Artículo de investigación

The Dynamics of Empowerment, Gender, and Patriarchy in Saudi Women's Short Stories

Las dinámicas del empoderamiento, el género y el patriarcado en los relatos breves de mujeres saudíes

Sihem Garrouri

Northern Border University, Saudi Arabia

ABSTRACT In their quest for liberation, Saudi women writers have employed a variety of strategic approaches to overcome gender inequality and patriarchal restrictions. One approach deployed to blurring gender boundaries is writing short stories, which serve as a means of empowerment and the transcendence of patriarchal, oppressive norms. This paper will approach Saudi female short stories within the framework of a discourse of empowerment and consciousness-raising, exploring the overlapping themes of patriarchy, gender, and empowerment. The paper will focus on the timeframe from the 1970s to the 1990s. A case study of fifteen short stories written by Saudi women is examined, with the objective of providing illuminating evidence about the rhetoric of empowerment, resistance to patriarchal limitations, and rejection of gender discrimination. The study's findings indicate that storytelling proved to be an especially effective method for empowering women, raising consciousness, and presenting an empowerment model as a substitute for the patriarchal system. Using an analytical-critical approach coupled with a thematic perspective, the text addresses three key pertinent issues: the challenge of patriarchal assumptions, the struggle for empowerment, and the redefinition of gender roles.

KEY WORDS Empowerment, gender, patriarchy, Saudi women writers, consciousness-raising, short story

RESUMEN En su búsqueda de liberación, las escritoras saudíes han empleado una variedad de estrategias para superar la desigualdad de género y las restricciones patriarcales. Una de las estrategias utilizadas para difuminar las fronteras de género es la escritura de relatos breves, los cuales funcionan como un medio de empoderamiento y de trascendencia de las normas patriarcales y opresivas. Este artículo aborda los relatos breves escritos por mujeres saudíes desde el marco de un discurso de empoderamiento y concienciación, explorando las temáticas entrelazadas del patriarcado, el género y el empoderamiento. El estudio se centra en el período comprendido entre las décadas de 1970 y 1990. Se examina un estudio de caso compuesto por quince relatos breves escritos por mujeres saudíes, con el objetivo de aportar evidencia esclarecedora sobre la retórica del empoderamiento, la resistencia a las limitaciones patriarcales y el rechazo de la discriminación de género. Los hallazgos indican que la narración de relatos resultó ser un método particularmente eficaz para el empoderamiento de las mujeres, la toma de conciencia y la presentación de un modelo de empoderamiento como alternativa al sistema patriarcal. Mediante un enfoque analítico-crítico, junto con una perspectiva temática, el texto aborda tres cuestiones centrales: el cuestionamiento de los supuestos patriarcales, la lucha por el empoderamiento y la redefinición de los roles de género.

PALABRAS CLAVE empoderamiento; género; patriarcado; escritoras saudíes; concienciación; relato breve.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the empowerment of women has been the center of attention for the government of Saudi Arabia (SA) to minimize gender gaps. Women have written short stories to advance social justice agendas, recognizing the importance of formulating their own tactics to challenge gender disparity and attain equality. The objective of this research is to explore a selection of translated short stories by Saudi women, with a focus on the rhetoric of empowerment and elements of consciousness-raising (CR), in relation to the interrelated themes of patriarchy, gender, and empowerment. It is important to delineate the theory of consciousness-raising as a form of challenging oppression that emerged from a group of feminists in the United

States during the 1960s and 1970s. The concept of CR signifies the practice of women discussing their personal experiences of gender discrimination to encourage political responses. This article employs the use of short story writing as a means of promoting awareness for the purpose of radically changing the status of women. This theory involves two dimensions: women's apprehension of their status within a persistently patriarchal society and being inspired to advocate for social justice (McCarthy, et al., 2023, p. 1152).

Recognizing their inferior position, Saudi Women Writers (SWW) promote gender equality through storytelling. This tactic is employed strategically in their short stories with an emphasis on cultivating empathy to eliminate gender inequality. To overcome the status of marginalization imposed by the patriarchal system, SWW speak out their concerns with the aim of building solidarity and deconstructing this system of subordination. As Almuthaybiri has observed, patriarchy is both an obstacle to empowerment and "a factor in the perpetuation of social oppression" (2024a, p. 2). Women sought to increase awareness of social and personal issues with the aim to change them. Consequently, the CR theory emerges as an effective rhetorical practice for a crucial purpose: ending the disempowerment of women.

The project is a text-based study which offers an analysis of some prosaic works from the anthology *Voices of Change: Short Stories by Saudi Arabian Women Writers* (1998). The selected short stories are: Fatimah al-Utaybi's "Just Give Me the Right to Dream" and "To Celebrate Being a Woman"; Nurah al-Ghamdi's "The Dove is a Woman"; Khayriyyah as-Saqqaf's "The Loss" and "The Reflection"; Badriyyah al-Bishir's "Wednesday Night" and "School Diaries"; Amal Abdul-Hamid's "In a Puzzling Whirlwind"; Mona A. Al-Dhokair's "The Last Dream"; Najet Khayyat's "Had I Been Male"; Jamilah Fatani's "Tears of Joy and Sorrow"; Sharifah ash-Shamlan's "Complete Calm"; Wafa Munawwar's "The Duties of a Working Wife"; Qumashah al-Ulayyan's "I Will Not Return"; and Samirah Khashuqji's "Fall of Nights". These literary works are of value, as they offer insights into women's approaches to empowerment. As Bagader et al. have explained, the short stories present the most pressing issues and interests of contemporary Saudi women (1998, p. ix). More interestingly, some works in the collection are 'protest stories' (1998, p. 1) that are deliberately employed to overcome the overwhelming gender discrimination and enter masculine territories women are not supposed to invade. Using storytelling, they have wisely addressed taboo topics, such as polygamy and arranged marriage, and affirmed their presence and central role in society.

According to the new historicism approach, literary texts are explored either as representing "topical events or as embodying the worldview of its contemporary culture" (Ciobanu et al., 2008, p. 203). Similarly, short stories reflect Saudi women's lives and delineate their society and culture (Al-Sudairy, 2017, p. 63). Literature func-

tions as a "system of representation" (Ciobanu et al., 2008, p. 203), allowing women to present life-like events and incidents, clarifying and evaluating characters, situations, and issues, and offering an illuminative view of life. In this respect, Almuthaybiri argues that female writings are forms of "evasion" or "subversion" of patriarchal norms (2024b, p. 16). Moreover, literary depictions are connected "to status, hierarchies, resistances and conflicts elsewhere in the culture. Texts both represent (reveal) a society's behavior patterns and perpetuate, shape, or alter that culture's dominant codes; thus, representation is reflective as well as productive of power" (Ciobanu et al., 2008, p. 208). This paper builds on this perspective by demonstrating that female storytellers seek recognition and empowerment through fictional works that portray fragmentary accounts of their lives. They "may have been denied a voice and place in the public sphere, but their literature attests to the quest for their right to exist as autonomous individuals" (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 177). Indeed, women's freedoms have been subject to control by their male guardians, and their creative literary discourse has been suppressed (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 177) and framed within rigid social rules. Their access to public discourse has been constrained by newspapers and blogs. As Al-Rasheed has observed, "women remained on the margin, seeking recognition and a voice in writing" (2013, p. 177). Writing short stories enables SWW to voice their concerns and aspirations, express their opinions, and resist marginalization.

In this sense, these fictional works have become an instrumental approach to deal with "the authoritarianism and domination that […] enforce constant surveillance of women in public places" (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 176). To overcome these constraints, women have found expression in fiction, daring to create fictional worlds that explore several aspects of their lives. They seem to "hide behind an imaginary world, created out of fragments of reality, personalities, and historical moments" (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 177). It is posited that storytelling paves a way for uplifting women, empowering them, and uprooting male supremacy. It is "a powerful tool for denunciation of a state of society they felt is unbearable" (Goyet, p. 2014, p. 7). Consequently, short stories should receive more rigorous debate, critical analysis, and genuine engagement. An active negotiation of Saudi women's short stories is a much-needed focus on issues that concern women as transcending patriarchal constraints, negotiating empowerment, and reconfiguring gender roles.

2. Methodology

The present study draws upon the feminist notion of CR and the rhetoric of empowerment approach. It provides a textual analysis of selected short stories to explore how SWW have redefined gender roles, challenged patriarchal conditions, and defended their right for empowerment. No inquiry has centered on the discourse of empowerment and the method of CR to explore storytelling. This project demonstrates the

importance of short stories as a literary source for studying women's approaches to empowerment. The authors offer candid depictions of their agony, since they realistically and poignantly describe myriad situations, feelings, and thoughts that illustrate their resentment of oppressive conditions and hope to introduce satisfactory changes.

This scrutiny does not constitute a critique of Saudi female writers; rather, it seeks to provide an analytical, critical interpretation and reading of selected short stories. The overall objective of this study is to interpret the works of some authors, whilst also exploring and interrogating the concepts of patriarchy, gender, and empowerment as recurrent themes in the selected works. This methodological approach shows that these three thematic issues are intrinsically interwoven. In these stories, women adeptly portray their quest for emancipation, communicating both their public and private concerns. Rather than merely testifying their oppression and presenting their aspirations; seemingly, the purpose of writing short stories is to encourage the government to implement radical reforms and formulate several policies that would empower Saudi women and achieve gender equality. Hence, the exploration of storytelling is not limited to its stylistic features, but it probes profound societal issues.

3. Literature Review

Scholars are interested in examining the novels written by Saudi women, but they have very rarely been concerned with their short stories. For instance, Madhawi Al-Rasheed (2013) has scrutinized four Saudi women's novels. Similarly, M. Kanie (2017) has examined three women's novels that illustrate the criticism of religious fanaticism and patriarchal strict gender segregation. In addition, Laila Al-Sharqi's (2016) analysis of the employment of magical realism as a feminist discourse to criticize patriarchal practices in Raja Alem's *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* (2002), and Ibrahim Abdulrahaman Alfraih and Hessa Almufarih (2023) have examined her depiction of the female body in her novels Khātam and Hubbā. Recently, Mubarak Altwaiji (2023) has discussed the factors that have contributed to the development and rise of the Saudi novel and short story in SA. The discussion has centered on the cultural and social barriers that the writers have encountered. A recent study by Haya Dahami (2024) has examined the emergence and development of the Saudi novel. It offers a thorough investigation of Ghazi Al-Gosaibi's 'Salma', probing its stylistic features, literary techniques, and thematic elements. The short story has received scant attention from writers. Employing a cultural discourse analysis and feminist epistemology, Ali M. Alshhre (2024) has examined the gender, power, and resistance dynamics in Badriyah Al-Bishr's

"Hend Wa al'askar" (2006). Moreover, Adel Musaylih Almuthaybiri (2024a) examines two Saudi novels written by a female and a male writer, respectively, demonstrating that the authors utilize their writings to challenge the patriarchal system. He further foregrounds the significance of contextualizing literary works within their unique cultural environments for a thorough comprehension of women's rights and issues in SA (2024b). Likewise, Zahia Smail Salhi (2024) emphasizes the consideration of historical, religious, political, and economic factors into the examination of women's circumstances. Furthermore, Rami Mustafa and Salah Troudi critically emphasize the importance that researchers scrutinizing women's conditions should not merely present an image of oppressed women; rather they must have access to scholarship depicting a full picture (2019, p. 139). Abdulrahman Hezam's (2018) study has examined Saudi female short stories, with a focus on social themes including marriage, divorce, and education. However, the present article seeks to highlight the use of the rhetoric of empowerment and CR theory with respect to the overlapping themes of patriarchy, gender, and empowerment. There has been surprisingly little significant, critical interest in storytelling as an effective approach to women's empowerment, an area that deserves more attention. This critical scrutiny aims to contribute to extant scholarships on short stories.

Hence, the decision to work on short stories rather than other genres of literature, is due, in part, from the scholars' inability to engage productively with the short stories that have been translated into English. Another reason is to furnish English-speaking readers with material that will enlighten their understanding of Saudi fiction, encouraging them to consult, reflect on, and engage with the translated works. Not only can they participate explicitly in their interpretation, but they will also develop a more profound understanding of such discourse.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Deconstructing Patriarchal Norms

Essential to the approach of empowerment and the notion of CR is the concept of patriarchy, which exists in almost every society. It is important to delineate it as a pivotal component in the analysis of gender inequality (Walby, 1989, p. 213). The concept has been described as "a generalized masculine oppression", "a sex-class system" (Waters, 1989, p. 193), a "structure of domination" (Santos et al., 2017, p. 8), "a powerful organizing concept with which social order has been understood, maintained, enforced, contested, [and] adjudicated" (Miller, 2017, p. 3), and "a hierarchical system of domestic relations that includes multiple intersecting structures of inequality including gender" (Santos et al., 2017, p. 10). It is noteworthy that these definitions emphasize power imbalance, domination, and hierarchy. Furthermore, the employment of the word system in certain definitions is noteworthy, as it denotes a deliberate establish-

ment of a set of principles or a mechanism in which societal roles are distributed un-equally. Through this organized scheme or method, the most important social roles are given to males, while females are excluded by imposing restrictive social norms.

According to the feminist theory, patriarchy is defined as "masculine domination" (Waters, 1989, p. 193). In this study, the concept of patriarchy is employed to denote both gender inequality and masculine superiority and oppression. One potential explanation for the development of patriarchal societies is male/female biological distinctions. Saudi Arabia is an inherently patriarchal culture, characterized by unequal gender expectations that attribute a domestic role for women, who are viewed as physically frail, while their counterparts are considered stronger and consequently could undertake distinctive societal responsibilities. Clearly, then, it is the society which constructs gender roles, mostly men, to enhance their superiority and reinforce women's subordination. Nevertheless, writing fictional stories enables women to create spaces in which they can denounce patriarchy and propose an egalitarian system. What is perhaps more intriguing, in a patriarchal system is that women's power in both the public and private spheres is constrained, and their right to decision-making is practically denied. As such, "the patriarchal system is characterized by power, dominance, hierarchy, and competition" (Ciobanu et al., 2008, p. 219). This is applicable to the Saudi context, which is characterized by patriarchal families, in which the wives and daughters are obedient to their patriarchs, the fathers and brothers.

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of women's status, it is crucial to consider the sociocultural realities and historical contexts, which illustrate the complexities of patriarchy within the Saudi context, and how traditional and social norms reinforce it. Indeed, within a conservative society that has distinct features, "patriarchy is manifested in the hierarchical nature of all aspects of life and sociocultural relations" (Almuthaybiri, 2024a, p. 3). Patriarchy, a resilient phenomenon in the SA, is defined as "the prioritizing of rights of males […] and the justification of those rights within kinship values, which are usually supported by religion" (Joseph, 1996, p. 14). A key term in this definition is "kinship", which is a central concept that justifies the prevalence of patriarchy. It permeates social, economic, political, psychological, and religious aspects of life. These manifestations of patriarchy serve to reinforce male superiority. Not only does kinship foster the patriarchal system, but also tribal setting and the family institution play an essential role (Almuthaybiri, 2024a, p. 4). It is argued that, in Saudi society, men are privileged because they oversee the well-being of the family, in control of financial resources, and the decision makers. For instance, male guardianship systems control women's lives since men watch over women. About family, Salhi (2010) clarifies that the "family code", a legislative framework that perpetuates male dominance, serves as an obstacle to the promotion of women's rights and the deconstruction of patriarchal norms. A more profound reason justifying patriarchal

persistence is the "psycho-dynamic aspect of patriarchy" (Joseph, 1996, p. 18). In fact, "where a sense of selfhood is fostered, which emphasizes the connectedness of individuals to each other, 'patriarchal connectivity' can emerge", (Joseph, 1996, p.18). An equally important factor that elucidates the perpetuation of patriarchy in SA is the conservative religious regime that hinders tangible changes in the status of women and the deconstruction of the prevailing patriarchy. The Islamic Wahhabi doctrine, which was "the official and only basis for laws and conduct," enforced strict control of Saudi women (Mustafa and Troudi, p. 134, 2019). In this sense, religion was employed to fortify patriarchy, support male supremacy, and intensify gender discrimination. Nevertheless, as Almuthaybiri explains, misinterpretations of Islam have resulted in gender inequality and the imposition of patriarchal customs that restrict women's rights (2024a, p. 3). He demonstrates that sex segregation is based on patriarchal constraints and social standards that are deeply embedded in the Saudi hierarchical socio-cultural fabric, rather than true Islamic teachings (Almuthaybiri, 2024a, p. 16).

Patriarchy is openly denounced in stories that portray women as less capable. An illustrative story is "Just Give Me the Right to Dream" by Fatimah al- Utaybi. It is evident that she condemns the marginalization of women who yearn for the right to dream as a manifestation of equality. The protagonist is married to a doctor who neglects her and rarely communicates with her because she is not as educated as he is. The simplistic use of binary opposites, such as "intellectual/ illiterate" and "everything /nothing", enhances the gap between them.

By highlighting their differences, she expresses her anxiety and frustration about her marginalization. She rebelliously expresses her discontent about being inferior, silenced, and without dreams. Indeed, she wants to be treated as an equal partner, blaming him for not taking any steps to narrow the intellectual gap between them: "You stubbornly kept me behind you all the time […] You never thought of holding my hand so that I could be a conscious being like you, to walk beside you" (Bagader et al., 1998, p. 65)". Thus, although her husband is educated, he never questions his male supremacy and her female subordination; rather, he endorses these social norms. It seems safe to argue that this story is a protest against male dominance and female disempowerment. It demonstrates how the writer raises awareness about the system of inequality, a strategic way to potentially empower and liberate women.

Nurah al-Ghamdi adopts the same tactic as in "The Dove is a Woman". She rejects the notion of female inferiority and advocates for women's emancipation. In this story, crying is projected as a "female habit" (1998, p. 57), which reflects women's weakness. Some women are disappointed and dishonored by men. Their crying, as a symptom of physical and emotional pain, is caused by males' negligence, disregard for their sentiments, and disrespect for their thoughts. Therefore, it is not surprising that frustrated women try to find comfort by crying or seek psychiatric assistance. Even

the doctor seems to unconsciously share the same patriarchal norms as his society. Instead of inquiring about the genuine reasons for their tears, he states that: "It is not strange for women to cry. What is strange is if they do not" (1998, p. 57). This reasoning demonstrates that the classification of women as fragile is fundamentally cultural. It is an attribute given by males to enhance their superiority.

The themes of tyranny, marginalization, and impoverishment as aspects of patriarchalism are evidently articulated in "The Loss" by Khayriyyah as- Saqqaf. The protagonist's naivety, ignorance, and inexperience culminate in her tragic downfall. She is a victimized woman who is uneducated and thus easily deceived and abused by her husband. Besides, she has unknowingly become drug-addicted, and consequently raped, and imprisoned. She trusts her husband, but he forges her signature, steals her money, and divorces her. In such a situation of helplessness and despair, her neighbor, Hamidah, pretends to help her while giving her drugs, which she mistakenly thought was pain reliever treatment. The employment of a language of incapability and powerlessness aims to raise women's consciousness about the consequences of marginalization. For instance, the protagonist confesses that women's laughter "is vague and dark, like everything else, in front of [her]" (1998, p. 69). Using a simile, she compares women's laughter to " the hissing of snakes from the darkness of the unknown" (1998, p. 69). There is also a recurrent use of the stylistic device, polyptoton. The terms "darkness" and "dark" are employed as a noun and an adjective, respectively, to highlight the loss of hope.

Women's qualities of vulnerability, subordination, passivity, and submissiveness have catastrophic consequences, including self-destruction. Badriyyah al- Bishir's "Wednesday Night" narrates the horrible experience of a powerless wife living with an alcoholic husband who considers her "an old-fashioned woman with psychological complexes" (1998, p. 80). Hai is afraid of becoming a widow at an early age and has no one to look after her children and protect them. Although her husband shockingly slaps her in the face because she dares to tell him that he is not a man, she shows no reaction to this dreadful, humiliating action; rather, her utmost concern is his safety. She articulates her discomfort living in a passionless relationship, yet "it is better than being a destitute widow with children" (1998, p. 82). Hence, because of her vulnerability and helplessness, she prefers a terrible match to widowhood. It is evident that the patriarchal structure has negative impacts on the life of the protagonist by actively preventing her from realizing her capabilities. She is unable to appreciate her ability to improve her social status and the advantages of self-reliance and independence. In this regard, Rafiah Almathami et al. claim that strict restrictions were imposed upon females and perpetual denial of their entry to public domains, specifically contributing to the workforce, are noteworthy challenges (2022, p. 47). There is a common perception that women are not as capable as men in public responsibilities.

To refute this claim, SWW advocate independence, promote self-worth, and denounce male dominance. In "The Reflection" by Khayriyyah As-Saqqaf, the main character's horrific experience with male oppression is best expressed through her words when she describes her mother as: "among the beasts who take away [her] freedom to make decisions on [her] own, who control [her] behaviour". She metaphorically addresses her father, mother, and brothers as "wild beast" and "thieves" [who] colour [her] smiles with tears" (Bagader et al., 1998, p. 87). She suffers abuse from her father, who neglects her right to study. He "grabs the book from [her] hand and rips it to shreds, just as he tears [her] soul and ideas" (1998, p. 89). Moreover, he never shows any affection or understanding of her feelings and aspirations. Her family's indifference, greediness, and brutality cause psychological issues, such as being unconfident, indecisive, and cowardly. The sad and gloomy tone that dominates the story highlights her discomfort with patriarchalism. Due to this system of segregation, her voice is silenced, and her dreams are taken away. Her frustration is evident when she reports the way she is tortured: "I would be ironed on both sides by fire, and my day would be hell" (1998, p. 89). Frustration is reinforced using exaggeration "rivers of tears streaming down my face" (1998, p. 91) and the repetition of the words "weep" and "weeping". Such affective moments or memorable instances portrayed in this short story play an important role in raising consciousness as well as evoking the readers' emotions. In doing so, the writer creates what Edgar Allan Poe aptly labeled "a single effect" (Lawrence, 1917, p. 276). She has deliberately sought to achieve specific outcomes: stirring empathy and assuming that officials would reduce social exclusion and suggest practical solutions to liberate women. The employment of a first-person point of view enables the protagonist, who is the narrator-focalizer, to express her inner thoughts and feelings, and to connect the reader to the story. To escape the torture of her family, she decides to accept the first man who proposes to her. The knight she has always been dreaming about, to save her from her oppressive family, turned out to be an old, impulsive man who cruelly beats and insults her. She is a victim of her family's harsh treatment, as well as her husband's brutal abuse. She is patriarchally affected by the various dimensions of injustices, such as physical violence, psychological humiliation, indifference, and other forms of torment. Clearly, then, gender segregation is the central cause of her endless "Journey of Pain" (1998,

p. 91). It is evident that her physical and psychological suffering are aspects of patriarchal domination.

Another manifestation of patriarchal malpractice is blaming women for being infertile. Amal Abdul- Hamid's "In a Puzzling Whirlwind", dramatizes a woman's extreme suffering because she is unable to bear children. In Saudi society, wives are expected to bear children from the first year of marriage. Her mother-in-law continuously and harshly reprimands her. Surprisingly, the protagonist seems to endorse the social norms which define women's identity in terms of childbearing ability, since her husband avoids hurting her or even discussing the matter. Another explanation of her anxiety is the fear that a second wife would share her husband with her. Indeed, he has the right to marry another woman to have children. Yet eventually, she is able "to break down the fences of weakness and humiliation that imprisoned her" (1998, p. 83). She redefines the concept of womanhood by showing that female fertility does not make a woman respectable; instead, her success and independence are important traits that should be highly valued. By means of creating opposites: "sadness/ happiness" and "desperation/hope", the writer shows the intensity of the internal struggle of a woman whose primary societal role is that of motherhood. This role confers upon her a respectful place in the family and in society. It is through courage, tenacity, and perseverance that she studies hard and becomes a teacher. Eventually, she proudly challenges her mother-in-law and declares, "I worked to become the master of myself". At this moment, she has felt "released from her chains" (1998, p. 85). This discourse illustrates her struggle for emancipation. It seems plausible to argue that, through the depiction of a round character who evolves from a state of immaturity and innocence to maturity and experience, the writer promotes women's liberation and self-worth and denounces the patriarchal distribution of roles.

4.2 The Struggle for Empowerment

Before addressing the struggle for empowerment in SWW, it is imperative to establish a clear definition of the concept of empowerment. It is "a continuing process of adult development" (2014, p. 31), explains Charles H. Kieffer. Nevertheless, it is easy to define it through its antonyms: disempowerment, which has several dimensions, including physical weakness, social inferiority and isolation, helplessness, and humiliation. In this study, it is associated with women's development and engagement with equality and social, economic, and interpersonal justice, and rejection of all sorts of control of their lives. The empowerment of women means promoting their rights and capabilities through active participation in the process of change and development. Saudi women are undertaking revolutionary measures to enhance their status and secure additional rights. Significantly, the concept of empowerment suggests the existence of certain methods and tools with which concerns are articulated.

The rhetoric of empowerment is exemplified in "Tears of Joy and Sorrow" by Jami-

lah Fatani, who underscores the significance of education as a powerful medium for the liberation of women. To overcome the traditional educational constraints, it is essential that women fight for the right to education, which would allow them to fully participate in the development of the Kingdom. Not only does education qualify them to enter the job market, but it serves as a bastion against male abuse and domination. It raises women's awareness of their potential and, consequently, asks for comprehensive reforms. Ahlem succeeds in convincing her father to pursue her studies. Her story clearly illustrates that the father or the patriarch's authority is a barrier to obtaining a proper education. His authority can "shatter such happy dreams and rosy expectations" (1998, p. 31). Indeed, over the past five decades, women have been regarded as "second class citizens," with their rights being limited in comparison to those of men (Alharbi, 2015, p. 4). Here, the recurrent question of identity appears. Ahlem's education would provide her with an identity and a "bright future". She would be a "great professor" (Bagader et al., 1998, p. 31). Not only does education empower, liberate, and enhance her self-confidence, but it also helps her achieve her dream for a better life. Similarly, in the work "The Last Dream", Mona A. Al- Dhokair cleverly denounces the family denial of girls' fundamental right to education because they are beautiful and, thus, vulnerable. By discussing such familial issues, the writers implicitly address the social problems as dark sides of patriarchalism. In fact, family is a mere reflection of the macro-level aspects of society. The relationships between family members are based on treating women as subordinates, vulnerable, irresponsible, and dependent on male guidance. Such practices are also evident in public life. In other words, the domestic practices of abuse, and dominance by fathers, husbands, and brothers are implemented and accepted in the public sphere. Bagader et al. emphasize that the situations portrayed are "very real," and the stories demonstrate the writers' obvious encouragement of women to resent mistreatment and torment (1998, p. 3). They reveal their awareness of self-worth, "presenting the self-anew, self-assertion within the household, and the self-facing others in the larger society context" (1998, p. 5).

One raised issue that illustrates the discourse on empowerment and the concept of CR is the promotion of women's right to choose a husband. In her short story, "The Last Dream", Mona A. Al- Dhokair articulates a protest against traditional tribal norms, which consider an outsider a foreigner. Sabeeka and Maher are secretly in love, but they are unable to marry because tribal customs prohibit girls from being wed to a foreigner. She is "silently defeated" by her family who wants her to engage with a man from the same area. She screams "her unbearable pain" and stops eating as an "unannounced protest" (Bagader et al., 1998, p. 123). Najet Khayyat, as well, in her work, "Had I Been Male", raises important questions about marriage and the identity of a Saudi woman. She portrays an adolescent, orphan girl who resists an arranged marriage and refuses to be sold as a commodity. As evident in the lexical

choice: "my price", "three thousand riyals", "paid in cash", "merchandise", and "closed the deal", Khayyat criticizes such arranged marriage by the protagonist's mother and uncle, who are supposed to be her protectors. The girl desperately confesses the bitter reality that her "life was sold to a man" (1998, p. 20). Her marriage is indicative of the "end of freedom and youth" (1998, p. 19). She expresses her extreme anger and agony because of her vulnerability as a female individual. She claims that "the hatred of [her] degrading femininity has sunk deep inside [her]" (1998, p. 19), blaming the social constraints placed on her sex and deprived her of the right to work and have dignity. As a woman, she is dependent on her uncle to survive. In SA, upon the death of the father, an unmarried daughter should choose a male relative to live with. Ironically, she states that she should not "revolt"; rather, she should stay imprisoned in traditional norms, which her protectors consider as "shelter and protection." The protagonist plainly denounces such social practices, describing them as "shameful" and unacceptable. She miserably and furiously speaks about the vulnerability of her sex: "Had I been male, I would not have been buried in this coffin they call a bride's gown, or celebrated in a funeral" (1998, p. 21). The construction "had I been" is used to describe an erroneous, speculative situation: being male. She imagines an impossible and different past condition, which emphasizes her alienation with her gender. Using repetition, she emphasizes this unreal condition and its subsequent consequences. Furthermore, through its stylistic intimacy, the writer establishes a close relationship with readers and seems to converse with them. Her description of the marriage day as a funeral, and the gown as a coffin, indicates not only her grief and frustration, but also illustrates her dehumanization by forcing her to marry a man who is considerably older than her. Additionally, the repeated use of the term "female" certainly indicates her struggle with her gender. She refers to her "miserable and suffocated" life as a dependent, helpless girl who endures a dehumanizing match with an old husband, simply because she is female and her decision is unimportant. As a girl who has been victimized and finds herself entrapped in a destructive marriage, she pleads with her mother to liberate her. The mother replies firmly: "You're female. It is not my mistake, not my oppression. Nothing can be done" (1998, p. 22). The social realities of oppression are clearly depicted in this story by presenting the heroine's anxiety, unfulfilled aspirations, growing anger, and dissatisfaction with the paternalistic model that limits her liberty, responsibility, and decision-making. Consequently, there is an intersection between women's literary creativity and the social reality of a highly segregated culture. In other words, literature reflects the prevailing social issues.

The theme of suffering and freedom is also plainly portrayed in "School of Diaries", Badriyyah al- Bishir portrays a heroine who aspires to liberate herself from male su-

periority, the mistreatment of other women, and polygyny. According to the Islamic doctrine, men are allowed to marry four wives simultaneously, on condition of financial ability and fair treatment. The father of the protagonist marries a second wife and neglects his responsibilities towards his family. Consequently, her brother Saeed "assumes his male right" (1998, p. 23) and exercises complete authority over her, constantly inspecting her phone, books, and room, although he is only two years older than her. This demeanor shows that she is considered unintelligent and unable to look after herself and needs male guidance to correct her behavior and surveil the way she dresses. Clearly, then, there is a connection between her dismal situation and gender inequity. By critically highlighting the grievances of the protagonist, the writer skillfully promotes women's empowerment and gender equality. This is achieved through the depiction of a violent, authoritative brother who controls and dominates the life of his sister. She shows that neglecting women's capabilities hinders their personal growth and the realization of their rights, consequently exposing them to the risk of mistreatment and difficulties.

Hence, the short stories demonstrate that, by adopting the concept of CR, female authors have presented their hopes for social progress and acknowledged their opposition to the various forms of oppression. Indeed, CR serves as a valuable means of moving towards revolutionary changes (Thexton et al., 2019, p. 84). It also involves evoking sympathy, challenging presumptions, "and connecting the micro with the macro in order to fight for structural change, usually through more collective means" (McCarthy et al., 2023, p. 1153).

These literary texts serve as an exceptionally effective medium for addressing gender disparities while fostering solidarity regarding women's disempowerment. In fact, "empathy can invoke altruistic behavior towards them" (Thexton et al., 2019, p. 85).

4.3 Redefining Gender Roles

What the feminists aptly labeled the "sex/ gender system", is the main reason for the disempowerment of women. Indeed, "the patriarchal construction of gender" imposes certain social norms on women and projects them as "natural" (Ciobanu et al., 2008, p. 217). That is to say, the patriarchal society utilizes factual biological, or physiological differences to attribute certain, distinct qualities to men and women, thereby establishing dissimilar identities and conducts that serve to enhance women's subordination and bolster men's superiority and dominance (Ciobanu et al., 2008, p. 219). In this respect, Susan Kingsley Kent argues that gender is not merely neutral or natural; rather, it is a social construct. Therefore, it undergoes alterations over time and varies according to the culture and the region (2021, p. 4). She further explains that gender is usually linked with power, and "ideas about sexual differences […] are used to create, justify, uphold, challenge, or resist some kind of power" (2021, p. 4). The justification of power is most evident in the establishment of gender roles, which

are sets of stereotypical behavioral patterns and attitudes considered appropriate or inappropriate based on sex. As such, gender expectations imply that society allocates distinctive responsibilities, benefits, and rights to some, while denying them to others. Evidently, there is an intrinsic connection between gender and power. The concept of power is justified by gender differences. Put simply, the biological distinctions are utilized to foster and validate masculine superiority. Moreover, men perceive themselves as powerful by dominating women. This imbalance in power is vividly manifested through gender relations, which are "fundamental means by which we understand ourselves" (Kent, 2021, p. 5).

Hence, within a masculine culture, gender roles are stereotypical, meaning that men and women perform dissimilar roles. Soekarba explains that masculinity is an "extreme enforcement of gender differentiation, in which male traits of assertiveness, power, control, and achievements dominate and rule the concerned society" (2018, p. 195). Accordingly, masculinity-a term most used to delineate the societal features and behavior attributed to men- is privileged over femininity-a term generally deployed to describe the cultural characteristics and conduct assigned to women. It is evident that culture plays a significant role in "gender construction" (Almuthaybiri, Reimagining, 2024, p. 119). Ciobanu et al. posit that "femaleness is a matter of biology, and femininity is a set of culturally defined characteristics" (2008, p. 217). Thus, the privileges given to men explain the conviction that women are inferior and men are superior. This distinction makes them unequal in terms of rights and opportunities. However, according to the feminist theory, men and women are equal economically, politically, and socially. For this reason, within their fictional creations, Saudi women advocate for governmental review of the legislative system and the implementation of regulations aimed at the elimination of restrictions imposed upon them. Therefore, storytelling is an extremely effective medium that allows for the negotiation of conventional gender roles to deconstruct oppressive societal norms, and to promote empathy. As such, it is a gateway for CR, which entails linking private concerns to political matters.

Several stories depict capable, responsible, and productive women who assume new roles. Role shifting is evident in Sharifah ash-Shamlan's story, "Complete Calm", which presents a mature and responsible woman who does not need a male guardian and custodian. As a self-confident and intelligent woman, Fatimah, who is flying to the United States, demonstrates that women can protect themselves. By demonstrating that her little brother, who is expected to be her protector, does indeed need her care and protection, she cleverly proves the inaccuracy of the male guardianship system. When a drunken man abuses her, she bravely and calmly defends herself and teaches him a lesson while her protector is in deep sleep. Furthermore, her words express her dissatisfaction with male superiority. She makes the following sarcastic

declaration: "Men are masters. They are everything" (Bagader et al., 1998, p. 48). Yet, she acknowledges that "most women's intelligence is greater than their experience" (1998, p. 48). It is evident that the writer advocates for women's empowerment by allowing them to travel without a male guardian and actively develops awareness of female abilities, specifically protecting themselves from abusers.

The potential of women is also addressed by Wafa Munawwar in her work, "The Duties of a Working Wife". This story illustrates the redefinition of gender roles. The writer emphasizes the competencies of a female teacher, who is successful in her duties as a mother, wife, and hostess. Laila is depicted in a newly gendered fashion. Despite the considerable demands of her job, she succeeds in her home management, motherhood responsibilities, and wifehood duties. It was through these roles that she engendered herself and redefined her identity. She is an excellent teacher who refuses to succumb to her husband's persistent demand to retire. Therefore, the storytelling approach demonstrates that women can make positive contributions to decisions that affect their well-being. As a teacher, she contributes to the economic growth of her society. Her accomplishments appear to exert pressure on other women to emulate the ideal home manager, mother, wife, and career woman. Accordingly, literature reconstructs gender identity. It is evident that SWW seeks to raise "consciousness by [representing] women's lives, by topics like childhood, jobs, motherhood" (Sarachild, 1979, p. 145). The main purpose is to increase awareness and comprehension of their potential – an awareness that would encourage women to challenge traditional ideas and discrimination based on sex.

Awareness raising is also demonstrated in Fatimah al-Utaybi's story, "To Celebrate Being a Woman". It reveals a protagonist who is proud of her gender and refers to women's success in the task of motherhood by raising responsible children who can replace irresponsible men. Using the first-person narrative, the writer presents the inner thoughts of a woman who defends her potential and talents. The question that haunts her is: Why is women's identity identified by appearance, if it is superficial? Unable to accept this contradiction, she says, "I wish I weren't a woman. Then, I could live peacefully" (Bagader et al., 1998, p. 53). The reiteration of the sentence, "I wish I had been born a man!" emphasizes her longing for liberty and discomfort with her gender. She defines femininity as "a weak creature with no demands weighing on [her] shoulders," or being "as fragile as glass" to endure pain and suffering (1998, p. 54). Surprisingly, however, she ultimately ceases to regret being a woman; instead, she celebrates her female capabilities, precisely, childbirth ability. She claims that, although customs and traditions prevent women from participating in wars, they indirectly join the battlefields by willingly sending their dearest sons to wars.

The reconfiguration of gender roles is also evident in the story entitled "I Will Not Return" by Qumashah al-Ulayyan. It portrays a wife who takes control of her own fate,

denouncing the traditional view that a woman should accept her destiny. Although Mariam knows that her husband, Ibrahim, is adulterous, she desperately and silently hopes that he may change his bad habits. She tries hard to get his attention and reach his heart, but in vain. Feeling humiliated, several questions arise: "Why did she keep allowing him to defeat her? Why didn't she drive him out of her life?" (1998, p. 98). Eventually, she realizes that she should put an end to such a toxic relationship. Indeed, her husband has detested, embarrassed, and dishonored her (1998, p. 98). Clearly, the writer aims at advancing her ideas of empowerment, referring to the way out of the situation of subordination-rejecting all sorts of male humiliation and contempt. When her former husband requests her, Mariam decisively informs him: "I'm sorry, I won't return" (1998, p. 99). She decides not to return to a situation involving degradation, loss of dignity, and self-respect. Such literary discourse demonstrates that the Western, stereotypical attitude towards Saudi women as submissive and voiceless is inaccurate. Accordingly, storytelling enables the author to address and rectify misperceptions about Saudi women.

The qualities of assertiveness and self-confidence are also evident in "Fall of Nights" by Samirah Khashuqji, who articulates her opposition to the practice of polygyny. Employing the technique of flashback, she presents a rebellious protagonist who rejects a polygynous match with a prince. Despite the religious and legal precedent that permits a man to marry up to four wives, Bara'ah refuses to succumb to her family's wish to marry the prince. When her family informs her that she will live happily and enjoy the wealth and prestige of a princely life, she firmly replies: "I will never marry a married man, even if he offers the treasures of the world. […] I am not a bonded woman, to be sold. I am a free woman with dignity and pride" (1998, p. 109). Her words are resonant with power, self-assertion, and confidence. In fact, she thinks that polygyny is harmful and detrimental to the prince's first wife. Khashuqji seems to encourage women to reject this practice because it violates gender equality. Evidently, literary texts are forms of CR (Ciobanu et al., 2008, p. 251) and manifestations of empowerment. Not only does Bara'ah have a free will to choose her consort, but she also denounces perpetual submission to a boring, mechanical marriage. Although she happily and lovingly married Salim, through the passage of time, her life becomes boring. She determinedly defends her right to enjoy her life in the company of her husband. This suggests that Saudi women are brave, intelligent, and decisive.

In the last two decades, the Saudi government has implemented significant and unprecedented measures to promote women's participation in various spheres, including education, employment, voting, driving, divorce, and marriage (Almuthaybiri, p. 2). Women occupy various non-customary positions, as nurses, doctors, engineers, teachers, and drivers. These profound amendments, that are taking place at an amazing speed, are a step towards further transformations and modernization of

society. There is no doubt that Saudi Arabia has undergone major developments and improvements in all aspects of life. The status of women is changing radically. More significantly, several liberal reforms are being carried out by 2030. Therefore, it is crucial to develop approaches and frameworks to study this phenomenon.

5. Conclusion

By analyzing some female short stories, we realize that storytellers have employed a discourse of empowerment and the notion of CR to capture the complexities and the underlying dynamics of gender, patriarchy, and empowerment. Indeed, in a male-dominated society, and being aware of their vulnerability, SWW employed storytelling as a means of empowerment. The scrutinized stories demonstrate that the traditional models of patriarchalism and gender inequality are reconfigured and challenged. It is evident that writers put a great emotional force to address the prejudice associated with their gender, presenting the societal hardships and gender-related issues, and highlighting the importance of reform.

The analysis of Saudi female storytelling also illustrates the strength of their words, which help understand the effect that their stories aim at producing. Moreover, their skills in presenting persuasive, realistic stories enable them to achieve specific practical objectives, thereby encouraging women to assume an active role as agents of change and empowerment. Therefore, storytelling is a powerful tool in the process of empowerment, ensuring an escape route from marginalization, humiliation, and oppression. This approach facilitates a better understanding of the way in which women manage to speak out their concerns. Moreover, these stories provide insights into their ability to escape the vicious circle of inequality. Most of the heroines are aware of their capabilities. The selected stories are testimony not only to the creativity and productivity of SWW, but also to their commitment to disseminate their ideas, worries, and hopes. What appears clearly in examining these stories from a thematic, analytical perspective is the deployment of a discourse of empowerment and forms of CR. The act of storytelling appears to facilitate debate on family relationships and societal issues, thereby aiming to bring about relevant changes and start negotiating new roles, responsibilities, and privileges.

Although the selected stories are enlightening material, which draw on circumstances and emerge from a specific Saudi socio-cultural context, the themes discussed in this study are relevant to male-dominated societies, particularly Arab cultures. The findings have the potential to inspire further feminist studies of literary texts as forms of rebellion and resistance of oppression, proving that literature, a far less well-discovered field, can serve to confront patriarchal societies and communicate women's discomfort with gender discrepancy. It unmutes marginalized women and unfolds their protests and their attitudes towards themselves and their social status.

About the author

SIHEM GARROURI is an Assistant Professor of English at Northern Border University, Saudi Arabia. She studied at The University of Caen Normandy, France. Her research interests include Renaissance studies, Gender studies, the Elizabethan era, and history of thoughts and politics. Garrouri's recent publications include: "Queen Elizabeth I: The Rhetoric of a Unique Paradoxical Image", "Mythologizing the Memory of Gloriana", and "Elizabeth I's Royal Progresses: A Study of Formal Orations and Poetic Recitations". Email: sihem.garrouri@gmail.com. https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6600-4870

References

Alfraih, I. A. & Almufarih, H. (2023). Exploring the Metaphors of the Body in the Novels of Rajaa Alem: Special Focus on Khātam and Ḥubbā. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 1(24). https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2023.2215186.

Almuthaybiri, A. M. (2024a): Breaking the Chains: Women's Writing Against Patriarchy in Saudi Narratives. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2024.2421504.

Almuthaybiri, A.M. (2024b). Reimagining Feminism and Gender Relations in Saudi Arabia: A New Theoretical Framework. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 6(2).117-136. http://doi.org/ 10.36892/ijlls.v6i2.1643.

Al-Sharqi, L. (2016). Magical Realism as Feminist Discourse in Raja Alem's Fatma: A Novel of Arabia. *English Language and Literature Studies*, 6 (58), 10.5539/ells.v6n2p58.

Al- Sudairy, H. T. (2017). *Modern Woman in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Rights, Challenges and Achievements*. New Castle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Ali M. Alshhre. (2024). Gender in Revelations: Unraveling Gendered Struggles and Revisiting the Construction of Cultural Identity Paradigms in Badriyah Al-Bishr's Hend Wa alʿaskar (2006). *Women's Studies International Forum*, 106, p. 102980. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2024.102980.

Altwaiji, M. (2023). Saudi Novel and Short Story: History, Realities and Prospects. *Journal of Umm Al-Qura University for Language Sciences and Literature*, 31 .61-67. https://doi.org/10.54940/ll42483373.

Alharbi, R. (2015). *Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia: Example of Political Life and Employment*. Working Paper. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.29270.96326.

Almathami, R., Catheryn, K., & Elaine, C. L. Y. (2022). Exploring the Challenges for Women Working in the Event and Festival Sector in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia". *Tourism Recreation Research*, 47(1), 47-61. https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2020.1821329.

Al-Rasheed, M. (2013). *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Sau-*

di Arabia. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bagader, A., Heinrichsdorff, A. M., & Akers, D. S. A. (Eds.). (1998). *Voices of Change: Short Stories by Saudi Arabian Women Writers*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Dahami, Y. S. H. (2024). Saudi Novel: Commencements, Efforts, and Headway (5): 'Salma' of Ghazi Al-Gosaibi as an Epitome. *ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 7 (2), 367-375. https://doi.org/10.34050/elsjish.v7i2.35611.

Golban, P., & Ciobanu, E. A. (2008). *A Short History of Literary Criticism*. Kütahya, Turkey: Üç Mart Press.

Goyet, F., (2014). *The classic Short Story, 1870- 1925: Theory of a Genre*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

Hezam, A. M. M. (2018). Social Themes in Saudi Women Short Stories: Making the voice of Women Heard. *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies*, 2 (4), 152-163. http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol2no4.11.

Joseph, S., (1996). Patriarchy and Development in the Arab world. *Gender & Development*, 4(2), 14-19.

Kanie, M. (2017). Young Saudi Women Novelists: Protesting Clericalism, Religious Fanaticism and Patriarchal Gender Order. *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 7 (2), 283-99.

Kent, S. K. (2021). *Gender a World History*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kieffer, C. H. (2013). Citizen Empowerment: A Developmental Perspective. *Studies in Empowerment Steps towards Understanding and Action*, Rappaport, J., Swift, C., & Robert, H. (Eds). London & New York: Routledge, 9- 36.

Lawrence, J. C. (1917). A Theory of the Short Story. *The North American Review*, Feb., 1917, 205 (735), 274- 286. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25121469.

McCarthy, L., & K. G. (2023). Breaking Isolation: Consciousness-raising as a Methodology for Academic Activism. *Organization*, 30 (5), 1152-1167. https://doi.org/10.1177/13505084231166172.

Miller, P. (2017). *Patriarchy*. London & New York: Routledge.

Mustafa, Rami & Troudi, Salah. (2019). Saudi Arabia and Saudi Women in Research Literature: A Critical Look. *Asian Social Science*, 15. 133-133. 10.5539/ass.v15n2p133.

Salhi, Z. S (2024). Striving for autonomy and feminism: What possibilities for Saudi Women? *Diogenes*, 65, 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0392192124000087.

Salhi, Z. S (2010). The Algerian feminist movement between nationalism, patriarchy and Islamism. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 33. 113-124. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2009.11.001.

Santos, G., & S. H. (2017). Introduction. *Transforming Patriarchy: Chinese Families in the Twenty- First Century*. Santos, G., & Stevan, H. (Eds). Seattle and London:

University of Washington Press. 3- 36.

Sarachild, K. (1979). Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon. *Feminist Revolution. Redstockings* (Ed.). New York: Random House, 144–50.

Soekarba, S. R. (2019). Determinants of Patriarchy in the Middle East: Hope for the 2030 Vision in a New Saudi Arabia. Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Strategic and Global Studies (ICSGS 2018), (pp.193–200). https://doi-org.sdl.idm.oclc.org/10.2991/icsgs-18.2019.27.

Thexton, T., Ajnesh P., & Albert. J. (2019). Learning Empathy Through Literature. *Culture and Organization*, 25 (2), 83- 90.

Walby, S. (1989). Theorizing Patriarchy. *Sociology*, 23 (2), 213-234.

Walters, M. (1989). Patriarchy and Viriarchy: An Exploration and Reconstruction of Concepts of Masculine Domination. *Sociology*, 23 (2), 193- 211.

UNIVERSIDAD CATÓLICA DE TEMUCO