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WRITING AS LIBERATION: CHALLENGING YEMENI PATRIARCHAL PRACTICES

by

SHEEMA ALAMARI

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,
The City University of New York

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ABSTRACT

Writing as Liberation: Challenging Yemeni Patriarchal Practices

by

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Patriarchal societies create an environment where men hold power and women are often treated as second-class citizens or are often held as having an inferior status. Throughout history and across cultures, literature has provided a platform for writers to share their stories and express themselves. However, Yemeni women have often been silenced and marginalized due to limited education and censorship. In recent times, Yemeni and Yemeni-American women have turned to storytelling as a means of creative expression and emotional release. This thesis analyzes Zubaida “Jasmine” Sharif’s memoir, *Caged in America: One Woman’s Journey Through the Veil*, and Nadia Al-Kowkabani’s Arabic novel, *It’s Just Love*, examining the relationship between religion and cultural practices in each work. Despite being of different genres, both texts highlight the injustices that Yemeni women face in Yemen and the United States due to entrenched patriarchal cultural practices that have been passed down through generations. The real barriers to Yemeni women’s freedom are the patriarchal traditions that persist in Yemeni society and beyond, depriving them of their basic human rights. While Islam protects these rights, they are often denied by cultural tradition. Both writers are feminist voices advocating for the liberation of women from the shackles of patriarchy. Critiquing the social and traditional practices that keep women subjugated is not commonplace in Yemeni society, but Sharif and Al-Kowkabani expose the ways in which these traditions contradict Islamic principles that empower women. Their voices, in different literary genres, produce feminist texts that call for a change that grants women their fundamental human rights. By critiquing misogynistic practices, both works raise awareness about the injustices that Yemeni women face.

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Introduction

Patriarchy is defined as “a social system in which power is held by men, through cultural norms and customs that favor men and withhold opportunity from women” (dictionary.com). Patriarchal cultures cultivate a space where men are dominant and treat women as inferior in all facets of their lives. Across cultures and time, works of literature have enabled writers to share their stories providing them an outlet to express themselves. The voices of Yemeni women have historically been silenced and absent in the public sphere due to the lack of education and censorship in some cases. However, in recent times, Yemeni and Yemeni-American women have turned to storytelling to channel their emotions and creatively express themselves. This thesis is an in-depth analysis of Zubaida “Jasmine” Sharif’s memoir *Caged in America: One Woman’s Journey Through the Veil A Memoir*, and the Arabic novel, *It’s Just Love (Hub Laisa Illa)*, by Nadia Al-Kowkabani, focusing on the relationship between religion and culture practices in each work. Both texts, through different genres, portray the injustices that Yemeni women face both in Yemen and in the United States due to patriarchal cultural practices enforced throughout generations.

Both works create a space to discuss women’s place in Yemeni culture and the ways in which these practices are backed with religious justifications. To keep women in the domestic sphere, women’s bodies are policed, their social mobility is limited, and restrictions are imposed in Yemen despite their contradictions with the Islamic faith. This thesis explores the ways in which the genres, both the memoir and novel, offer different opportunities to discuss gender inequality and the oppression of women. Subsequently, both Sharif and Al-Kowkabani are on a quest for finding and defining oneself as well as seeking independence that results from existing

in a society that enforces the control of women's physical movement, intellectual thought, and civil engagement, as presented in both narrations.

Zubaida "Jasmine" Sharif's *Caged in America: One Woman's Journey Through the Veil* A *Memoir* exposes the forms of oppression and violence that Yemeni and Yemeni-American women endure behind closed doors, within their own 'homes.' Jasmine Sharif is a writer and poet who was born in Guban, Yemen in 1974 and later immigrated to the U.S. with her family. Her memoir focused on her life in Dearborn, Michigan, was published on October 26, 2010. As a Yemeni-American, Jasmine Sharif's memoir narrates her prison-like experience in Dearborn. It exposes the ways in which Yemeni women are controlled physically and psychologically in every facet of their lives, especially in regard to their finances, body and mobility. Consequently, they have no body autonomy, no financial independence and are deprived of the ability to move freely in private and public spaces, resulting in imposed prison-like experiences. Sharif's memoir portrays the various struggles that Yemeni women endure, even here in the United States where some may assume would be the 'land of freedom.'

Jasmine is the third of eight children who served, cooked and cared for her younger siblings. In Dearborn, she was sold at the age of 15 through an arranged marriage for thirty thousand dollars and some gold. Between the ages of 15 to 30, she endured four arranged marriages. Once married, she became her husband's personal possession. Her memoir begins with her older sister's wedding, who at the time was 13 years old describing her fascination with the celebration. Undoubtedly, the parents and the community knew well that they could get in legal trouble for underage marriages, so they held the wedding ceremonies at the homes of their relatives. Expectedly, the men in their lives, whether fathers, brothers, or husbands, were in control at all times dictating when they have to get married and to whom. Throughout the

memoir, Jasmine's story depicts the ways in which she, and other women around her, are imprisoned at home and deprived of their agency.

In another space, Al-Kowkabani's novel grapples with the topics of marriage, abusive husbands, and the violation of the female body within patriarchal cultural practices. *It's Just Love (Hub Laisa Ila)*, published in 2006, was Nadia Al-Kowkabani's first novel after the publication of several short stories. In subsequent years, she published the following novels in Arabic; *Aqeelat (Ladies)* in 2009, *Sana'ai (My Sana'a)* in 2015, *Souk Ali Mohsen (Ali Mohsen Bazaar)*, in 2016. Nadia Al-Kowkabani is a Yemeni postmodern short story writer and novelist whose work voices the harsh reality that Yemeni women face. She was born in Taiz, Yemen and studied at Sana'a University focusing on architecture. In 2008, she completed her PhD in architecture at Cairo University. She then returned to Sana'a where she took up an academic position at Sana'a University. As a contemporary and crucial voice in Yemen, Al-Kowkabani received several awards and recognition including the Saud al-Sabah Prize in 2000 (Second prize), the Yemeni President's Award for Young Writers (2001) and the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture Grant (2010). In 2005 and in 2009, her work appeared in translation in two issues of Banipal magazine.

Al-Kowkabani's *It's Just Love*, deals with the topic of marriage and the traditions that perpetuate a cycle of masculine entitlement and male dominance in Yemen society. Farah, the narrator of the novel, is an educated and ambitious young woman with a passion to pursue education abroad and become a professor. Her world crumbles after her father forces her to get married to a man she does not know. The shackles of patriarchy trap Farah as it is the norm in Yemen that the men in the household always have power over women. Farah experiences a traumatic wedding night and as she grapples with that shock, she contemplates the pain that her

mother, sisters, and grandmother have endured. In this moment of discovery, she felt powerless and overcome with physical pain which made her wonder if her mother and maternal ancestors experiences were similar. Toxic marriage traditions such as those narrated by Farah, destroy a woman's identity and cultural norms deprive her of the ability to work or study. Al-Kowkabani also depicts the family dynamics that surveil young girls in their parents' household and impose a prison-like experience. They are stripped of their agency and their basic rights are disregarded, leaving them with the painful dilemma of having to choose between subservience and alienation. Subservience requires her to give up on her dreams while living with cultural restrictions. Meanwhile, defining her identity and chasing her dreams puts her at risk of becoming ostracized due to going against cultural norms. Thus, her novel also explores the narrator's educational journey and the opportunities she wished she had and could not obtain until society labeled her a widow, following her husband's tragic death.

Both writers are feminist voices advocating for the liberation of women from the entrapment of patriarchy.¹ Critiquing the social and traditional practices that keep women in shackles is not the norm in Yemeni society; nonetheless, Sharif and Al-Kowkabani expose the ways in which these traditions contradict with Islamic rulings. They explicitly call into question how these traditions are in contradiction with the religion's empowerment of women. The Yemeni national and transnational feminist voices through both texts call for change that grants women their basic human rights. Critiquing misogynistic practices through these literary works spreads awareness about the injustice that Yemeni women endure.

¹ Here, I am using the following definition of feminism: "advocating social, political, legal, and economic rights for women equal to those of men" (dictionary.com)

The Dilemma of Representation of Arab and Muslim Women and an Overview of Yemeni Women's History

The two texts *Caged in America* and *It's Just Love* contend with the history, status, and depictions of Yemeni Muslim women. It is important to briefly address the scholarly debates about the representation of Arab and Muslim women as well as the historical status of Yemeni women. Scholars have addressed the issues of the misrepresentation of Arab and Muslim women in different works. Lila Abu-Lughod, a professor of Anthropology and Women's and Gender Studies at Columbia University, addresses the important question: *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* In her book, she challenges the idea that Muslim women are helpless victims who need to be saved by Western powers. She argues that this narrative is not only inaccurate but also harmful, as it perpetuates a colonialist mentality and reinforces Western dominance over Muslim countries and cultures. Abu-Lughod draws on her own experiences conducting fieldwork in Muslim countries and on a range of case studies to demonstrate that Muslim women are active agents in their own lives and societies. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* offers a nuanced and thought-provoking perspective on a complex and contentious issue.

Abu-Lughod vividly explains that we need to pay attention to the human rights issues involving women. Outsiders may assume that Yemeni women in Yemen might need saving because they're 'oppressed.' They may lack a knowledge of unjust practices and conditions that Yemeni women face and that deprive them of their human rights. Abu-Lughod emphasizes, "The focus on Muslim women's supposed oppression can divert attention from other important issues facing Muslim communities, such as poverty, discrimination, and political repression." These factors must be explored when analyzing Yemeni women's struggles before labeling them as 'oppressed' or 'passive.'

Similarly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, critiques the way in which Western feminist discourse has constructed a homogenized image of Third World women as passive, oppressed victims in need of Western salvation. Mohanty, a postcolonial and feminist theorist, argues that this portrayal is not only inaccurate but also harmful, as it ignores the diversity and complexity of Third World women's experiences and reinforces a colonialist mentality. She argues that it's not about the veil, but about human rights such as the right to an education and participating in the work force. Deprivation of those human rights is the real problem. Mohanty critiques Western feminist discourse for constructing a monolithic image of Third World women as oppressed victims. She emphasizes the importance of recognizing and respecting Third World women's agency and activism, and rejecting ethnocentric assumptions that they need saving or liberation from the West. She calls for a more nuanced and intersectional approach to feminist activism that takes into account the specific historical and cultural contexts of women's lives in the Third World.

In theory, Islamic law can be interpreted to either support or restrict women's human rights and their ability to live humanely. In the case of Yemen, the real restrictions on Yemeni women are based on patriarchal practices that follow the Yemeni community transnationally and deprive them of their human rights. Those human rights can be protected by Islamic law but denied by patriarchal cultural practices. Awareness of the issue of the depiction of Muslim/Arab/Third world women in Orientalist discourse is crucial but it is equally important to be conscious of the very real forms of patriarchal oppression that challenge Yemeni women. This thesis contends with the real violation of women's human (and in some cases civil) rights and the reality of the consequences of patriarchal cultural conventions on Yemeni and Yemeni-American women.

Aside from being ranked one of the least developed countries on the Asian continent, Yemen's unequal gender power relations further set back the Yemeni people. Gender relations are shaped by cultural, social, political and tribal traditions. Hence, "Yemen ranks last (144th of 144 countries) in the 2016 World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, a position it has held for the last 10 years" (Rohwerder). The struggle for equality and justice is a long journey for Yemeni women. Despite many obstacles, women have continued to demand rights that they deserve as human beings and rights granted to them by Islam. However, women in Yemen are generally regarded as subordinate and inferior to men. Amel Nejjib al-Ashtal quotes Abdul-Malik al-Fuhaidi stating, "Our culture says that women cannot leave the house, cannot work, etc. However, according to our religion, there is a difference. We try to emphasize these differences" (232). It is acknowledged by anthropologists and historians who have studied gender relations in Yemen that religious principles can be distorted to be aligned with patriarchy.

Unfortunately, there is a dearth of literature available on Yemen's gender studies due to obstacles that researchers face while conducting their research in Yemen. It is crucial to study the patriarchal system and cultural practices that contribute to any and all forms of violence against Yemeni women. Gender studies in various disciplines are essential and serve as a first step to building awareness and bringing change. To address the dearth of literature, there are several anthropological and historical literature on the "woman question" in Yemen conducted by various scholars such as Magda M. ElSanousi, Amel Nejjib Al-Ashtal, Mohammed Baobaid, Margot Badran, Susanne Dahlgren, and Brigitte Rohwerder along with organizations such as Oxfam. Discussing and comparing how each discipline approaches the "woman question" in Yemen is a necessary step in understanding the current studies, their successes, and their challenges.

To expand further on the factors that shaped women's status today, Margot Badran's historical approach in her article, "Unifying Women: Feminist Pasts and Presents in Yemen," focuses on the way in which the past impacts the present. The Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in the Northern part of Yemen was established in 1962 influenced and supported by Nasirite Egypt. Nasser's regime helped the new nationalist republican state to end the Zaidi Imamate which had been in power since the fall of Ottoman rule in 1918. The southern part of Yemen, People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, established its socialist state in 1967 replacing the British colonial rule which was in control since 1839. Both new states established family laws pertaining to marriage, divorce, child custody and property rights, which are referred to as Personal Status Laws. Badran further expands her argument by explaining that despite women's efforts, "Centrifugal forces, especially the power of the tribes, impeded the creation of a strong and progressive state. The Family Law issued in 1978...preserved patriarchal privileges..." (503). Women in both states faced obstacles and despite having some laws claiming to provide equality, many of them were not applied in practice, a fact emphasized by several researchers.

Badran argues that the state, once unified, was "unwilling to play a prominent role in their support" (503). The changes in laws that occurred in the unified Republic of Yemen after 1990, specifically the YAR's patriarchal conceptualization of family law caused setbacks for women. Despite women's differences in both parts of Yemen with regard to allegiances, affiliations and identities, women were united in their struggle for equal rights. In their fight for equality, they were similar despite some of their differences both in the former YAR and PDRY as well as post-unification.

In her anthropological approach, Magda M. ElSanousi's "Strategies and Approaches to Enhance the Role of Men and Boys in Gender Equality: Case Study of Yemen" focuses on what

she refers to as the “socialization process” in Yemen which functions as one of the contributing factors to unequal gender power relations. In the case study, she explores strategies and approaches to target “men and boys to sensitize them about gender equality and their potential role” which can be established by “using Islamic codes that promote respect of humanity, mercy, and the welfare of the family” (14). Additionally, she argues that a few main events and factors have caused setbacks with regard to women achieving more rights such as, “the unification of Yemen, a weak women's movement, a new and evolving democracy, and spread of radical misinterpreted religious movements” which intensifies the existing “patriarchal socialization processes, and gender stereotypes at all levels (household, community and state levels)” (14). Like other researchers, she reiterates that the gender power relation discourse is connected with poverty. Lack of access to education, poverty and oppressive cultural norms leave Yemeni women with no protection from male relatives. Even if a woman were to ‘free’ herself from the control of a male relative, societal structures will work against her rather than provide her protection.

ElSanousi expands her research by breaking down the socialization process and the formation of men’s identities in Yemeni society. She claims it is an essential step to understanding the systemic oppression that women live in and iterates the importance of exploring strategies to rectify the unjust practices. She notes several of the listed socialization processes are in violation of Islamic principles. For example, she quotes, “National studies revealed that violence against women is a widespread phenomenon manifested in wife battering, forced early marriage, honor crimes, deprivation of girls from education, prohibiting women inheritance, and women’s limited access to claim divorce or alimony” (8). Therefore, she focuses on the importance of involving men in the process of addressing these issues. ElSanousi

understands the real danger women could face when discussing gender equality and suggests that the approach to these conversations should consist of entry points as means to shape the response receive from men which as articulated by one of her interviewees, “We need to Yemenize the gender concept” (11). ElSanousi’s approach may be perceived controversially in Yemen due to its nature. On one hand, it appears to be an effective approach as reported in several NGOs in 2002-2003. On the other hand, it can be problematic as it is not getting to the root of the problem.

Similar to ElSanousi, Mohammed Baobaid’s historical and anthropological approach in “Masculinity and Gender Violence in Yemen” explores how gender identities are produced as a result of specific processes of socialization that has enforced gender inequality. While ElSanousi focuses on using Islamic rulings to demand justice for women, Baobaid places an emphasis on understanding the various ways in which the Yemeni legal system uses misinterpretations of Islam to not only create but also reinforce the law to serve men. His research consists of various interviews conducted in Yemen in the late 1990s. Before expanding on the current state of Yemen in the early 2000s, he identifies the historical events that contributed to the persistence of gender inequality and violence against women. Baobaid acknowledges that the unification of North and South Yemen served as a major setback in the fight for equality. In his research, nearly a decade after the unification of Yemen, he cites reports of violence against women and explains the system of oppression that women face. In addition to poverty and financial dependency on male relatives, “norms of gender inequality are further strengthened in legal codes” (Baobaid 162). Yemeni women’s lack of social movement along other forms of abuse further exacerbates their inability to report violence.

Baobaid utilizes both qualitative and quantitative methods to determine the extent of violence against women. Police records from 1996-1997 revealed the forms of abuse women faced. Additionally, his extensive qualitative research focused on hearing women from various economic classes in Sanaa, Yemen. His findings reveal several crucial factors: the forms of abuse, the identity of the abusers, and the role of “societal violence.” According to Baobaid, understanding that Yemeni women face societal violence is important to being aware of the systems that contribute to gender inequality and injustice. Yemeni women identified several examples of societal violence such as early marriage, unwanted divorce and its aftermath, and restrictive norms that limit their mobility. The perpetrators are often the fathers or husbands of these victims.

Conversely, Susanne Dahlgren’s historical methodology emphasizes the negative impact of the unification of South and North Yemen. In “Revisiting the Issue of Women’s Rights in Southern Yemen: Statutory Law, Sharia and Customs,” Susanne Dahlgren states, “The two Yemens were the first countries in the Arabian Peninsula to issue a comprehensive marriage law. While the southern law (1974) can be said to stand for a modern reading of Sharia, the northern code (1978) mixes local custom with Sharia” (1). Dahlgren describes the PDRY’s state as progressive which was apparent in their family laws and the YAR’s state as having “strong ties to the centuries old tribal system” and having a “more conservative reading of Islamic law than the southern code” (2). Women in both states faced obstacles and despite having some laws claiming to provide equality, many of them were not applied in practice. Women’s experience in the YAR was far more difficult than women in the PDRY because they received limited support from the state.

In addition to the lack of support from the state regarding granting women equal rights, Islam was used by men in positions of power in a manipulative manner. For instance, “advocates of limited role models for women have attacked women’s advancement in the south by claiming that such rights were outside Shari’a. Amal al Ashtal, a Yemeni social scientist, calls such views “arbitrary Shariaism” (Dahlgren 12). Hence, the former PDRY was labeled as “secular” by people who wanted to deprive women of any form of equality with men. Dahlgren expands on this North-South split by stating, “complacency towards Sharia’ is viewed differently by people debating marriage reform in different periods of Yemeni history. This becomes evident also when looking at more attempts at reform, such as the child marriage controversy” (1). Opinions vary regarding child marriage and depending on who the religious scholars want to side with, different interpretations of the Qur’an and the sunnah are provided to support their claim. Child marriage is just one of the issues that continue to be a huge problem in Yemen until today. Matters pertaining to marriage, divorce, child custody, property rights and access to government positions are still continuous struggles for Yemeni women. Women have taken a plethora of strides and have been able to voice their opinions and demand rights more than before. However, it is still a major challenge to implement changes to the patriarchal system.

On the other hand, Amel Nejib al-Ashtal offers a different perspective through the historical methodology in her chapter, “A Long, Quiet, and Steady Struggle: The Women’s Movement in Yemen.” Al-Ashtal’s study focuses on tracing women’s movements throughout different historical time periods from early 1930s until the early 2000s. By doing so, she highlights various factors contributing to gender inequality beyond the unification of North and South Yemen. Some of these factors include the bias in school curriculum, rural versus urban movements, national committees, NGO-ization, and “the ‘Islamic’ solution to the Woman

Question” (224). Her emphasis on Yemeni women’s utilization of Islamic principles to fight for their rights correlates to the ongoing struggle to differentiate between cultural practices and religion. Women resort to using Islamic rulings to demand improvements of their legal rights.

Additionally, strong tribal and patriarchal structures are intensified by the “widespread poverty, high female illiteracy, high population growth, high rural population, poor infrastructure and pronounced class stratification” (al-Ashtal 238). These challenges interfere with women’s movements and fight for equality. Hence, violence against women tragically persists despite the “steady” progress women have made throughout Yemen’s history (al-Ashtal 240). Studying the “woman question” through the historical lens provides a chronological layout of the movements and challenges Yemeni women faced. Analyzing these movements allows for an understanding of the systems that shape Yemeni society today and the deeply rooted patriarchal practices that exist in the present.

Furthermore, al-Ashtal briefly discusses female prisoners and “vulnerable women” in her study. Women in these categories are often overlooked in studies focused on gender relations. However, Brigitte Rohwerder’s study “Conflict and gender dynamics in Yemen” highlights who is considered “vulnerable.” Her recent study, published in 2017, explores the impact of the current conflict on gender dynamics through both qualitative and quantitative methods. It is without a doubt that the conflict that began in 2015 has impacted every Yemeni despite gender, however, this catastrophe has a more tragic impact on women. She notes that “the increase in poverty has led to negative coping strategies such as child labour; child marriage; survival sex; and begging” (2). Additionally, “displaced women are among the most vulnerable and face problems accessing humanitarian assistance” (Rohwerder 2). Women who were displaced as a result of the conflict and have no male relatives are often viewed as “easy targets.” Girls and

women from marginalized groups are also at high risk of being kidnapped or harassed by armed groups at checkpoints. Rohwerder further states that there are reports of young women being forced to marry men in the armed extremist groups. With no legal protection, they resort to any form of assistance they can receive since even accessing humanitarian aid is difficult. Beyond the norms that enable gender inequality, the safety of women and girls from marginalized groups is threatened.

Patriarchal practices are deeply ingrained in the structure of Yemeni society starting with the way girls and boys are taught to perceive their gender identity, thus, leading to decisions that serve only men's political, social and personal interests. In general, women in Yemen lack legal protection and face systematic marginalization. Rohwerder elaborates, "Gender based violence prior to the conflict was a serious problem and included sexual harassment, forced marriage, early marriage, exchange marriage, female genital mutilation, denial of inheritance and restrictions to mobility...52 per cent of Yemeni girls marry before they are eighteen, and 14 per cent before they are fifteen" (3). These practices continue to violate women's rights creating restrictions that impact Yemeni women transnationally. When the government has made an effort to pass legislation to grant women rights, poor enforcement due to cultural norms resulted in failure. For example, if legal processes required women to visit a court or any law establishment, she is almost always accompanied by a male relative. This is problematic if that male relative is also the oppressor shaping the outcome to his favor. Their inability to participate politically and legally allows men to continue to shape the law. Without the ability to participate in lawmaking or to effect real change, women's lives continue to be shaped by patriarchal practices. Therefore, all of the aforementioned forms of violence persist in Yemen and continue to serve not only as forms of injustice, but also as barriers to the improvement of women's rights.

For Yemeni women, achieving gender equality and fighting against gender-based violence is an ongoing struggle. Improvements for Yemeni women, although slow, are steady and gradual. Moving forward for Yemeni women goes beyond just one law or one social movement. It is the dismantling and restructuring of unjust and deeply rooted patriarchal practices throughout all aspects of Yemeni life. While writing doesn't exactly dismantle those structures, it challenges the patriarchal practices. Both *Caged in America* and *It's Just Love* confront those practices through narrating the stories of both Yemeni women.

***Caged in America: One Woman's Journey Through the Veil A Memoir* by Zubaida "Jasmine" Sharif**

Discussing Muslim/Arab women's struggles, Lila Abu-Lughod declares, "The voices of Muslim women themselves are often marginalized or silenced in Western discussions about their lives and experiences." This has slowly begun to shift as there are more Muslim women sharing their literary voices and stories in the West. Women, across cultures, are often socialized to feel guilt or shame and their expression of anger is adamantly suppressed and diminished. Literary works allow them to share their stories intricately and unapologetically. In Sharif's memoir *Caged in America: One Woman's Journey Through the Veil A Memoir*, anger is both visible and invisible for Sharif as she is gradually stripped of her agency. Her memoir exposes the forms of oppression and violence that Yemeni and Yemeni-American women endure behind closed doors. It focuses on injustice within their "own" homes. Hence, they are imposters in the spaces they reside in because of hidden oppressions. As a Yemeni-American, Sharif narrates her prison-like experience in Dearborn, Michigan and exposes the ways in which Yemeni women are controlled physically and psychologically in every facet of their lives, especially in regard to their finances, body and mobility. Consequently, they have no body autonomy, no financial independence and

are deprived of the ability to move freely in private and public spaces, resulting in imposed captive experiences. Sharif's visible and invisible anger in response to the physical and psychological torment shapes her narrative as she embarks on a quest to fight the injustice that she and other Yemeni-American women face. Her anger sheds light on issues embedded in the cultural systems that Yemenis have established and continue to enact even in their diasporic experience .

At first, Sharif mostly exhibits signs of suppressing her anger. However, this changes as she can no longer accept the oppression imposed on her. As a newlywed teenager with an immense amount of domestic stress from her in-laws, she began to drown in darkness and despair. Tragically, she attempted to end her life. She writes, "Eyes once beautiful brown were now swollen with grief...I would never see another happy day. I looked for a straight blade...Desperate to stop my pain, I emptied a bottle of Motrin pills into my palm and swallowed them" (Sharif 51). Her memoir grapples with conflicts surrounding marriage, physical abuse, and psychological manipulation. Hence, these struggles provoke feelings of anger that Sharif endures in an internal "caged" form which transforms throughout her life. The oppressive physical, and psychological control of women cause ongoing feelings of entrapment.

Her mother's internalized misogyny allows the reinforcement of misogynistic practices to persist in the lives of Yemeni-American women which is precisely portrayed in Sharif's memoir. Both her anger and her relationship with her mother shape her life choices and experiences as she navigates life as a Yemeni-American woman. Additionally, an in-depth analysis of her relationship with her father and brothers provides the readers with a clearer understanding of how these domestic dynamics shape the larger Yemeni-American society in Dearborn, Michigan and perhaps beyond. Although controversial from the point of view of conservative Yemenis, the

memoir is crucial to emphasize that although Yemeni women may seem to have more rights as they are on American soil, cultural systems continue to trap them in cycles of agony in their households. This text, especially because it is in the form of a memoir, serves not only as an outlet to cope with traumatic experiences but also as an act of activism speaking for the myriad of silent voices of Yemeni women. The form of the memoir enables crucial conversations pertaining to Yemeni-American women rooted in reality, not in a fictional world.

As a child, Sharif served, cooked, and cared for her younger sibling before being sold at the age of 15 through an arranged marriage for thirty thousand dollars and some gold in Dearborn. She then she endured four arranged marriages between the ages of 15 to 30 where she faced psychological, physical and emotional abuse. She repressed her anger and it manifested in other ways as is common when particular emotions are suppressed or repressed--she's not 'allowed' to show her anger, so it transforms into physical illness. She began to lose weight and psoriasis gradually covered her entire body. She describes, "The sores on my scalp had nearly gone away after Dignity's birth. Now, they re-emerged as blooming red welts on both my scalp and torso. Could I not have a break, I asked God, just a little time to breathe or heal or clear my head? My life was one continuous disaster, one horrible event after another. Now all the poison in me was seeping through my skin" (Sharif 114). Sharif portrays the quickly spreading psoriasis as a manifestation of her internal turmoil displaying itself in a physical manner.

Across cultures, girls are expected to self-regulate emotions such as anger from a young age. Sharif's suppression of her strong emotions is an age-old tradition of the unjust expectations that many women face in being silenced. This demand to contain rage continues to remain an unjust expectation as they mature into womanhood. In the introduction of *Rage Becomes Her*, Soraya Chemaly explains, "It's as children that most of us learn to regard anger as unfeminine,

unattractive, and selfish. Many of us are taught that our anger will be an imposition on others, making us irksome and unlikeable” (xvi). Particularly, in patriarchal societies such as in Yemeni culture, women suffer tremendously because the suppression of their emotions and their outrage is even more intensely prominent. Chemaly adds, “While we experience anger internally, it is mediated culturally and externally by other people’s expectations and social prohibitions. Roles and responsibilities, power and privilege are the framers of our anger” (xiv). Male dominance is embedded into norms and systems that not only exist in Yemen but are also practiced thousands of miles away from the homeland. Women like Sharif carve out a space to tell their stories and express their anger freely in the literary world. In her memoir, she writes about her mother’s role in shaping her identity as a woman and navigating through her anger.

Mothers play an essential role in perpetuating patriarchal practices. Sharif’s mother contributed to Sharif’s anger and the worsening of her mental health struggles. After her older sister got married, Sharif has more responsibilities as the oldest girl in the family. She writes, “Mouzi took out his frustrations with his fists. Father’s cursing became more frequent. Nothing I said seemed to stop it” (Sharif 9). In response to her complains, her mother says, “‘Do not let them get to you,’ Mom advised. ‘If you feel anger, show them a smile . If you feel fear, stand your ground. Never let them know what you are thinking.’ I tried to follow her advice, but it was difficult to disregard Father’s cutting tongue. When I ran crying to Mom, she would suggest her alternate strategy, ‘Eat. It will make you feel better’” (Sharif 9). Her mother’s response to her physically and verbally abusive husband is either distract herself or pray to God. As Chemaly emphasizes, “Anger is like water. No matter how hard a person tries the dam, divert, or deny it, it will find a way, usually along the path of least resistance...women often ‘feel’ their anger in their bodies. Unprocessed, anger threads itself through our appearances, bodies, eating habits,

and relationships, fueling low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, self-harm, and actual physical illness” (xx). Sharif’s anger becomes visible as she witnesses her mother humiliated by father, yet she remains powerless. She contemplates her father’s death and a life where she and her mother are free of her father’s tyranny.

As a female, Sharif is not allowed to do anything that disobeys Allah’s commands. However, when her dad and brothers drink and engage in other sinful acts, her mother justifies it or dismisses it. Sharif grows angrier with her mother for validating their sinful acts and normalizing them because they are men. Living physically away from Yemen does not save Sharif and her mother from being subjected to these forms of injustice Sharif’s rage erupts when her father violently beat her mother and she called the police. Upon their arrival, her mother denied that she was beaten. Sharif narrates, “Mom finally returned with a neighbor. They had stitched her head, but she refused to stay in the hospital for observation... I hated that she would not put her foot down and leave Father. That night I prayed to Allah, could he please kill Father? A year later, I was still praying. Mom was pregnant again and Father continued his abuse” (Sharif 19). Evidently, Sharif resorts to religion as a source of refuge and channels her anger through praying for her father’s death. The angrier she became, the more she referred to him as the “Monster” and no longer acknowledged his paternal status. The trauma she endured is less about the individual event than it is about “the impact of its very incomprehensibility. What returns to haunt the victim, these stories tell us, is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (Caruth 6). The intensity and shift in the way she referred to her father depicted the internal suffering and anger she experienced. Tragically, her brothers perpetuated the cycle of abuse as they grew older and became young adults. Thus, their actions trapped her and her mother in an endless cycle of abuse

and trauma. None of their behavior is justified religiously; yet, men will claim that as “protectors” of their family, they can behave in any way they please.

Fast-forward several years later, Sharif is trapped in abusive marriages and facing similar injustices that her mother endured. Witnessing her parent’s marriage frustrated Sharif as an outsider being able to clearly see that her mother was abused, yet when it happened to her, she perpetuated the same lessons of survival her mother instilled in her from a young age. This coupled with her diminished self-esteem and self-image, allowed her to remain in highly abusive and manipulative marriages. One of her marriages to a relative named Habul, we as the readers feel like Sharif looking in and pondering her acceptance of his treatment, however, we can understand that abused women often lack support. In one instance Habul raped her while she was heavily pregnant. Sharif describes, “He might get my body, but he would never take my soul. I returned to the bed and let him have his way. After that, he was satisfied enough to let me sleep” (Sharif 87). She initially stayed in the relationship and remained silent about his abuse exactly like her mother who she despised for doing the same thing. As Chemaly notes,

Gendered ideas about anger make us question ourselves, doubt our feelings, set aside our needs, and renounce our own capacity for moral conviction. Ignoring anger makes us careless with ourselves and allows society to be careless with us. It is notable, however, that treating women’s anger and pain in these ways makes it easier to exploit us—for reproduction, labor, sex and ideology (xx).

Habul also continuously manipulated her by telling her sweet words about how he loved her so deeply. Growing up witnessing her father abuse her mother weakened her sense of self, and the reality of not having any place of refuge caged her further. She knew returning to her parents’ home would be traumatic in its own way. Her memoir contains several poems placed at the end of chapters expressing how she felt, especially after traumatic experiences. In her poem addressed to her father, she writes, “You are hell, burning us to unlimited degrees/Leave this

lifetime, leave us be!” and follows it by expressing her longing for feeling like an individual, “And feel I am real/I am someone” (Sharif 20). Her search for her own identity and a sense of dignity as she continues to be abused by her father, brothers and husbands.

Even after she has left her abusive husband and resided with her sister and brother-in-law, Sharif faced another terror, the threat of being sexually assaulted by her brother-in-law who made unwanted sexual advances. One night, he attempted to rape her but was interrupted by knocking on the door. She froze in the dark out of fear of the reality that reacting would destroy her more than him. As Chesler explains in “Women and Madness,” “when women allege sexual harassment or sex discrimination they are sometimes disbelieved or blamed...Sometimes, when women charge rape or sexual harassment, some truly strange things can happen” in reference to the fear of being perceived a certain way (19). Sharif feared not only for her own safety, but also her sister’s reaction and her community’s cruelty. Chesler further emphasizes that rape victims are often “portrayed as ‘crazy’ or as a ‘slut’” (19). She feared they would believe his lies about her initiating the sexual encounter since she was divorced and the label alone already alienated her from her community. In Yemeni culture, being divorced is looked down upon and women are not treated well by relatives once they’ve been negatively labeled as a divorced and unwanted woman.

When faced with further physical violence in marriage, Sharif’s rage became visible. When her ex-husband strangled her, nearly killing her, she instinctively responded with violence. She describes, “Enad’s strange behavior continued. One night he came home early. I woke up to find hands on my throat, pressing hard, strangling me. Instinctively, I brought my legs up and kicked his chest. His hands loosened and he fell backward to the floor” (Sharif 121). Although this was traumatic, Sharif did not leave immediately because all she has ever known was that it

was acceptable to be abused as a woman. It was not until her daughter, Dignity, was beaten by Enad that Sharif decided it was no longer safe for them, but even then, she remained trapped for a while. She had been in the emergency room because of physical illness when she left Dignity with her husband. She writes, "...I went to the emergency room because my menstrual bleeding had been going on for a month and I was feeling weak" (Sharif 121). Her body began to deteriorate as a result of the stress she endured in her prior and current marriage at the time.

During her absence that day, Enad hurt Dignity but denied it. However, she eventually caught him and when she did, her anger was reactive, immediate and visible. She describes, "I walked to Enad and kicked him in the balls, hard. He fell to the ground moaning" (Sharif 122). Immediately after, she places her daughter in front of the TV, and describes, "My heart thumped in my chest. I did not want her to grow up in a house of fighting, but it was already too late. She had seen everything. I wash dishes trying to calm my anger...I pulled a butcher knife from the drawer and stared at the large blade. I could end it, free us both from this life of misery" (122). At this moment, the reader sees her anger visibly and her urge to defend herself erupts for the first time. Additionally, behaviors adopted from her mother are depicted when she resumes to the routine activities to calm herself after a tragic occurrence. She further contemplates, "Holding the knife, I peered around the corner. The coward was sitting in a chair with his back to me. It would be easy to kill him. He would never hit my daughter again. He would never hurt any woman. The thought of it energized me. For those seconds, I was a killer lioness ready to defend my cub" (122). Sharif's inner thoughts reveal her anger and the temptations she experiences after a traumatic experience in this incident with her ex-husband and her urge to murder him to end her agony. Her response in this moment in her life changes her in subsequent years as she

embarks on a journey to run away from the oppressive men in life and from the Yemeni community as a whole.

After planning her escape and executing her plan with the help of a friend, she spent a short period of time in Phoenix. However, soon after that, she found herself returning to her parents' home due to guilt and sorrow for abandoning her mother. She did not fully understand why she was returning but she did and after a short period in Dearborn, she fought to visit Yemen. She was searching for a home and spent her time surrounded by women sharing their experiences. This bond and sisterhood comforted her, but her anger had already consumed her body after all that she had endured. Her anger manifested as illness and not as rageful reactions as depicted in this crucial passage:

Without an appetite, I lost weight. Soon, I was 110 pounds and none of my clothes fit. Beni Musleh women donated their teenage daughters' clothes so that I had something to wear. Bahiya tried to feed me every day, but I remained in my bedroom world. I did nothing but write and chew khat. One of my aunts came in and told me how her father went crazy and died from writing too much. I enjoyed her company, which offered nutrition for my soul, but was not suitable for my body. I continued to decline. By this time I preferred to die in Yemen rather than go back to my parents. They would not give up, though. Like psoriasis, they kept coming back (199).

In this phase of her life, her depression became more visible and declined both physically and mentally. Weight loss was just one of the few ways in which her health deteriorated. The only source of comfort for her in that tragic phase is the bond she established with the women related to her and around her. Sisterhood grounded her. Although her mother was not of help to her directly, she formed her own bond with women around her to keep her grounded. Sharif bonded with non-Yemeni friends who played a crucial role in her life once she began to seek freedom away from her family and community. She continued to pursue a cure for her physical illness while also coping with the impact on her mental health. In "Women and Madness: Sisterhood is

Powerful," Phyllis Chesler discusses the importance of sisterhood and collective action in challenging the patriarchal medical establishment's pathologization and control of women's mental health. Chesler argues that women's experiences of mental illness are often rooted in social and political structures that oppress and marginalize them, rather than being solely a result of individual pathology. She emphasizes the importance of women's solidarity and support networks in resisting these oppressive structures and advocating for women's rights and autonomy. Chesler also critiques traditional psychiatric treatments for their often oppressive and dehumanizing approaches and calls for alternative forms of care that prioritize empowerment and self-determination. Collective action and solidarity are crucial in resisting oppressive structures and finding healing. Sharif's journey is an embodiment of the significant role that sisterhood plays in a woman's journey to finding healing.

She had found no cure for psoriasis, despite all her attempts. Prior to visiting Yemen, she sought help from her mother showing her the flakes of skin, but it was pointless and made matters worse. She describes that encounter, "I left my dress to show her my back. 'It's the evil eye,' Mom whispered. 'Someone has cursed you.' She insisted I remove my dress. She called my brothers in to look at me stripped almost naked. I was embarrassed and angry. 'What the hell is that?' Mouzi asked" (Sharif 120). They eventually blamed her for somehow causing the skin condition and shamed her for her health decline. Anger consumed her body and manifested in visible ways that not ached her physically but mentally as well. Not only did she have to put up with her skin itching and irritating her, she also had to put up with her tyrannical father and brothers.

The root of her anger is the trauma she experienced from multiple sources starting with patriarchal cultural practices that enabled her father, brothers and husbands to transgress and

harm her in unjustifiable ways. Sharif's memoir voices her trauma and her anger, which manifest in both visible and invisible ways. In Caruth's "The Wound and the Voice," she explains "literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing" and expands on that idea by adding, "It is indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet" (3). In a way, the memoir as a form is a way of giving the wound a voice. Her inner wounds, trauma, caused by the oppressive treatment she faced slowly impacted her physical health. Even when she has reached a sense of stability the first time she ran away from home with the help of a generous family, she could not understand why a voice in her kept telling her to return home. In that moment, she exhibits what Caruth describes as "knowing and not knowing" and the complexity in that decision may not only be confusing for readers, but also for Sharif herself. Her guilt for abandoning her mother and her sorrow led her to a return that she eventually regretted. Eventually, she left a second time and would not return again.

Besides the physical and psychological violence, she endured, Sharif along with women in her community, shared a common vulnerability, financial dependency. Sharif writes, "Women united in a common deception," when describing how women hid jewelry, cash or important papers from their husbands and stored them with her mother whom they trusted. Sharif and her mother are taken advantage of financially and any attempt they make towards financial independence is shut down. Financial dependence on men enabled their control over the women in their lives. In her childhood, Sharif witnessed the way her father manipulated her mother into adding her son to her bank account. After she added him, she received a statement that all she had left was five dollars and that the money that she had saved from sewing was gone. After

assuming it was her son, she soon discovered it was in fact her husband who had manipulated her to add the son, so he could steal it.

Like her mother, Sharif was repeatedly taken advantage of and deprived of financial independence. In her second arranged marriage, Habul forcibly took her holiday Eid money. In her third arranged marriage, Enad removed Sharif's name from the mortgage without her permission, merely because he was paranoid that she would leave him. Thus, he resorted to trapping her. Sharif was isolated, deprived of money, lacked access to educational opportunities and sometimes was unable to even visit others. This created a vulnerability that continued her captivity which only shifted from her father to whoever her father selected as her next captor. Regardless of who it was, they each continued to hold her captive in one form or another.

Her extremely stressful and oppressive circumstances led to an anger that manifested itself through symptoms that her body endured. As a preteen, her anger was not as visible which shifted after she was forced into arranged marriages with benefits only to the man in her life. She was taken advantage in a myriad of ways, including financially, physically, emotionally and sexually. Her relationship with those closest to her negatively shaped her and the stress they induced further exacerbated her psoriasis, anxiety, and depression. Her father was the Monster in her life and her husbands, in various marriages, perpetuated that same cycle of abuse. Her memoir, giving voice to her wound, portrays the ways her anger both negatively impacts her body causing her several illnesses and drives her to eventually make the decision to flee from a life of entrapment.

Her memoir offers her a space to share and process her experiences. She utilizes this genre to relentlessly voice her experience and expose the patriarchal practices. In "Resisting Silence in Arab Women's Autobiographies," Magda M. Al-Nowaihi examines the ways in which

Arab women use autobiography to resist the silencing and erasure of their voices in patriarchal societies. Al-Nowaihi argues that Arab women's autobiographies are a powerful tool for challenging dominant cultural narratives about women's roles and experiences, and for asserting agency and subjectivity in the face of cultural and political marginalization. Al-Nowaihi elaborates, "...in exposing their tentativeness, vulnerabilities, hesitations, and stumblings— these women's voices are much more powerful and compelling than the louder voices of those who are self-assured, adamantly certain of the correctness of their ways..." (489). Writers like Sharif use language, imagery, and storytelling to challenge patriarchal norms and assert the autonomy and agency of Arab women. Her memoir contributes to ongoing debates about gender, identity, and power in Yemeni-American society. Al-Nowaihi adds, "Their writings become true sites of resistance because they do not position themselves as all-knowing authorities who hold all the right answers... These voices deserve to be heard. They deserve not to be silenced" (489). Writers, like Sharif, use the memoir genre to resist silence and assert their voices and agency ensure they are heard.

It's Just Love (Hub Laisa Illa) by Nadia Al-Kowkabani

Like *Caged in America*, *It's Just Love* by Al-Kowkabani addresses the issue of marriage and traditional gender roles in Yemen society. The main character, Farah, is a young woman who dreams of pursuing her education and becoming a professor, but her plans are disrupted when her father forces her into an arranged marriage with a stranger. The story highlights the oppressive nature of patriarchal traditions, which give men power over women and often lead to abusive and traumatic experiences for women in marriage. The novel also touches on the challenges faced by women in Yemeni society, including limited agency and lack of basic rights. Al-Kowkabani

portrays the societal pressure for young girls to conform to traditional gender roles and the resulting loss of identity and opportunities. The book also explores Farah's educational journey and the restrictions she faced as a widow following her husband's death. Overall, the novel exposes the negative impacts of toxic marriage traditions on women's lives and advocates for gender equality and empowerment.

Farah is a young Yemeni woman, born in 1966, living in Sana'a with her seven siblings and parents. In facing the daily challenges that Yemeni women face, she resorts to journaling as a place to dream, hope, and explore her curiosities. Thus, she names one of her journals, "journal of discoveries" (23).² As a high schooler, she read books that were banned in the Arab world at the time such as works by Mustafa Lutfi, Abbas Mahmoud al-Aqqad, Ibrahim al-Mazini and Michel Clerc. She manages to obtain these books through her friend's father who traveled outside the country frequently. Farah has a deep love for Greek philosophy which she later pursued. She reads the works of Victor Hugo, Alexander Dumas, Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, Michel Zevaco, Maxim Gorky, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Gustave Flaubert, Honoré de Balzac, William Somerset Maugham, Albert Camus, Charlotte and Emily Brontë. She enjoys reading about Karl Marx, Gandhi, Louis Pasteur, Marie Curie, Einstein, De Vinci, Hellen Keller and Edison. She describes falling in love with Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*. Immersed in literature and academics, she is devastated shortly after graduating from high school. This exposure to those readings and ideas shaped her identity and the way she views the world around her. She develops an awareness of her place as a girl, then as a woman in a patriarchal Yemeni culture. Her way of thinking influences her commentary and her writing

² All translations from the Arabic novel are my own: "مفكرة الاكتشافات"

pertaining to the unjust cultural practices. Her writing, like other authors, is her way of expressing herself where she might otherwise be silenced.

Nadia Al-Kowkabani's novel begins with highlighting Farah's love of writing specifically discussing her blue journal. Her 30 journals capture memories, hopes, and dreams, which she hopes to share with her children one day. Farah describes her journal as calm and personifies it stating that it was smiling waiting for her (Al-Kowkabani 10). Her blue journal, along with her other journals, are her companions throughout her journey. Her sister exposes her by telling her mother about the secret blue journal she keeps on the fourth shelf of her cabinet. The detailed account of each of the eight siblings' cabinet and physical space at home is crucial as it captures the social norms that enforce spaces that lack privacy and individuality. Farah reflects, "I remember that the first thing my mother did was to collect the keys to the eight doors, and put them in the depths of her closet, since the cupboard was placed in the "living room" that all the rooms of our house overlook, with its eight doors..." (10).³ Their mother removed all the locks from the cabinets and bedroom doors. Each child had one cabinet with one door. Her mother has a habit of searching their closets every night. This portrays the lack of privacy and the mother's control of all the details of her children's lives. This also captures how women are complicit in perpetuating patriarchal restrictions. After Farah's older sister exposed her, Farah developed a phobia of writing and when she eventually overcame it, she created a new way of writing about personal matters without being explicit. She emphasizes, "In short, it is a method of my own that I have mastered, a new language that I have mastered to the point of vanity, and I feel proud of what I have accomplished, a blue notepad, open it whenever I want, to see, smell,

³ "أتذكر أن أول عمل قامت به أمي هو تجميع مفاتيح الثمانية أبواب، والزج بها في أعماق خزانة، منذ ان حط الدولار في "الحجرة" التي تطل عليها"
جميع غرف منزلنا، بأبوابه الثمانية"

touch, hear, taste my own world...” (20).⁴ She no longer feels the urge to hide the journal as she was confident that no one will understand what she has written. It also comforts her that her mother could not read. She notes that the percentage of illiteracy among women over the age of 35 was 80% according to studies at that time (14). Writing serves as a coping mechanism and a form of escape for Farah. Even their bathroom does not provide the privacy that one might expect. It had a glass window that is easily accessible simply by stepping on a chair. She never looks up but her siblings describe seeing a “ghost” looking into the window. She describes how it was likely her mother “fulfilling her hobby” (15). This type of surveillance in the domestic sphere encapsulates the ways in which Yemeni women are deprived of privacy and their sense of individuality. Thus, Farah’s writing is her voice against patriarchal restrictions.

Her father loves education and attempts to treat his children equally regardless of gender. To Farah’s shock, he said he would allow her to study abroad at first as he loves and values education. Later, to Farah’s shock and disappointment, he later states, “There is no travel for girls alone, even if it is for study” (14).⁵ She suffers from this decision and social norm that prohibited her from studying abroad due to gender inequality. She proceeds to excel academically continuing her studies in Yemen and utilizing the freedoms that were granted to her within her circumstances. Farah’s story is heavily impacted by her academic journey.

Farah accompanied her father on several travel trips along with her younger sister, Sala. In those travels, she continues to express herself in her journal of discoveries. Writing about her writing is a thread carried out throughout Al-Kowkabani’s novel. Following her exploration of

”إنها باختصار طريقة خاصة بي تفننت فيها، لغة جديدة أتقنتها حد الغرور، وأشعر بالفخر حيال ما أنجزت، مفكرة زرقاء، افتحتها متى أشاء، أرى،⁴ استنشيق، المس، اسمع، اتذوق عالمي الخاص“

”ما فيش سفر للبنات وحده حتى لو للدراسة“⁵

Damascus with her father and sister, her life is shaped by a tragedy that shocked her entire family. Nader, her brother, was shot and murdered after being chased by bandits at a check point. Tragedy struck her family. Her parents were devastated. Her father attempted suicide and her mother became severely depressed. Farah discusses the corruption and manipulation that occurred during the investigation of her brother's brutal murder. She finds the investigators' use of religion to justify not doing their job properly both ironic and appalling. When the son of an official died in a similar way, the investigators responded differently. They did a thorough investigation, meanwhile, her brother's death was justified using the religious concept of fate. Her commentary on the crime and corruption in Yemen is critical as it could be controversial. Despite their struggle to cope with the tragedy that struck their family, they were able to gradually resume to normal life.

Her older sister, Sala, is her role model. Farah and Sala are not only close in age but also in their bond. Farah admired Sala's perseverance in her pursue of the field of architecture. Farah was searching for "what's in between the lines" (41).⁶ She is deeply fascinated by philosophical thinking, especially with the works of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. As a student in Sanaa University in the 1970s, she highlights her experience as a Yemeni woman in a conservative society. At the time she was vulnerable and grieving the loss of her brother, and in those moments, her philosophy professor Hisham, stepped into her life. She receives constant attention and support from him in a time she needed the most. She eventually develops feelings for Hisham, which shaped the remainder of her journey and story. At first, she describes it as a dreamlike experience repeating the phrase, "it's just only," which is a direct reference to the title,

⁶ "ما وراء السطور"

It's Just Love (45).⁷ Farah romanticizes many aspects of her life, especially her feelings and experiences with Hisham. In pondering this love story, she reflects on cultural practices and marriage. She writes, "In a society such as the Yemeni society, most marriage relationships take place without prior acquaintance! And if the husband sees a picture of his wife before the marriage contract, this is a great good. In addition to that, nothing faults the man first and foremost except his pocket, the wisdom of my mother and her mother or her mother!..." (47).⁸ This highlights the expectations of men and women in Yemeni society regarding marriage. This is crucial as it emphasizes the generational social practice of tradition rather than religion. Despite all the rules and expectations in a conservative society, people found ways to live their love stories. Farah and Hisham meet every Thursday evening in his house garden, which is perceived as scandalous in conservative Yemeni society. By incorporating this in her novel, Al-Kowkabani is commenting on the patriarchal practices and unreasonable expectations and pressures that women face.

During her third year of her undergraduate studies, she began to aspire to become like Hisham, a university philosophy professor. Shortly after, Hisham traveled abroad to further pursue his career. In their last meeting, Hisham kissed her, and she describes it as a dream-like experience. This entrancing experience kept recurring for a long while, as she continued to live through life experiences immediately in front of her. Hisham describes all the places he visited throughout his stay abroad and through his letters, she immersed herself in dreaming of visiting those places.

⁷ "ليس إلا"،

⁸ "في مجتمع كالمجتمع اليمني، تتم معظم علاقات الزواج فيه دون تعارف مسبق! وإذا رأى الزوج صورة زوجته قبل عقد الزواج فهذا خير كبير، يدل على تحضر العائلة التي وافقت على إعطاء الصورة وعلى أن الرجل متدين لحرمة على تنفيذ شرع الله في الزواج!...إضافة إلى أن الرجل أولاً وأخيراً "لا يعيبه إلا جيبه، حكمة أمي وأميها أم أمها"

The novel incorporates the historical events that occurred throughout Farah's journey. During her fourth year of college, North and South Yemen were united, which Farah states she was glad about (52). After Hisham's sudden disappearance, Farah is distraught. Her devastation impacts her mental health, as she describes an intense desire to scream and sob (53) In battling gender norms, Farah struggles to accept that as a woman she is not allowed to go on the trip to Aden, which was an opportunity awarded only to students who excelled. She understands that it was rare and near impossible for a woman in a Yemeni society to go on a mixed gender trip. This is certainly frowned upon in Yemeni culture. However, Farah's father agrees to allow her to go as a reward for her four years of hard work.

The text's genre allows for Al-Kowkabani to explore experiences and freedoms that do not necessarily reflect the reality that Yemeni women encounter. In the policing of women's bodies in public spaces, Farah would not have been allowed to go on the road trip. Al-Kowkabani explores these freedoms for her narrator, Farah, while also grounding the readers back in Yemeni women's reality. For instance, Farah recognizes that her father taught her brothers archery, horseback riding (driving), and swimming. Meanwhile, he had no plans to teach his daughters any of it. She writes, "I can't swim, despite all this love for the sea. Teaching us how to swim was not part of my father's plans or his policy for girls. The opposite for boys! He made sure to teach them archery and horseback riding! I mean drive cars!" (63).⁹ She emphasizes that women in Aden did not know how to swim, they simply walked along the beach as a form of enjoyment. By placing quotation marks around the word "the walk", she highlights the way that women's bodies were policed and the way in which they were denied the freedom

⁹ "لا أجيد السباحة، رغم كل هذا العشق للبحر. لم يكن تعليمها من ضمن خطط أبي أو سياسته للبنات. عكس الأولاد! حرص على تعليمهم إلى جوارها ⁹ "...! الرماية وركوب الخيل! أعني قيادة السيارات"

to choose since they quite literally could not swim (64).¹⁰ The only source of enjoyment that women could have was walking along the shore. They could not swim because of the male gaze. Revealing their body in that way is considered immodest and scandalous. Thus, women settle for walking along the shore as a source of joy. This captures the way in which women's movement and bodies were under male ownership in the Yemeni patriarchy.

Like Jasmine Sharif, Al-Kowkabani's narrator, Farah, experiences a tragic form of domestic violence. Under social pressure, Farah agrees to get married to Sammy at the age of 27. She had completed her master's program and secured a position as a Teaching Assistant; therefore, she was running out of excuses. She exhausted all justifications for rejecting suitors. She writes, "I exhausted all my excuses for refusal!" (73).¹¹ The next step for her would have been pursuing a doctorate program abroad, which she knew well would be a difficult step for her as a Yemeni woman. Sammy is the only opportunity for her since suitors pursued women less as they got older. He is 35 years old and very little was shared about him besides the typical, "he's a good man from a good family." Her family wants her to get married as soon as possible, especially because her younger siblings had already gotten married before her. One of Farah's conditions before marriage is to be allowed to keep working. She tries to remain hopeful, however, he disappoints her and hurts her terribly. She describes, "He disappointed me! He killed my joy! He ruined my hope! He ended me in one night. A night for which there was no dawn, its darkness permeates my limbs, its pain perches on my breath, its pain gnaws under my

¹⁰ "التمشية"، 10

¹¹ "استنفذت كل مبرراتي للرفض"، 11

skin. A night I can't forget unless the memory center is uprooted from my brain!..." (75-76).¹² The morning after their wedding night, her father and brother visit her quickly to pick up the bloody white sheet to prove her virginity. This misogynistic practice has been passed down through generation in Yemeni culture, "Like her rag, her mother's rag, and my four sisters' rags, in that little box she keeps under her cupboard!" (76).¹³ This practice is both patriarchal and degrading. Farah describes, "I didn't know that my virginity was so important! And her redness shone with all this joy! (77).¹⁴ She emphasizes that in the same way that the whiteness disappeared with the presence of blood, her internal "whiteness" of her being also disappeared forever. Similar to Jasmine Sharif, she refers to her non-Yemeni friends and how their mothers responded to their journeys as women such as when they first started their menstruation cycle. While Farah's friends' mothers react positively, her mother shames her while on her period, especially during Ramadan. A similar comparison occurs in Sharif's memoir. Both narrators illustrate the way that both Yemeni mothers respond negatively to the natural menstrual cycle and continue to enable a cycle of shaming their daughters.

Alone, with no one to resort to, Farah is unsure if what was happening in her marriage was normal. Sammy is sexually aggressive from the beginning of their relationship. He was controlling and jealous. His strange behavior consists of watching her every move as he followed her on her way to work. Similar to Sharif, she is denied access to the world outside of her

¹² "خيب ظني! قتل فرحتي! قضى على أملي! أجهز علي في ليلة واحدة. ليلة لم يظهر لها فجر، تمخر عتمتها في أوصالي، يجثم ألمها على أنفاسي، ...! ينخر وجعها تحت جلدي. ليلة لا سبيل لنسيانها إلا إذا تم إقتلاع مركز الذاكرة من دماغي"

¹³ "كخرقتها وخرقة أمها وخرق شقيقاتي الأربع، في ذلك الصندوق الصغير الذي تحتفظ به أسفل دولابها"

¹⁴ "لم أكن اعلم أن لبقارتي كل هذه الأهمية! ولألق حمرتها كل هذه الفرحة!"

'home.' Despite both women's conditions prior to marriage and their hopes, they eventually ended up in situations where they faced limitations on where they go and how long they can be outside. When Farah finally goes to her mother to share the horrific experiences, her mother justifies the abuse stating, "It's a phase and it will pass!," 'Everything is difficult at first!,' 'Be patient,' 'There is a lot of work pressure!.' Oh, how I hate these phrases for my mother and sisters" (79).¹⁵ This type of response enables a patriarchal cycle to continue. She remained in this abusive marriage for two years due to fear of being labeled 'divorced.' In Yemeni society, divorce is viewed as the woman's failure to maintain the relationship. Once divorced, a woman is unwanted and treated miserably by family members. Due to this, she remained in the relations. She writes, "My intense fear of the word divorced made me search for ways to stay with Sammy" (85).¹⁶ Consequently, she feels like a drastically different person. As a result of Sammy's abuse, Farah felt destroyed. She goes on to discover that he had been cruel in his past as well. When his cousin rejected him and refused to marry him, he asked her father to force her to marry him. This behavior depicts the way that men feel entitled and seek ownership of women.

To cope with the abuse, Farah begins to create her own personal world. She did this to escape his sexual aggression. Sharif copes through exercise and dancing. Farah copes similarly through reading and dancing, which were two old habits she had developed earlier in her life. Dancing and reading serve as outlets to help her navigate her emotions and cope in a way she controls. However, this did not last long because Sammy eventually sees her dancing and when

¹⁵ "فترة وتعدي!، اكل شيء في أوله صعب!، استحملي، اضغوط العمل كثيرة!، اوووف كم أمقت هذه العبارات لأمي وشقيقاتي"،¹⁵

¹⁶ "كان خوفي الشديد من كلمة مطلقة يجعلني أبحث عن منافذ كثيرة للبقاء مع سامي!،!"¹⁶

he did, he compares her dancing to that of prostitutes. He beats her for the first time after already sexually abusing her throughout the two years of their marriage. Immediately after, she left him and asked for divorce. Her mental health deteriorates immensely. After a short period of time and many promises from Sammy, she agrees to give him another chance. Just as she returns and as they were on their way to begin their vacation in Aden, they get into a tragic accident that resulted in Sammy's death. In reflecting on how she remained with him despite the abuse, she suggests that women demand a divorce are strong because they put up with what society puts them through. She writes, "I wasn't that strong, so I took what Sammy did to me! For my fear of that word! Strange thinking, astonishing it was even to myself! I discussed it repeatedly between myself and myself to overcome it to no avail" (127).¹⁷ She also reflects on how his death was a mercy to her because it saved her from society. She was then labeled a widow, rather than being labeled divorced.

It is not until they reached a breaking point and take matters into their own hands, that they are finally able to move freely in society. However, that freedom is obtained at the expense of something valuable, which is their well-being. Farah's mental and physical health deteriorates due to experiencing multiple traumas and tragedies. It began when she lost her brother after he was brutally murdered. Then, after a few years, she was sexually and emotionally abused by her husband Sammy. To heal, she has to prioritize her well-being which, for her, meant travelling abroad to complete her doctorate studies. Sharif experiences a similar deterioration of her mental and physical health resulting from father's abuse at first. Then, she faces brutal a treatment in the marriages she was forced into. Ultimately, Sharif faces alienation and physical removal from

¹⁷ "لم أكن تلك القوية، لذلك استحملت ما فعله بي سامي! لخوفي من تلك الكلمة! تفكير غريب، استغربه على نفسي! ناقشته مراراً بيني وبين نفسي 17
"لأتغلب عليه دون فائدة"

society even though it meant being away from her children. Both Farah and Sharif endure multiple traumas and responded in ways that broke social norms such as moving abroad and moving away from family. Farah does not abide any social norms and pursues education abroad regardless of society's lack of approval. Sharif physically removes herself and moves away from the community that caused her and her children harm.

Aside from finally taking matters into their own hands, there is another factor that grounds both women in their difficult journeys. Sisterhood is a key component in their experience as it provides them guidance and support. In her trip to Yemen, Sharif finds comfort in the sense of community and sisterhood among the women around her. In her first attempt to escape, her non-Yemeni friends helped her get to the airport and emotionally supported her escape from her cruel husband. Her mother was in her life but was not supportive. Instead, her mother perpetuates the cycle of patriarchal practices in which she constantly reminds her to be patient with her husband. Similarly, Farah's mother is alive but absent in her journey. When Farah resorts to her for help with her abusive husband, she gives her the typical response of advising her to be patient with her husband. Additionally, Farah's bond with her sister Sala is what grounds her. She coaches her and guides her through various difficult experiences especially after she endured abuse from her husband. Another crucial bond is the one she forms with her friend Hanna in Cairo. She stays with her while studying abroad and their sisterhood provided her the support, she needed in her journey to obtain her doctorate. In *Feminism and Community*, Weiss and Friedman elaborate, "Sisterhood and friendship have been proposed by feminists as the relationships that women need to foster or recognize among ourselves if our liberation from sexist oppression is to end" (135). The narratives of both women depict the ways

in which they establish friendships and sisterhoods that grounded them in their treacherous journeys to pursue a life without patriarchal oppression.

In writing Farah's story, Al-Kowkabani speaks against the patriarchal norms that continue to dictate Yemeni women's lives. Nawar Al-Hassan Golley's "Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies: Shahrazad Tells Her Story" explores the autobiographical writings of Arab women and focuses on the ways in which Arab women use storytelling and autobiography to challenge dominant cultural narratives about gender, identity, and culture. Arab women writers have used autobiography to assert their agency and voice, to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about Arab women, and to highlight the complex intersections of gender, culture, and politics in their lives. She offers a nuanced and insightful perspective on the ways in which Arab women have used autobiography to assert their subjectivity and to participate in ongoing cultural and political debates. Golley writes, "The act of writing one's own story is an act of resistance against the erasure of women's voices and experiences." Al-Kowkabani's novel depicts the struggles that Yemeni women encounter in regard to toxic marriages, deprivation of education and the control of their movement in society. Writing stories, "...is a form of activism for Arab women, a way of breaking the silence and speaking truth to power" (Golley). Farah's story, as written by Al-Kowkabani, breaks the silence around what life is like for Yemeni women behind closed doors. Farah narrates the intricate details of her life and unapologetically recounts her truth. Autobiographies and storytelling enable and empower Yemeni women to voice the problems they face with the hope of ending the cycle of perpetually following Yemeni misogynistic norms.

Conclusion: Both Texts as Forms of Activism

In *Caged in America* and *It's Just Love*, both narrators experience a quest for finding and define oneself. Sharif paves her own path as she navigates through verbal, emotional and physical abuse. She pursued financial independence and eventually removed herself from the community that enabled the cycle of patriarchy to continue. Similarly, Farah eventually chose her own academic path and career success without submitting to her desires. She was tempted to chase her lover, Hisham. However, she pulled herself out of darkness and overcame despair with the help of her sister. Perhaps both Sharif and Al-Kowkabani have created narrators that embody their hopes for Yemeni and Yemeni-American women. Education is a major focus concern in both texts which is intertwined with financial independence and how that poses a threat to the men around both narrators and the men in their lives. Redefining oneself in a patriarchal society is quite a journey for the Yemeni woman. Sharif had to completely remove herself and move far away which meant that she could no longer be with her siblings and friends. Her friends were her support system and assisted her in her journey to escape her family in Michigan. In parallel, Farah endured multiple tragedies in a span of a few years. Once she realized the state of despair she had reached, she decided she had to save herself.

Although both Sharif and Al-Kowkabani are not necessarily marching in the streets demanding equal rights, their works advocate for justice as they expose the forms of injustice women endure. Within Al-Kowkabani's novel, Farah writes about her love of journaling and capturing the intricate details of her life. She has created a world where her narrator navigates life as a Yemeni woman and the struggles she faced in several aspects of her life. In his study, "Imagining an Alternative Homeland", Abdulsalam al-Rubaidi states, "...identities are thus products of the writer's imagination of the past or of their cultural memory...By choosing to

write about these specific aspects of the past, the authors intend to convey certain messages to their readers about the Yemeni present” (5). Thus, the readers can infer that Al-Kowkabani’s character stems from her “cultural memory” and her perception of her own culture which she is clearly highly critical of. Al-Kowkabani’s choice of Farah as the young Yemeni woman narrator places an emphasis on the world that she is trying to create and the message she wants to send to her audience. In her memoir, Sharif elaborately illustrates the various forms of injustices that Sharif faces throughout her life. The memoir began with how the Yemeni community concealed child marriage in Detroit, Michigan. Even in their diasporic experience, Yemeni patriarchal practices persisted. Al-Kowkabani and Sharif utilized both mediums to firstly express themselves creatively and secondly to serve as a form of activism giving voice to those who are unable to share their similar stories.

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