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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Women's Struggle and Resistance in Al-Shaykh's Women of Sand and Myrrh**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses Arab women's resistance against multiple types of patriarchal and cultural oppression in Hana Al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh* (1992). The paper also discusses the importance of education, employment, and freedom of daily life practices for women's mission of self-development. Furthermore, the study also illustrates that through education, women come to their intellectual growth and independence that enable them to get rid of the patriarchal guidance restricting their life patterns and behaviours.

**KEYWORDS**

Arab women, female identity, oppression against women, resistance, feminism, *Women of Sand and Myrrh*.

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**1. Introduction**

Although some Arab countries have progressed in women's education, employment, and other social activities, Arab women still face many obstacles and challenges in obtaining satisfactory social and cultural life opportunities. One of the most significant challenges is the Arab customs and traditions that restrain the role of women in the domestic sphere and therefore devalue the necessity for their education and employment. In this sense, the early Arab feminist critics have highlighted the importance of education and employment. In *The Liberation of Women*, Amin explains that depriving Arab women of education has turned women into disabled citizens and thus turns them into dependent citizens and more vulnerable to oppression (19).

Moreover, in *The Essential Nawal El Saadawi*, El Saadawi states that although Arab societies have gotten rid of many oppressive practices, there are still many practices that must be eliminated. Among these practices is the exploitation of women in unpaid housework, which in turn does not provide Arab women with financial independence (60). El Saadawi has called for the need to reform the educational system in the Arab world in order to restore the true place of women in society. And there is a persistent need to reform the Arab family to reconsider the distribution of social roles for men and women and the separation between the private and public spheres (89).

Despite the prevailing belief that Islam is the source of the teachings, customs and traditions that oppress women in the Arab world, Al-Ghazali, a Persian philosopher, who was one of the most prominent and influential Muslim philosophers, theologians, and jurists, explains that such oppressive practices have nothing to do with the Islamic teachings. In "Women, work, and Islam in Arab societies," Yusuf Sidani explains that:

[Al-Ghazali] praised the worldwide women's movement aiming for social and political development and called on Muslim women to behave accordingly within the instructions of Islam. He asserted that this could be accomplished by opening the doors for political and labour participation for women in an environment where a certain amount of mixing between the genders should be expected and accepted. (505)

Moreover, Heba Ra'uf, an Egyptian academic, thinker, writer and activist, joins Al-Ghazali's claim. She emphasizes that women's work should not be limited to the private sphere, as Islam does not prevent women from playing an active role in the public sphere.

Accordingly, she affirms that qualified women in a Muslim society should be allowed to public functions in the same manner as qualified men (Sidani 508).

In this context, Sidani explains that Mernissi asserts that women's economic independence is extremely important, as women cannot be freed from the restrictions imposed on them without being freed from their financial dependency:

Mernissi [...] asserts, on the other hand, that the liberation of women is mostly an economic issue. The relationship between women's liberation and economic development is shown by the parallels in the circumstances of the two sexes as they both suffer from exploitation and dispossession. She asserts that – over and above the general exploitation everybody has been exposed to – Islamic societies have developed institutions that attempt to contain women and control their power. (507)

Furthermore, in a recorded lecture, Hanan Al-Shaykh explains that the problem of women in the Arab countries centres on the problematic concept of shame, as some Arabs believe that any behavior or activity of women outside their home is considered a source of shame. She illustrates that shame, in the Arab countries, is a contagious disease and is almost the oxygen Arab people breathe. In addition to this, Al-Shaykh's critique centers on the concern of Arab people in the lower part of women's bodies instead of the upper part. Thus, the culture of shame affects women's legal rights and the right to choose their own destiny. Based on this point of view, the solution lies in breaking the silence and saying no to such an oppressive culture (Al-Shaykh 30:45-46:35).

Hanan Al-Shaykh's was born to a strict Shiite family. She experienced strict social control from her father and brother during her childhood. She was sent to a gender-segregated school for Muslim girls and was forced to cover her head. After her graduation in 1966 from the American College for Girls in Cairo, she worked for a Lebanese newspaper until she left Beirut in 1975 to Saudi Arabia. Currently, she lives in London.

Her works challenge the patriarchal Arab traditions that place women at the bottom of the social structure. Her works were banned in most Arab countries due to the explicit sexual scenes which contradict the traditions and norms of Arab culture. For example, *The Story of Zahra* and *Women of Sand and Myrrh* involve scenes of abortion, adultery, divorce, sexual promiscuity, and lesbianism.

Most of her works were written in Arabic and then translated into English, including; *Women of Sand and Myrrh* (Trans. 1992), *The Story of Zahra* (Trans. 1994), *Beirut Blues* (Trans. 1992), *Only in London* (Trans. 2001), *I Sweep the Sun Off Rooftops* (Trans. 2002) *The Persian Carpet*, *The Locust and the Bird: My Mother's Story* (Trans. 2009), *One Thousand and One Nights: A Retelling* (2013), and *The Occasional Virgin* (2018).

Al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh* was originally published in 1989 as *Misk Al-Ghazal*, and then translated and published in 1992. Al-Shaykh locates her novel in an unnamed country in the Middle East, but it is believed to be Saudi Arabia. The novel consists of three main Arab characters: Suha, Tamr and Nur, and the American Suzanne.

## 2. Education, Employment, and Daily Life of the Arab Women

The first character is Suha, a Lebanese woman who is not able to tolerate the restrictions imposed on women in the desert society, where she recently moved. She tries to find her way in an extremely patriarchal society, but she stumbles across many cultural obstacles. As a result, she feels that she lost herself and became worthless, like the other women in this desert society. Therefore, the only solution for her is to return to Lebanon against her husband's will.

The second character is the rebellion Tamr, who challenges the patriarchal authority of her brother in order to receive education and then establish her own successful business. Her story shows the perception of the desert society for women's work and education, as there is no value for desert women without a husband. Tamr, who is treated as a minor, manages to establish her own genuine and independent identity and forces people around her to change their perception toward women.

The third character is the beautiful and rich Nur, who is not happy because of the cultural restrictions imposed on her in the desert community. Therefore, Nur resorts to finding her happiness through the numerous sexual relations and through her several trips to Europe. However, her attempt to pursue happiness leads her to lose her identity and her goal in life, for going with the extremist opposition to the original culture.

The fourth character is the American Suzanne, who is perceived to be attractive in the desert and becomes an object of desire. Unlike the rest of the female characters in the novel, she is drawn to life in the desert because of her sense of worth derived from the attraction of men to her overweight body. Eventually, she is shocked by the reality of the desert society, which considers women as a tool of pleasure while denouncing sexual pleasure for women.

The novel comes across many issues in Arab patriarchal societies, such as social and cultural restrictions imposed on women, segregations, limitations, and the importance of challenging the oppressive practices. The four characters represent different

reactions of women to the nature of life in traditional patriarchal societies. For example, Tamr decides to challenge the oppressive practices and constructs her new identity, while Nur decides to surrender and escape.

Starting with Suha, she is a Lebanese woman who has recently moved with her husband to live in the desert country, which is most likely believed to be Saudi Arabia. Although she is the only character who has a way to live out of this country, she tries to challenge and resist the restrictions imposed by the patriarchal desert culture. Suha explains that due to the social and cultural restrictions imposed on women, they are turned out to be captives of their husbands, brothers, and fathers. Therefore, she affirms that this desert is a masculine country and women are powerless and can do nothing without their men:

I knew that life here was odd when I found that I had no garlic for my cooking and I couldn't go out to the shops and buy some. So I opened the door and stood on the step [...], and it made me imagine that I was somewhere in space [...] Only when I could go in the car with my husband did I feel happy to leave the house. However hard I tried to buy everything I needed, I always forgot many things, and the shelves' display didn't help me. (8)

Suha feels that she is a hostage in this country due to the restrictions imposed on women's movement; she is not allowed to approach the shops alone to fetch her needs. Therefore, she experiences a cultural shock, as she comes from Lebanon, which is considered to be the most liberal Arab country.

Another reason for Suha's discomfort and rejection of the desert culture is the restrictions imposed on women's employment, especially in places where men are present. In "Education and the Role of Women in Saudi Arabia," Reema Alsweel explains that "Saudi Labor laws may limit the places where women work" (9), which is very similar to the desert country Suha lives in. Suha explains that this country is based on segregation between the two sexes in all public activities. Thus, it was very difficult for her to find a job, despite having a degree in Management Studies from the American University of Beirut. In this sense, in "Issues and Challenges of Saudi Female Labor Force and the Role of Vision 2030: A Working Paper," Sana Naseem and Kamini Dhruva explain that "[t]he traditional workplaces were not designed to accommodate women especially in the private sector and this discouraged women candidate to apply. Further companies had to invest in separate workplaces which all companies cannot afford" (26).

Therefore, when Suha finally finds a secret job in the department store, as women are not allowed to work in such places, she expresses her anxiety about the continuous visits of the inspectors. She used to hide in a cardboard box so that she would not be discovered and prevented from working. Although her work carries a kind of risk, her passion for getting a job is the motivation for her to continue in it.

Every day there, I used to hide in a big brown cardboard box, wondering whether the security man would suspect anything. I pictured to myself how the box looked from the outside, inscribed with the words 'FRAGILE — WITH CARE' and a picture of a glass tumbler. If ever I caught a faint whiff of my perfume, I used to feel scared in case the man was blessed with an extraordinarily powerful sense of smell. (4)

Despite the constant stress that Suha used to experience in her job in the department store, she preferred not to stay home and be like the other women in the compound, jobless, useless, and dependent. She states that her job grants her the feeling of being important and productive:

I preferred it all to staying at home or going to visit the other women I knew. When the store's owner, Amer, began to entrust me with correspondence and making out orders, my feeling of importance knew no bounds; before that, my work had been confined to arranging toys and displays of household goods on the second floor. (4)

Although Suha insists on work and endures the psychological pressure and constant tension, she decides to give up her work when she meets the security man face to face in the doorway of the storeroom. Suha gives up her work as a result of the restrictions imposed on the work of women in the desert community:

Even then, I'd desperately resisted the torpor that enveloped this place, resisted being sucked down by the swamp whose waters never grew deeper but never completely dried up. Like the other women, I'd thrown myself into the life here so that I wouldn't feel sorry for myself. (5)

Besides the restrictions Suha experiences on movement and employment, she also experiences restrictions on her dressing style. She explains that women in this desert country are supposed to wear a certain outfit; more specifically, they must be veiled. Suha illustrates that one time; she goes to the market with a Saudi girl, Tamr, to be surprised by the public objection of one of the men to her dress:

Tamr explained, 'That old religious man. If he knew you were an Arab, he'd be furious.' [...] I imagined that by talking English, I'd become miraculously invisible, but the man stood in our path and addressed himself to Tamr: 'Tell her to cover herself up. Our women don't walk about unveiled.' Tamr snapped, 'She's foreign, isn't she? They have their religion; we have ours.' I pretended to have no idea what was going on and said, 'Let's go to the car,' in English as if I was talking to myself. I seemed to have 'provided an outlet for the old man's pent-up anger, and he thrust out his stick, blocking my way, and screamed at me, 'Get out of here. You can't shop while you're unveiled.' (28)

In fact, this is about the dress code and about imposing restrictions on the most private matters of women. Women's dress is one thing that reflects women's identity, and imposing restrictions on women's dress means imposing restrictions on women's identity. Therefore, Suha feels "besieged from every direction" (28), as she is not used to accepting restrictions imposed on her dress and way of life. What drives Suha's anger even more is the suggestion of one desert woman: "[b]uy the lady an abaya and go to your homes. May Heaven's door be barred to her" (29).

Furthermore, desert women are denied driving, and this has major implications on women's freedom and makes women far imprisoned and dependent on men and their temperament, which consequently gives men the authority to control the movement and activities of women. Moreover, the prevention of driving enforces the social mechanism that works against the establishment of women's identity, in which "the veiled women rushing through it always waiting at the mercy of their husbands or brothers or drivers who might or might not remember the right time to come and take them back home" (30). In many cases, transportation hinders the advancement of women and acts as an obstacle for women to obtain a job or an opportunity to study. In this respect, Sana Naseem and Kamini Dhruva clarify that "[t]he ban on driving has not been lifted, which always has been the biggest challenge for women's employment. Transportation to and from work is also costlier for female employees" (26). Thus, Suha reveals her dissatisfaction with this by stating that "[f]or God's sake, aren't we meant to be modern women? We're educated, university graduates, but what can we do here? We're not allowed to work, not allowed to drive cars. There are no places to go on outings" (7).

Consequently, this extreme patriarchal nature of life imposes on women a reality that does not go beyond "the daily routine of housewives and [...] the smell of coriander" (9), which causes them to be submissive and dependent, rather than rebellious and liberate. In this context, in "Women and education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and achievements," Amani Hamdan explains that "[w]omen do not have power in any position and are subordinate in both the private and the public sector to male individuals who may often have inferior qualifications to their female counterparts" (45). Thus, on the contrary, men have greater opportunities and freedom than women to move without any restrictions. In this sense, Suha indicates that her husband's experience is much different from hers. He "had gone further afield and begun to discover what lay beyond our street and on the other side of the shops and buildings, we could see from our house" (9).

After several unsuccessful attempts to rebel over the patriarchal desert culture, Suha challenges her husband's desire and decides to return to her country of origin, Lebanon. "I'm leaving this country, whatever happens" (77). Her husband tries to influence her decision, but she explains that she is losing herself in this country due to the restrictions imposed on every aspect of life:

I want to walk about, not go in the car all the time, and I want to dress how I like. Yes, I've got a small mind. I don't want to feel afraid when I send a film to be developed if my arms aren't covered in the photos. I don't have any reasons. I can't tell any more lies. I don't want to be afraid. I don't want to tell lies.' (78)

Suha's decision to return to her country is not an escape from reality but a back-to-reality step. To her, what she experiences in the desert life is a fictional one. She does not find herself in any single aspect of the desert life. Further, Suha's identity does not achieve any progress that matches her ambition. Thus, she prefers to protect her identity more than staying with her husband and losing herself in a country that does not give women any value.

Unlike Suha, Tamr, the desert girl, has no way out to live outside the desert country because first, she belongs to this country and second, she is incapable of doing so. Therefore, she has no choice but to rebel against her society and obtain part of her inherent rights. Tamr is deprived of an authentic identity due to the cultural and social persecution that perceives women as only wives and mothers. In addition to the laws and regulations that do not recognize the legal competence of women, men are given absolute power to manage women's life and affairs.

Moreover, in this desert culture, women are often considered the enemies of themselves, especially when mothers support their sons' dominance over their daughters. This is evident by the support approval of Tamr's mother to Rashid's positions in hindering Tamr's goals in education and employment. In *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, Al-Shaykh portrays women's struggle against the multiple, patriarchal oppression through the female character Tamr. Al-Shaykh explains that struggling against society and culture

is one of the most difficult forms of struggle, as a woman struggles against her own gendered constructed mentality, her family, her society, and even governmental laws and institution.

Therefore, being aware of this fact, Tamr has rebelled against these desert restrictions and has taken several means to obtain her education and employment rights to achieve a rebellious identity that represents her. Although Tamr's rebellion against these restrictions is unacceptable in her community, she succeeds to resist the social restrictions over her life. More importantly, her rebellious experience enables her to establish the identity that maintains her value and self-esteem.

In such patriarchal communities, men tend to believe that they know the good of their women better than them. Rashid believes that it is better for Tamr to get married for the third time than going to the institute for education: "No, Aunt. Tamr's not going to the Institute. I swear that it doesn't bother me having her to live with me. But she must think of her future" (85). The future for Tamr from Rashid's perspective is getting married. In "Women's Education in Saudi Arabia The Way Forward," Mona AlMunajjed emphasizes that "Marriage and the low level of awareness of the social and cultural value of girls' education are major factors that hamper girls' education" (8).

However, the rebellious nature of Tamr refuses her brother's decision and fights for her rights to education:

I went off into my room crying. After a bit, I got up off the bed, wiped my eyes and went back to my aunt and Rashid. Struggling to control my voice and slow down my breathing, I said: 'What's wrong with me going to study? The Anaiz girls, the Mabruk girls, all of them go, even the old women. And Qumasha and Mawda. Rashid paused on his way out and replied, 'You're not going. I haven't time to take you there anyway. And you're not going in their cars. You'd do better to think about getting married.' (85)

In that sense, Tamr, the illiterate divorced desert woman, struggles against her culture and insists on her inherent right to education. She explains that Rashid is against achieving her goals due to transportation, claiming that "the car was one of the reasons why at first [Tamr] hadn't been allowed to go to the institute to learn how to read and write" (84). However, later Rashid states it clearly that Tamr has to get married, and thus she does not need education at all. From Rashid's perspective, going out of home for education is a challenge for his sacred culture and the image of the ideal desert woman. In "Education and the Role of Women in Saudi Arabia," Reema Alsweel illustrates that "there is this image of the 'Ideal' Muslim woman; a woman who stays at home to take care of the children, cook and care for her husband, her place is within the family" (10). Therefore, Rashid, is afraid of challenging his culture's norms and traditions.

In such a patriarchal society, women are thought of as not being in need of education or work because, according to their culture, they will end up as wives and mothers. Besides, women are denied an education because they are feared by the power of knowledge they will gain through the learning experience. Thus, women's power of knowledge will affect men's hegemonic power over their women, and consequently, women's progress will question their men's authority. In "A Critical Study of the Works of Nawal El Saadawi, Egyptian Writer and Activist," Diana Royer explains that Arab men cannot accept women to be stronger than them. She adds that "most males expect women to subsume themselves to male control. Women are likely to be less educated, less experienced, and therefore less confident than men" (139). In addition to this, Royer elucidates that, in some Arab cultures, educated women are not considered feminine due to the power they gain from education. She adds that "the fear that education might "masculinize" a woman, that is, make her self-assertive and active, seems at work here" (48).

Furthermore, Tamr does not only challenge Rashid by arguing, but she decides to go to the institute on foot, since Rashid's problem lies in transportation, as he claims. In that regard, in "Women in Saudi Arabia Status, Rights, and Limitations," Safaa Fouad Rajkhan states that "the ban on women's driving is one of the biggest obstacles women still face and deal with every day" (iv). Therefore, Tamr decides to overcome this obstacle and go to the institute on foot. This step is the most significant one in Tamr's struggle to obtain her right of education, as she moves from speech to action:

My throat muscles tightened as they did whenever I rebelled and did what I wanted to do. As I shut the door behind me, I called out, 'The food's ready, and I'm off to the Institute.' I walked along determinedly in my thick abaya, my throat growing tighter and my palms sweating. Only once I looked back towards the house and saw that its iron door was closed. I didn't notice the heat, my sweat, or the distance. Instead, I concentrated on the obstacles in my path, which forced me to cross from one side of the street to the other — heaps of stone and steel beams and mounds of sand left lying about the streets. I couldn't see the Institute building, but it didn't matter. I heard a car horn and stopped myself turning around, drawing my abaya more closely around me and wrapping the black headcover twice round my face: a car horn and Rashid's voice calling to me. I turned then; he'd opened the back door for me. I stood where I was for a moment, but my thoughts were a jumble. I climbed into the back seat, and Rashid didn't speak the entire way home. (85-86)

It is worth noting that rebellious women in such a society are not expected to obtain their rights easily; they must insist and persist in order to achieve their goals. So, Tamr decides "to go on hunger strike" (86) in order to put some pressure on her family. Tamr goes on her strike for several days while her brother keeps refusing her enrollment in the institute. Tamr proves to be tenacious and steadfast in her attitude towards her education:

Batul persuaded Rashid to come in and see me just before the evening prayer, and I was confident that my fast must soon be over. In a voice which sounded as if he was making an effort to be kind, he said, 'What are you doing to yourself, Tamr?' 'I want to go to the Institute and get educated,' I answered tearfully. His reply was quite unexpected, and I didn't believe it until he repeated it: 'You're not going to the Institute.' Then I won't eat,' I said firmly. (86)

Instead of supporting Tamr, Tamr's mother takes a passive attitude claiming that Tamr is spoiled by the westerners. In this sense, Nawal El Saadawi illustrates that:

Whereas society has thrown overboard certain values that were an obstacle to the participation of women in the labour force, it has continued to uphold many old values with remarkable obstinacy, and in particular, those values which ensure continued exploitation of their efforts in caring for the home, husband and children, efforts which also continue to be unpaid. ("*The Essential*" 60)

Therefore, Tamr's mother thinks that submitting to the patriarchal authority represented in her son is the ideal behaviour: "Those English have had an effect on you. They must have put a spell on you and poisoned your mind. Tamr, my daughter, get up and ask God's pardon" (87). This attitude indicates three facts: first that this culture believes in male dominance over women; second, the negative attitude of Arab people toward western civilization, especially with respect to women's empowerment; and third, this culture has approved a negative attitude towards the Islamic teachings as Tamr's mother has asked her to ask for God's pardon as if she claims that women's learning is opposing God's will on earth. This is to say that culture demonizes those women who ask for their right to education and work to sanctify men's education as the only righteous education and thus assert women's right to education as divinely illegitimate. Again, this is a desert tradition that has nothing to do with Islam because God confirms the right to read for every human being, as the first word God has given to his Arabic Prophet is "Read" without exception.

On the contrary, Rashid's wife supports Tamr and tells Rashid that he is not allowed to sleep in her room unless he approves Tamr's education. Indeed, at the end of the matter, Rashid gives up and approves his sister's education: "Batul rushed in kissing me and crying 'Congratulations,' followed by my mother who was trilling for joy and singing, 'O Tamr, O Tamr, you're going to the Institute by car, and you'll come back reading and writing'" (87). This is considered the first success for Tamr in struggling against patriarchal authority.

After winning the first battle against her brother's authority, Tamr decides to open her own business. This time, she has to struggle against her brother's will and her culture, laws and regulations, and the whole community. Therefore, Tamr persistently passes through several constructed patriarchal obstacles and insists on achieving her goal. She claims that "[she is] going to get a license to open [her] own workshop, in [her] name" (97). When Tamr goes to the bank to withdraw her money, she feels that she is the first woman to enter that building among the men's facial gestures:

I was probably the first woman to cross its threshold, but women went into shops and stores and bought things. Who was going to stop me? [...] then he told me that my money was in Muhammad's name. I gasped. 'He's my son,' I cried. 'He'll have to come and see us himself,' said the official. I went out of the bank, wondering why Rashid had entered my money in the name of my son, who'd been five years old when my father had died and left it to me.

In fact, Rashid deposited Tamr's money under her son's name due to their cultural belief that male kids are considered more trustworthy than women as adult women are considered minor and always need a male guardian. In other words, women are completely excluded from the arena of maturity. Moreover, Tamr proves to be confident when she gets to the municipality in order to apply for a permit for a workshop, which is considered a place only for men. In the Municipality, she is passed from one official to another because her presence at that place seems to be something wrong; women culturally are not allowed to be seen in such a building:

Silence hung over the place, and when I approached an official sitting at a table, he appeared tongue-tied and waved me over to another table. From there, I was passed from one person to another, and I realized that by coming into a government building, I had made another big mistake. But it wasn't forbidden, and why should it be? (105)

Tamr knows that silence will not bring her the permit, so she returns to the first table and challenges the employees by speaking in public loudly: "My name is Tamr daughter of al-Tawi," I declared, not caring if anyone heard me or not. 'I want to open a dressmaking business and a ladies' hairdresser's" (105). Following this, the man who is on the counter tells her that she has to send her papers with her guardian, and they will give her the license.

One of the documents Tamr has to provide for the municipality is her divorce certificate that is issued by her ex-husband. Though feeling humiliated, she decides to visit her ex-husband and asks for her divorce certificate. In fact, referring to her ex-husband instead of a governmental institution for her divorce certificate indicates that women are always under the mercy of men.

In the beginning, Rashid was against Tamr's plan to open a business, but when he realizes Tamr's resolution and sees the permit registered under her name, he changes his mind and supports her. The transformation of Tamr's case emphasizes that women of this culture can never achieve any progress without challenging the patriarchal hegemony. Tamr would have been a jobless, dependent, illiterate, powerless, divorced woman, has not she struggled against her brother and her community:

Rashid agreed with my plan for a workshop once he'd read the permit and saw that it was registered in my name. He agreed to bring in the Filipino seamstresses on condition that Batul came in as a partner but didn't visit the place, and the Filipinos slept in the workshop and didn't cross the threshold except in my company. My aunt trilled, I jumped for joy, Batul cheered, and my mother wept. (108)

Tracing the development that took place in Tamr's identity illustrates that there is a close relationship between the development of her identity and obtaining her inherent rights. There is also a close relationship between the establishment of an independent identity that represents women and their insistence on obtaining their rights.

Thus, Tamr now becomes confident, powerful, and economically independent in comparison with other women in the desert. She grows with more strength and self-appreciation and is consequently aware of herself and her potential. She is no longer afraid.

Similarly, Nur is the desert girl who belongs to the upper rich class. She suffers from a clash between her desire to live freely and the restrictions imposed by society on women. This struggle leads to an identity crisis, for she is neither able to live in a way that suits her identity nor is she able to live in a way that suits her society and its traditions. Accordingly, this crisis creates a feeling of dissatisfaction with her life and her feeling that there is a great difference between the life of a woman and that of a man in her desert society.

The meaning of the novel's original title, "*Misk Al-Ghazal*," Musk of the Deer, refers to the privilege of the male. In fact, Musk is a type of perfume that is only taken from the male deer, as it is not found in the female. This symbolizes the higher value of the male deer than the female deer. Thus, the title of the novel suggests the greater value and privilege of the male in the desert society than the female, and this privilege has been granted to men due to their possession of the male organ.

Nur suffers from the traditions of the desert society that grant men the right to restrict women's freedom metaphorically and actually. In "Women and education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and achievements," Amani Hamdan illustrates that such traditions and norms are supported and strengthened by the misinterpretations of religion. She adds that "the use and the acceptance of only a sole religious interpretation of Quran (extremism or fundamentalism), to promote the authority of men is a pressing issue. In the conservative religious scholar's views, women are often considered to be irrational and incomplete beings" (3). Therefore, Nur is desperate to travel because her husband has taken her passport and made her feel imprisoned in her marriage and society. In this regards, El Saadawi criticizes that "marriage regulations and common law give the husband an uncontested right to refuse his wife permission to leave the house, go to work, or travel" ("*The Hidden Face*" 190).

Consequently, Nur feels that she is trapped and has no way out of this multi-layers prison, she is trapped in her marriage, house, community, and most importantly, she is trapped in a reality that does not relate to her:

Nur was beside herself. She bent her head and said, 'I want to die. Every day I can feel myself beginning to explode. I want to travel and I can't. Saleh's got my passport. I can't live another moment in this house; I'm going to run away.' (42)

Though Nur suffers in her marriage, she is not willing to ask for a divorce due to the importance of marriage for the desert women. In this sense, in "Women, work, and Islam in Arab societies," Yusuf Sidani states that "Arabian Gulf women are locked in restrictive traditional roles" (501). In other words, women do not have access to society without marriage. Therefore, Nur explains that marriage for a desert woman is a ticket that grants them partial freedom that unmarried women do not have, as unmarried women suffer from greater siege as a result of tracking their movements and actions:

It was as if I'd reminded her of something worse. She bowed her head again and repeated, 'It's a huge catastrophe. If I get divorced, who do I marry?' I was taken aback by Nur's question but instead of saying jokingly to her, 'How can you think about marriage when you haven't thought about divorce yet?' I asked reasonably, 'Did you quarrel? What about? Let somebody try and bring you back together.' Dabbing at the tears and sweat on her face, Nur answered, 'He won't budge. He's got a heart of stone, and his head's not much different.' Then leading me back to the main issue, she repeated, 'I want to go away. I can't bear living here. If only I could go on a trip for a week or two.' (44)

Being imprisoned within the limitations of the desert society, Nur decides to take the extreme rebellion by defying what is completely forbidden in this community. She starts a multi-sexual relationship with both men and women as an expression of her anger and a form of revenge over her society. Thus, Hala explains that:

Nur began coming to my house and going to my room, closely followed by a man who slipped in after her like a thief while I sat in the sitting-room or in the kitchen waiting for the outer door to open and close and for the sound of Nur's footsteps, her kiss on my cheek and her words, always the same, 'I don't know how I'd live without you, my sweet.' (45)

However, her rebellion against society and its restrictions is not enough for Nur to feel comfortable. Wearing Abaya poses for the persecution of her personal life. Therefore, she sees her experience in Egypt as a great experience as she is not obliged to wear Abaya, and she has the freedom to choose whatever she likes to wear:

There I discovered that the freedom which I'd thought I would gain by moving out by myself into the desert was nothing compared to my freedom in Cairo. Just walking down the street on my own two feet was freedom, so walking without an abaya was out of this world. Freedom no longer consisted of dialling a telephone number and giggling and whispering love down the line, or making the driver follow the other cars, or eyeing the shopkeepers; even kissing and sometimes other things in cars — which seldom happened anyway — weren't freedom compared to Cairo with her wide-open arms reaching out beyond the horizon. (248)

One of the significant things that represent a person's identity is clothing. Forcing women in the desert community to wear a certain dress code has two consequences: First, it restricts one of the inherent rights that they must enjoy, which is personal freedom, and second, it prevents women from reflecting their identity on their outward appearance, which leads to increase women's desire to run away and leave their society searching for a proper place that can grant them the essential freedoms.

However, the American, Suzanne, who is perceived to be attractive in the desert, is drawn to life in the desert because of her sense of worth derived from the attraction of men to her overweight body. She is the only woman in the novel who loves the desert life due to the advantages she gains from being a foreigner, as men in this desert society treat foreign women completely different from how they treat their women. Therefore, in the desert society, Suzanne enjoys the freedom that many Arab women do not.

Suzanne used to have a typing job for a company through a person named Ahmed, but Ahmed stopped her work for "the pressure against women working was increasing, and he didn't think that [she] ought to work" (180). In fact, this does not affect her, for that what she cares about is her relationship with Maaz, which is considered a relationship between two different civilizations; a superficial relationship, based on Maaz's ignorance and his perceptions about women:

In the early weeks of our relationship, it was because he wanted to own me, exactly as he wanted an American kitchen; this time, it was the result of a relationship between a man and a woman, and it meant, as well, that he must have grown accustomed to the idea that his wife and I belonged to the same sex, even if there was a vast difference between us. (186)

It is worth noting that Suzanne has helped Maaz with the material development, such as importing modern American kitchens, but she does not seek to develop his beliefs about women and sex, for that she, as an American, is not concerned with this and knows that the desert traditions and norms do not apply on her.

However, Maaz's contradictions soon become evident when he rejects the fact that women enjoy sex just like men, besides his belief that women are created only for the enjoyment of men and childbearing. He changes his opinion on Suzanne when he learns that she is not able to give birth due to a procedure:

He answered that I'd done things for my own pleasure like a man. When again I sifted through what had happened the day before and still couldn't guess what he meant, I shook my head questioningly, and he said calmly and gravely, 'God created you to bear children and to give pleasure to a man, and that's all.' I didn't



understand. Perhaps I hadn't understood his English? Naturally, I'd had children, and naturally, a man enjoyed me just as I enjoyed him. (210)

Although Maaz's dialogue with Suzanne may seem about women's sexual rights, it is also about the social dimensions that affect the relationship between men and women outside the framework of intimacy. The way the desert men view women's role as limited to men's enjoyment and childbearing is, in fact, the main reason behind the social siege and restrictions imposed on women, their work and education.

In this regard, in "Women and education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and achievements," Amani Hamdan states that Arab women are taught to accept their role in their community. In fact, what women learned is nothing but the patriarchal thought that serves the interest of men and their hegemony over women. Hamdan adds that: "girls were taught enough to buy into an assigned role, a role in which they were subordinate to men, but not enough to challenge it" (45). Therefore, Suzanne is not accustomed to such thoughts and is shocked by Maaz's backwardness:

Wide awake by this time, Maaz repeated seriously, 'God created woman to make children, like a factory. That's the exact word, Suzanne. She's a factory; she produces enjoyment for the man, not for herself.' I laughed and replied quickly, 'If God doesn't want her to enjoy it, then how and why do I enjoy it?' He looked confused, and, not finding a ready answer to my question, he shouted, 'Yesterday you were like a she-devil.' Then he mumbled, 'I swear, in God's name, I was disgusted by you and by your whole race. You seemed like a man to me when you were crying out. (210)

This part of the novel is different from the rest because it examines men's unconsciousness and their perception about women as a socio-historic legacy that has been transmitted through successive generations by instilling their teachings and traditions in the society, besides the fact that the Arab community is able to keep pace with technological development without pacing the intellectual one.

### **3. Conclusion**

To sum up, this paper examines the importance of Arab women's struggle and resistance to some patriarchal and cultural restrictions and challenges through the study and analysis of Hanan Al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh*. The study centres on the importance of women's access to their cultural and social rights and confirm that education and employment are pure personal rights that must be granted to every woman. They are essential for women's success in their mission for freedom. The paper also indicates that Education and work have many positive effects, not only on the life of women but also on the development of society as a whole.

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