin, race, religion, class, sexual orientation, or education. Litosseliti explains new directions in the study of gender and language as follows:

The current and new directions in the study of gender and language, in terms of theoretical and analytical frameworks, are the result of a critical rethinking of linguistic analysis, feminist theory, and feminist linguistic analysis. This also involves a lack of consensus on how to evaluate the claims of the literature and to what extent to revisit previous assumptions. (Litosseliti ,2014: 2)

Mary M. Talbot (1998), in *Language and Gender: An Introduction*, also studies gender as a social category, not a grammatical one, because gender is a major social division and vital for humans. Birth gender has far-reaching consequences. It has an impact on our behaviour as well as how others treat us. Feminist stylistics grew and developed in various domains based on this constructionist point of view in gender and language studies to examine literary and non-literary texts with varying meanings for different readers. In this context, this study aims to scrutinize the varying meanings in Ahdaf Soueif's *Aisha* based on the analysis of gender and language.

Ahdaf Soueif was born in Cairo Province, Egypt, on March 23, 1950. While pursuing her doctorate, she spent her pre-university years in London with her mother. She spent most of her childhood in Egypt, where she attended Cairo and London schools before graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in the English Language Department from Cairo University in 1971. Soueif graduated from the University of America in Cairo with a master's degree in English and Literature (1973). She was awarded a scholarship to study linguistics at Lancaster University in England (1978). She spent the majority of her time in Egypt and the United Kingdom (Chambers, 2011: 245).

Ahdaf Soueif is accepted as an Anglo-Arab novelist, translator, and political analyst. Her work includes themes on femininity, particularly women's "autonomy" and "sexuality," Egypt's relationship to the "West," and "Arab identity" in a changing political atmosphere. *The Map of Love* (1999) and *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) are both significant works that stress gender topics as well as Egypt's political past and the impact of

colonialism. Her two short story collections, *Aisha* (1983) and *Sandpiper* (1996), also deal with women's inner lives and the experience of migrating between Egypt and the West.

Soueif's first series of short stories, *Aisha*, was published in 1983. Edward Said reviewed it for the *London Review of Books*. In addition to his comments on the work of other postcolonial English-language writers like Chinua Achebe and V. S. Naipaul, Said expressed his admiration for her (Brown, 2017: 78). Soueif's writing indicates that the concept of "women's identity" is expressed through a nomadism movement that transcends established boundaries. *Aisha*, the heroine of Soueif's series of short stories of the same title, is an example of cultural reconfiguration brought on by displacement. When her parents decide to relocate to London, *Aisha*'s identity and cultural positioning are doubled. The story collection depicts a continual transition from Arabic language culture, which symbolises the East and her country Egypt, "traditional Middle Eastern values," and "Islam rules," to English language culture, which represents "western modernity," "literature," and "knowledge" (D'Alessandro, 2007: 325).

Aisha is experimental in various ways. It is neither a "novel" nor a "collection of short stories," according to Hilary Kilpatrick (1992). Kilpatrick writes of *Aisha* in her discussion of English fiction that Soueif has combined modern techniques such as the stream of consciousness and flashback with a preference for formally independent but thematically related narrative units, which are very common in older Arabic literature (Nash, 2007: 65). This collection contains eight chapters, titled "Returning", "1964", "The Suitor", "Knowing", "The Wedding of Zeina", "Her Man", "The Apprentice", and "The Nativity". Each chapter's plot is unique, but this collection of short stories shares one common character: *Aisha*. The narrative technique is related to the main character, *Aisha*, a middle-class Egyptian-educated woman attending a London state school where her excellent English sets her apart from the other students (Nash, 200: 66). The story suggests that *Aisha* is the centre of attention and the incidents related to her are narrated by a narrator who displays different viewpoints and depicts *Aisha*'s in-between situation in the society.

The stories in *Aisha* depict women of various social classes and religious affiliations, as well as women of various ages, levels of education, and experience. These women have suffered as a result of unfavourable circumstances and insensitive men in their society. The love-hate relationship is central to Soueif's stories, which also depict sexual politics, culture, and practices. Within this context, this study aims to analyse Ahdaf Soueif's short story collection, *Aisha*, which contains some female characters from different cultural backgrounds, by exploring their major roles according to a feminist stylistics perspective.

This study adopts Sara Mills's (1995) model of feminist stylistics. The analysis focuses on the stories on four levels; each level has its own characteristics and has its own categories. The analysis starts with the analysis at the level of the word and phrase, goes on with the analysis at the sentence level, and ends with the level of discourse in *Aisha*. In this sense, the study will focus on how the themes such as sexism, patriarchal dominance, female resistance, and gender inequality are reflected on word, phrase, sentence, and discourse levels.

2. Scope of Study

Previous feminist stylistics research focused on patriarchy, sexuality, race, nationalism, religious fundamentalism, social relationships, and the status of women in Western societies. Few have attempted to apply feminist stylistics theory to Arabic novels written in English and to compare the style of feminist Arab writers to women's western style. This study proposes the need for new models to search for gender issues and sexism in the selected texts' analysis. This study examines the stories on four levels, using Sara Mills' feminist stylistics model: the word level, the phrase level, the sentence level, and the discourse level. The study's goal is to discover how those levels can be used to deconstruct sexism, patriarchy, and gender bias linguistically. From a new perspective on Arabic literary works, the study highlights the language used in the texts by analysing the discourse of the characters in the novel.

3. Data Selection

Aisha, an example of short fiction, is open to discussing some issues in feminist stylistics, such as sexism, patriarchal authority and ideologies, and gender roles. By applying discourse analysis to *Aisha*, the primary aim is to show the features discussed in feminist stylistics. Sara Mills's model of feminist stylistics will be the main tool to analyse the stories. Mills writes in her book:

In order to do any analysis of text, we need to be clear about the type of model that we are using, because that has serious implications for how we analyse the text and what our interpretations are. This does mean that, unlike most stylistics textbooks, we cannot plunge straightaway into an analysis of texts, but that we have to consider our assumptions about texts and the relation they have with context and readers since frequently it is here that assumptions about gender are most at work. (Mills, 1995: 18)

By extracting linguistic evidence from the stories, the study re-evaluates linguistic strategies related to sexism, power and dominance, social inequality, and social relationships. Because feminist stylistics is a linguistic means of expressing a feminist point of view, this study selects stories that reflect feminist issues.

This short story collection was chosen for several reasons in this regard. To begin, the research for these stories is primarily based on feminist theory. They contribute to the improvement of this study by approaching it from a feminist standpoint. Furthermore, this study reveals how events are narrated from a female perspective, revealing a world of frustration in which women rebel against traditional roles. The study also employs an eclectic model to identify linguistic devices that reflect the female narrative perspective. This proposed model combines feminism and linguistics to demonstrate how feminism, as a social theory, influences authors' linguistic choices to depict the characters' frustration, which reflects the stereotypical image of women in the Arab world.

4. Analysis at the Level of the Word and Phrase

Linguistic determinism claims that language structures determine how societies see and shape the world (Mills, 1995: 63). Feminist critics are concerned with sexism in language, and they claim this type of language usage has a significant impact on readers, particularly females. Furthermore, Mills (1995) uses sexism in language as a starting point for her investigation of how people choose their words so that the first focus will be on sex-specific pronoun use, misuse of generics, address phrases, and negative descriptions of females in various texts. To Mills, first, we need to consider whether language merely reflects the world (i.e., simply 'puts names' on things that exist even without language) or whether language influences our perception of the world (i.e., things which our language names become more 'evident' than things which our language does not name) (1995: 62). She mostly takes a side on the idea that language influences our perception. Thus, we should focus on changing the established perceptions about gender bias. So, she proposes to analyse the words first.

It is essential to look at how males and females are named in Aisha's stories. The first-person narrator in the novel is a female who is unnamed but tells the story of the heroine named "Aisha" (Soueif, 1983: 32). The stories refer directly to gender issues in the Arab community, and each introduces a different character. In part named "1964," Aisha calls herself a "heroine" (23); thus, the writer announces the sovereignty of the female. She uses the words like "father, mother" (24), "boy," and "girl" (29) in terms of social contexts and with social connotations.

The marital status of women in the stories is represented chiefly with specific words such as "Mademoiselle Marianne" (49). The words that refer to endearments, such as "pretty" (45), and some words in the French language, like "Chérie" (45), are frequently used to refer to females. The standards of those words are mostly socially decided and ironically used by the author. The writer also uses some words to describe women containing sexual connotations. For instance, when "Tante Safi" talks to Aisha about Marianne, she describes her body, her "broad hips and heavy thighs," "full breasts tapered into a small waist," and "powerful sexuality" (45). Soueif reflects the established criteria about women's body, which is criticized by feminists. She describes a society in which women's body is the target object. The word "virgin" (54) is also used with sexual connotations. Soueif explicitly refers to female sexuality and female sexual experiences in this context. In doing so, she deconstructs established patriarchal rules while also bringing female sexuality to the forefront of conservative societies.

In "The Wedding of Zeina," Soueif's use of words reflects the visual and aural imagery of a cinematic scenario through stark realism, evoking a cinematic atmosphere through the written word. Zeina is the protagonist of multiple stories. In "The Wedding of Zeina," she is just a little girl who is married. In a flashback, the adult nanny Zeina tells young Aisha about her life (Miniawi, 2016: 96). Zeina is mostly called in the story a "bride" (88) and a "girl" (90-91). The word "girl" is used in binary opposition to men. In the Arab society, "girl" denotes low status, youth, and irresponsibility. It is what is lacking in the word 'woman' (Mills, 1995: 84). At the same time, it is used to refer to the virginity of a female. While the story puts the words like "little girl"

(86), “child” (88), and “the bitch” (91) referring to Zeina, it refers to the man Zeina gets married to with the words like “Her man” (85), “her husband” (85), and “bridegroom” (87). The possessive pronouns reflect the societal status of men who are accepted as superior.

The language used to describe the wedding night contains sexual violation. Ahdaf Soueif uses the words and phrases such as “take the knickers off” (88), “thighs tight” (91), “a thick white bandage wrapped” (90), “bandaged finger” (91), “blood” (92), “undress” (87), and “undershirt” (87). On the wedding night, all of these words were used in acts of violence against women. These are the most frequently used words in her work. The author’s main concerns are reflected in the use of these words. Soueif reflects her concern for women’s issues, especially for underage girls, their marriage is compulsory by their parents, at this young age, girls do not have knowledge about the wedding night. These customs are widely spread in Egyptian culture. As well as the language used to describe the wedding night, Zeina describes her husband with animistic words such as “big as a bull” (92). The word bull is a metaphor for vulgarity and violence in Arabic culture. The characters also reflect the pejorative perspective towards women. For instance, the uncle calls Zeina a “bitch” (91).

The words that describe the patriarchal rules are also given. “Our Honour, Our daughter’s Honour, Our family’s Honour” (92) are specific in this sense. In Soueif’s works, this is a classic example of a low-class or rural Egyptian cultural practice shown with brutal realism. On her wedding night, a party is held in the name of family honour, especially to honour the bride’s virginity (Miniawi, 2016: 96). This kind of evidence implies that the language we use shapes our worldview and, by extension, the opportunities available to women (Mills, 1995: 64). Research (Eberhardt 1976; Martyna 1980; Adamsky 1981) shows that sexist language has long-term consequences on people’s self-image and confidence. As a result, feminists use gender-neutral or anti-sexist terminology to demonstrate that they do not see the world as a masculine domain. They argue that through language, people should accept women’s experiences and contributions. Even the words ‘he’ or ‘she’ in phrases imply a critical perspective and attitude against traditional gender norms (Mills, 1995: 72).

Zeina’s “sister-wife” is also an oppressed woman. She calls her husband Sobhi as “my husband” (96), “my man” (101), and “Abu Sa’d” (104). The second wife calls her husband “Si Sobhi” (102); the word “Si” is from the Pharaonic era and is from the ancient Egyptian language and means a ‘man’. Thus, it is clear that the women accept and obey their husbands because of their status as “man”. As the narrative progresses, Zeina calls her husband “Iblis” and “Devil” (96) because of his anger and hatred towards Zeina. Hekmat, her sister, describes him as “The Djinn”. The word “The Djinn” (sometimes spelt Djinn) refers to a spirit that existed before humanity but was created by God. According to Arab culture, Jinn, which can influence humanity with God’s intent, can be benevolent and wicked. The hatred of women towards men is reflected within this word.

Soueif explicitly uses the words of the body parts, which are mostly accepted as taboo in Arab culture. The “naked breast” (106), “the nipple” (106), “writhing” (106), and a “sob” (107) are all used to make women’s bodies visible, which is also a taboo in this society. Although she describes how female sexuality is oppressed and abused, she still talks about “girl’s pleasure” (107), which is a right from a feminist perspective. However, Soueif is well aware that changing the norms is not as easy as it seems; thus, she always reminds men’s established superiority in Arab culture. Tahiyya recommends Zeina how she should “make [her husband] feel like the master of men” (107). Men are equal to be masters in their culture, so Zeina is expected to be “a sea for a man to down in” (109). This is because Arab societies value men more than their female counterparts, and here the patriarchy in these phrases, the inequality between the gender is evident. This sexual connotation is again reflecting the superior and oppressive attitude of men. The husband’s calling Zeina not by her name is also significant in describing this oppression. He does not say her name but calls her “woman”. He wants to underestimate her value as an individual with that word. Sobhi’s approach to his second wife, Tahiyya, is also derogatory. He calls her “you bitch” (112) and “dirty slut” (112).

The following story “The Apprentice” again deals with sexuality. The story introduces female sexuality using some words such as “sexy,” “yellow hair,” “a deep décolletage,” and “high-heeled green open shoes with ankle straps” (117). The body parts are also made visible with the frequent use of the words such as “her head,” “her hand,” and “her elbows” (117). The writer uses the hairstylist as a setting of pure femininity. The boy’s sexuality develops as he begins to touch the women’s necks, ears, and hair as a natural by-product of his job of washing their hair (El-Miniawi, 2016: 101). It is free from male oppression and abuse. Women are what they want to be in this setting. They even experience their sexuality by communicating with other men, even though they are boys. The hairdressing salon (Romance Salon) is full of women of different ages, marital

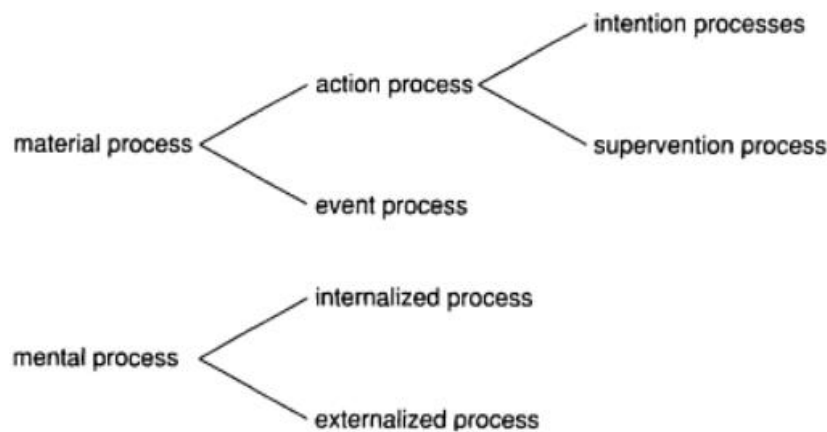
statuses, and classes. There are “ladies” (122), an “old lady” (124), “Madame Nada,” “Madame Aisha,” “Mademoiselle Mimi,” “Madame Gabi” (127), “Old Madame Angele” (123), and “Mademoiselle Paulette” (124).

The unoppressed sexuality is also given within the words. The words like “pressing hard,” “rubbing slowly,” “closing her eyes,” “fingertips wet,” “a little friction” (124), “thumbs at the crown,” “his fingers to the back of her neck” (125), “women’s feet” (125), “soft hips into soft leather” (126), “the wide hips,” and the slim ankles” (129) all refer to female sexuality that is unbounded in this place. These words are used to criticize the female body's taboo status in Arab culture. The author draws attention to a sexual encounter that takes place in a feminine setting free of male oppression. Several of Soueif’s protagonists desperately seek alternate fulfilment (El-Miniawi, 2016: 106), and Aisha has a temporary tendency to be with the butcher though the end is frustrating. The male in this story is called “Zar-man” (151), “a master butcher” (152), and a “dwarf” (152). This word is used to identify him as “A tiny man with a great big ugly head” (152). “His manhood”, “his maleness”, and “his masculinity” (161) are strongly mentioned. The abuse Aisha experiences makes her an unfortunate passive object while making the male subject an active and dominating figure.

Findings suggest that women have been devalued at the word/phrase level by prevalent words that refer to traditional family behaviours and restrictions on women. In addition, in the stories, the writer presents a highly pathetic image of women, as well as prevailing patriarchal beliefs, power relations, and sexist viewpoints.

5. Analysis at The Level of The Sentence

Mills contends that analysing the sentence level is dependent on analyzing textual transitivity choices. She proposes sentence analysis by describing material and mental processes in a narration with a schema. The critic examines the author’s and reader’s perspectives to determine the protagonist's and antagonist's characteristics (Mills, 1995: 110). Ideology appears to be reflected in the speaker’s or writer’s linguistic preferences. As Wales states, “The different patterns of transitivity are the prime means of expressing our internal and external experiences, which is part of the ideational function of language” (Wales,1989: 466). An orator or author can choose from “material, mental, and relational” possibilities, as shown in the following schematic form of material and mental processes:



When we apply this schema to traditional fiction and Soueif’s stories, we can observe that material processes regulate traditional fiction. In contrast, in Soueif’s novels, female characters’ mental processes are mostly incorporated into tangible ones. Internal processes, such as events, sentiments, and attributions, are also externalized. As Mills claims: “The extent to which a character is the passive ‘victim’ of circumstance, or is actively in control of the environment, making decisions and taking action, is one of the concerns of feminist stylistics” (Mills, 1995: 112).

The study of transitivity primarily concerns how actions are represented in texts, including the types of activities present, the actors participating, and the beneficiaries of those acts. Transitivity choices indicate decisions on which participants and processes to use, as well as the roles those processes and individuals may

play. The significance of these categories stems from the fact that syntactic decisions are a component of character representation. A character's actions may appear particularly introspective if based on many internalized thinking processes. Furthermore, if a character's actions are based on many externalized mental processes, they may appear incomplete. When a character is written based on supervision processes, it might seem out of control (Mills, 1995: 110). Thus, the characters' worldviews and the way they see themselves concerning others can be inferred from an examination of patterns in transitivity choice (Mills, 1995: 112). Soueif's transitivity choice, namely "who does what to whom?" needs analysis. What is the focus of the investigation? Would a syntactic analysis reveal it? Thus, Soueif's stories lend themselves to a syntactic analysis in which the gendered representations of the active and passive, the actor and the sensor, stand out more clearly. The depiction of female active and passive roles in Aisha leads to the conclusion that the stories begin with feminine passivity and end with female action, albeit on a mental level. The female character, or sections of her body, is the performer in these procedures.

In the first story of Aisha, "Returning", the protagonist's marriage is described as if she were a passive recipient of masculine action. To analyse the transitivity decisions in the novel, the actors in each process are extracted, and the grammatical level of each process is correlated with them, as shown below:

"He slept alone, unknowing, in large double beds that mocked her." (11)

"Twice he had not come looking for her." (11)

In these two examples above, Soueif describes Aisha's frustrated and unemotional life with her ex-husband. She describes that she has a separate bedroom and sleeps alone. He did not search for her if she was absent from him.

The story of "1964" begins with the journey, as Aisha travels from Egypt to England with her family on a boat, and she gets to know a 17-year-old Indian teenager named Christopher, who asks her to meet him on the ship. The narrator depicts the female as weak and the agent male as strong:

"I gave him my London address, and paid for it when he actually wrote." (24)

"How had he got my address? I hung my head." (24)

Likewise, what happened to Aisha when she went out with the son of her parents' friend portrays a similar picture. Here, the male is an agent, and the female is acted upon, which is affected by the actions of the male.

"He kissed me goodnight in our front garden he never asked me out again." (28)

"David came to fetch me in a dark suit." (36)

In the story titled "The Suitor", the female is sometimes the actor, and the male is acted upon. Mimi gets strength in her decisions towards her suitors at certain times, while the suitors take the role of temporary passivity and submission to those conditions she sets. Mills states that "If the process is a material one, the actor will be called the agent; if the process is a mental one, the actor is referred to as the sensor" (Mills, 1995: 113). The following sentences need analysis:

"Mimi had visions of herself incarcerated in a two-bedroom flat with a husband who fell asleep after supper." (48)

"How can she marry a man from a technical college?" (48)

"She grew adept at smelling out a suitor from a genuine reader." (49)

In the last two sentences, Mimi's role is reflected in terms of a negative and weak role when she meets Engineer Wassef Ghali. He is fortyish. Mimi, at first, refuses to marry traditionally and searches for love for the purpose of marriage, but she fails to choose her life partner. Her role is passive and submissive. She obeys finally Engineer Wassef:

"He did not behave like a suitor, or was he just clever? When he left she looked out of her window and saw him climb into a red Volvo." (50)

"He had commanded and she obeyed." (52)

We can deduce from the language above that the female character is the passive 'victim' of this relationship. By making decisions and acting, the man exerts control over her environment, body, and emotions. Soueif utilizes sexuality in this stage of the encounter, in Wassef's flat, to refer to male control over females. This scene is told through the material-action-intention processes. As Mills states, "One aspect of texts which is very fertile for transitivity analyses is romance scenes" (Mills, 1995: 112). Besides, to her, popular fiction has a tremendous impact on romantic encounter stereotypes (Mills, 1995: 113). In this story, the woman is a

stereotype who is directed and controlled by a male. The following sentences show how the male is highly dominant over the female.

“He introduced her to pleasure and to pain; and to pleasure through pain, handling her body freely and making it his own.” (54)

In “The Wedding of Zeina,” the female is depicted again as a traditional woman. The male is the actor, and the female is the sensor; besides that, the affecting and affected become explicit in the marriage scene in this story. Her joyful feelings are castrated as depicted in the following sentences:

“My uncle had a gun in one hand and he held me by the other.” (90)

“I was scared of the gun because I’d heard of some girl they’d shot on her wedding night, but he led me to the new room.” (90)

“Afterwards Setti explained that he was my husband and any time he wanted to do anything with me I must let him and not fight him.” (92)

“I fought him every time for a month, but in the end he mastered me.” (92)

While actions define the male characters, the female’s inner voice reflects horror, fear, and insecurity. The males are the actors, while the female is the sensor that internalizes personal feelings and emotions.

In the story, titled “Her Man,” many sentences depict the passive role of the females regarding both wives, the first wife and the second wife of Sobhi.

“Sobhi thought he was doing right marrying the girl when her father died.”

“God commanded us to protect our neighbours’ honour and the girl has no brothers, no uncles, no menfolk. He preserved Sheikh Mahgoub’s honour by marrying Tahiyya.” (99)

The following story, “The Apprentice”, differs from the rest of the stories in the novel. All the stories have female heroines, unlike this story; in addition, the processes performed by females differ qualitatively from those performed by males. The novel’s hero is a male named Yosri, who plays the primary role in the story. Yosri’s work in the women’s hair salon has stimulated his sexual desire towards women coming to the salon. Here, the boy is the agent.

The use of transitivity in the texts, as well as the portrayal of the female as a passive recipient of the male’s activities rather than a sexually active individual in her own right, are firmly linked in this story. In contrast to the male experience, which is represented by the activities he performs on her body, the female experience is represented by her thoughts and feelings, as well as her body’s independence; nevertheless, with muted reactions to physical pleasure. The male as an actor is depicted in the following sentences:

“As he crouched, sweeping, he saw her stretch a bare foot.” (124)

“He settled his fingertips more firmly on to her wet scalp and rubbed.” (124)

Activity and passivity are attributed to male and female, respectively. Yosri is the active boy, though he is younger than the ladies, while the ladies are mostly described as passive agents who do not actively respond to his actions but just close their eyes:

“Mimi whispered without opening her eyes.” (130)

His sexual intention is reflected in his motives and actions, which are specified with some active verbs such as “poked in,” “pressed,” and “slid into”. The lady is again in silence, motionless, and eyes closed. In the following sentences, his active role is more apparent as he exactly declares his sexual intention:

“He carried it carefully into the salon and put it at Madame Gabi’s feet as she sat under the dryer.” (131)

“He asked her to go home with him?” (131)

In the story “Nativity”, the love-hate connection between Aisha and her husband reveals Aisha’s passive role because she is dissatisfied with this marriage and does not feel content with her husband. The character’s mental state reveals that she is very depressed and shattered.

However, she suffers all of the psychological pressures to avoid becoming a divorcee, and in patriarchal nations, women are humiliated after divorce and are considered inferior in society. Thus, they try to pursue their relationship with their partners, but she cannot bear all these psychological pressures. In terms of transitivity choices, she challenges the norms of society and becomes a strong female who acts. She is the rebel who transcends boundaries to achieve independence. It is appreciated by the writer but not by society. The agent turns out to be female, as in the following sentences.

“When even as he probes her, she retreats from him.” (141)

“I have seen her turn her head away and drift among the whirling cornices of the walls or the intricate lace of her pillow.” (141)

In another example, Aisha visits the place of Zar with her nurse, Zina, to break her knot faith about having a child. However, an unfortunate event happens when she meets a butcher in that place. Regarding transitive options, we note that the operator here is male, and the sensor is female. Aisha seeks love and emotion that she does not receive in her marriage. But his affections for her are deceptive. In this case, the man is the one who acts and influences the surroundings. The female is the sensor affected by these methods since she is a victim of the male actor's actions. He first assaults her because she is a married woman.

“He was looking at her left hand as it rested on her right on top of the handbag. He was looking at the wedding band.” (176)

Aisha is uneasy due to the man's criticizing tone and questioning manner. However, as a woman she is subjected to male authority and persecution once more. The following lines demonstrate how she is constrained, oppressed, and violated, not only psychologically but also sexually.

“I really want to go. You can't go now.” (182)

“He put a hand on her mouth. You'll make me look a fool going back there on my own. She bit. He pulled his hand back and hit her face.” (183)

“No, she whispered, no, but he named the name of God and thrust and her body received him.” (183)

This tragic story of Aisha, who is abused by a man mostly because she is married and must keep it hidden, depicts the silence of females enslaved and injured by patriarchy. Despite her attempts to evolve, the character is stifled by the patriarch and physically mistreated. Although Soueif's use of 'transitivity' provides the narrative a female-oriented perspective, the sentences nevertheless represent patriarchy's control. The last narrative begins with the heroine's strength as an agent, but it ends negatively when the butcher rapes her savagely.

When data is analysed at the sentence level, it reveals a specific discourse about femininity and masculinity. This form of examination of transitivity choices can teach us a great deal about the ideological signals that circulate in texts with heroines who are trying to get power but are mainly destined to be passive victims (Mills, 1995: 116). Thus, as the analysis at the sentence level reveals, while the males pursue their agent roles, females are exposed to passivity and oppression in patriarchal societies.

6. Analysis at The Level of Discourse

Analysis at the discourse level focuses on four steps: Characters/Roles, Fragmentation, Focalization, and Schemata. Characters are built around words. They are not human replicas but rather ideological signals that the reader decodes based on their knowledge of history and literature, as well as societal conventions and beliefs about what it means to be a man or a woman in society.

Sara Mills puts some questions (Mills, 1995: 160) that should be answered methodically at the level of discourse:

1. Does the text have gendered and more enormous structures?
2. Examine the men and women. Are they described similarly? With gender-specific words? Which genders are portrayed? How are they described? Mostly white or black? Young or old? How do they relate? What are the power hierarchies? Do gender, ethnicity, class, or sexuality matter?
3. Are the narrative channels gendered? Does gender affect performance? Are these paths derived from other texts? Does the text alleviate gender issues?
4. Are male and female bodies entire or fragmented? Clothed or naked?
5. Whose perspective does the text reflect? Speaker? Who told you? Who is the text's subject? Does text focalization change? Whom does the text serve? Whose information is the text supporting?
6. What gender-related elements are included in the text?

By answering them, it will be possible to figure out how texts represent gender and how those representations may be a part of the text's logic. It might also help us figure out how our society deals with gender. As Mills states,

Stylistic analysis as a simple formal analysis is a thing of the past, this type of analysis – where language analysis is enmeshed with a concern with the representation of sexual difference, and/or racial difference, and/or sexual orientation – may hold a way forward for the analysis of text. (Mills, 1995: 160)

As a result, the characters are the most prominent part of the narrative, as they carry thoughts and ideas about what the story is about. Soueif sends her female characters to Europe rather than her male characters, which differs from the majority of the Arabic literature she discusses (Soueif & Massad, 1999: 75). She communicates ideological messages on marriage, sexual desire, intercultural dialogue, language politics, gender relationships, race, class, and patriarchal societies.

Soueif shows Aisha as an independent woman seeking to break free from patriarchal oppression. Aisha attempts to transcend her stereotyped, inferior, and weak image, and in doing so, she liberates her story from the disorientation of a forgotten past. Ahdaf Soueif intertwines the stories of her protagonist 'Aisha' with those of other female characters. Soueif redefines and deconstructs time by employing memory to depict female voices as a storytelling tool, proving that female writers can compete academically with male writers in textual creation (Brahimi, 2022). Reflecting on her ideas above, in the story "The Returning," she represents the protagonist as a sentimental, crazy woman trapped in her past and recollections, especially of her spouse. Soueif portrays Aisha as a woman struggling to be free and standing against patriarchy. Aisha transcends her cliché image of inferiority and weakness to free her story from the dizziness of a lost past.

"She put her hand out to the mirror. She lightly traced the outline of her face with her finger. But the mirror was a wall between herself and the warm flesh behind it", "And it was cold. Her finger still on the mirror, it came to her that that was an apt metaphor for her relationship with him. She could see him, sense his contours and his warmth but whenever she made a move to touch him there would be a smooth, consistent surface. It was transparent, but it was unbreakable. At times she had felt he put it there on purpose and she had been furiously resentful" (10)

It is interesting to explore the roles of female characters. In traditional stories, females are frequently the recipients of actions or tools for solving problems through marriage, a means of receiving and giving a gift (Mills, 1995: 131). In this sense, Soueif portrays how females are accepted as tools and confined objects in Arab society. For instance, Aisha depicts her marriage apartment as (a prison): "This flat she had locked herself in here: squeezing herself into the corner behind the door and crying till she could not breathe" (11). In "The Suitor", similarly, Mimi has visions of marriage as entrapment: "Mimi had visions of herself incarcerated in a two-bedroom flat with a husband who fell asleep after supper. 'I want to live,' she would cry. [...] And here a woman only starts living after she's married. I want someone who enjoys life, who knows how to live" (48). Likewise, in "The Wedding of Zeina," the character Zeina has no ideas about marriage or her future after marriage. She has been transported to the unknown world of a teenage girl stating, "I knew nothing of marriage" (85). In the story of "Her Man," Zeina is looking for reasons for her husband's marriage to another woman, so she sums it up with these words, "What is wrong with me that he should marry on top of me" (98). And finally, in the story of "The Nativity," Aisha tries to save her marriage, so she tries to break her marriage knot by having a child: "There is a knot but it will not be broken. How can it be broken when she does not love him? Does not love him as a woman should love her man?" (140).

Women play the roles of mother, wife, and divorcee in all the stories, or their husbands marry on top of them, as polygamy is frequent in Arab societies. In this sense, the stories emphasize the concept of marriage as a constraint. Many concerns are linked to marriage: the woman's position at home, her responsibilities after marriage, and the increased difficulties and problems faced by Arab women. Soueif examines themes concerning women's troubles after marriage, however, she does not suggest a remedy to these problems.

Soueif employs descriptions of women from various socioeconomic groups and religions, as well as women of various ages, educational levels, and life experiences. These women have been hurt in some way by unfortunate happenings (El-Miniawi, 2016: 93). Soueif also identifies the women's religions as Christian or Muslim. She also identifies the places of worship such as mosques, churches, and Zar. In the story "The Nativity," the religious place Zar is described as a dominating and oppressive character.

A larger vocabulary is accessible when describing female characters than when describing male characters. Furthermore, many expressions appear to have meanings that are not applicable to male characters (Mills, 1995: 126). When describing female characters, more information is used than when describing male characters, who are depicted more traditionally.

In the story "The Suitor," men's bodies are not fragmented and are not categorized in the same way as women's bodies because men are not regarded as sexual objects in the sense that women are. In this sense, Mills states that "these terms as 'sexualized', that is, despite seeming to be simply descriptive terms, they are in fact terms

which are related to the person's sexual attractiveness" (Mill, 1995: 126). In other words, men's bodies are not subjected to the same levels of sexual segmentation and categorization as women's bodies. In the literature, the strategy of fragmenting the female body by categorizing it under the discourse of sexual appeal has been noticed. Because many female protagonists are not shown as independent individuals, the scene cannot be framed from their point of view. Fragmentation of the female is associated with male focalization – the female is represented as an object, a collection of objects for the male gaze (Mill, 1995: 133). In a similar vein, Soueif depicts the female body in fragmentation and as a sexual object.

The writer uses stereotypes of women who differ from their male counterparts, such as housewives, nurses, and women working in the kitchen, washing dishes, and tidying up the house. In the story "The Apprentice," we can observe the stereotypical roles of women. In the story "The Wedding of Zeina," the girl is expected to look after her male cousin who will be her husband. Similarly, in the story, "The Returning," Soueif portrays the women working in stores who feel fragmented and are seen as sexual objects by men. Thus, fragmentation is a part of describing women. This is a strategy, not a lexical item, but it does affect the kind of language that will be used (Mills, 1995: 138).

The issue of sexuality and marriage draws attention to many social, cultural, and psychological concerns of women in typical patriarchal society. The author presents a detailed description that reflects cultural standards of physically preparing and grooming the bride for her wedding night. Zeina describes how she was forced to marry her cousin when she was fifteen. Ironically, this lower-class girl is not emotionally or psychologically prepared for the sexual act expected on this particular day (El-Miniawi, 2016: 94). Zeina's marriage is consummated ritually with the bridegroom's forcibly deflowering her in front of her family, whose 'honour' is claimed to be served this way (Said, 1983, quoted in El-Miniawi, 2016: 94).

During the scene of the rape, the sexual act in its most primordial form can be tied to a physical one of penetrating, experiencing pain, and possibly finding sadistic pleasure in the process (El-Miniawi, 2016:108). In "The Nativity," Ahdaf Soueif tells another rape story. The female character's experience is so horrific that it is not recounted in full but rather left vague to reflect the psychological weight of the torture. Women in the stories are abused in a variety of ways.

As the examples demonstrate, the characters and roles of women and men in fiction and other fields are influenced by normative attitudes. This is especially limiting for women, who are restricted to passivity, the obligation of sexual attractiveness, sexual abuse, and self-deprecation. The sexual abuse is such a severe oppression of feminine identity that the author stops addressing it. Soueif's characters are subjected to many forms of patriarchal abuse, whether physical or psychological. At the word, sentence, and discourse levels, all of the episodes in the novel have one thing in common: the patriarchal oppression of women.

7. Conclusion

Soueif portrays how women in Arab society are weak and obedient to patriarchal restrictions. It should be mentioned that language has also contributed to women's oppression in society. Mills states: "Because the phrases work on the basis of assumed background knowledge, they can have a strong ideological impact in persuading people that they are in fact an accurate version of reality" (Mills, 1995: 102). In this sense, Soueif refuses to accept the established norms in Arab culture, and she tries to subvert them.

We noticed that in the word-level analysis, females were primarily defined in terms of their lower status in a patriarchal society. Many passive sentences at the sentence level reveal inflammatory processes of gender roles. These roles have been disassembled and analysed using transitive options. The discourse level analysis found that Soueif portrays her main female characters as weak, confused, and repressed due to the cultural and societal conventions in which they were raised. Compared to males, this causes them to feel inadequate and avoid leadership roles. Soueif's writing also reflects the Muslim women's perspective on life, both in her native culture and Europe (Rezk, 2019: 33).

Ahdaf Soueif has an unusual knack for presenting significantly charged sexual situations, often just by implication and without direct confession or by using sexuality phrases that would be considered derogatory in her traditional Arab milieu. She explores the complexities of cross-cultural relationships between Eastern males and women. Sexual politics are subtly disguised by implication in our author's writings, making them more effective and attractive (El-Miniawi, 2016:114). Soueif's fiction explores transcultural identity transformations, hybridity, multilingualism, migration, and international mobility.

Soueif, as a feminist, critiques Egyptian patriarchal traditions and addresses contentious issues in her works. In her stories, she draws attention to the challenges of Arab women, allowing the reader to determine the larger context in which the female characters are depicted (Sanjakdar, 2015). Soueif applies Arab feminist ideology within the framework of literature and feminist stylistics in this regard. When analysed through feminist stylistics, the levels in her style indicate patriarchal words/phrases, sentences, and discourses inherent in the culture. In this sense, her work attempts to generate a profound awareness of gender roles as well as a shift in patriarchal thinking.

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