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# The Crime of the Elite: A Feminist Reading of Omaima Al-Khamis' *Saja Visit*

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***Saja visit* is a Saudi novel; it explores the traditional upper-class Saudi extended family's relationships. The crime that takes place in the current of the events is not the center or goal of the novel. The concern is its reflection and consequences on each character acting in this family drama. The crime is used to reveal the struggle, the murder of the individual's ability to live as he/she desires. This paper will focus on women's struggle to be and how a hideous incident as the crime can shed light on the hidden silent accepted social crimes.**

**Keywords:** patriarchy, elite, woman, crime, self-assertion

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## INTRODUCTION

Crime fiction as a writing that deals with death, blood or detective stories of such nature is written and published in many parts of the world. It mainly started in the early 19th century, when it gains its literary status and became a genre that is recognized by readers as well as librarians at bookstores and libraries. But if we look at the Middle East writings, specifically, Saudi Arabia, we will not find a crime fiction dealing with crime as its major subject. True, some novels have crimes as an aspect of man's evil nature but it does not take it as a major theme.

However, Saudi society tends to view itself as a crime-free one. This tendency puts pressure on the novelists if they ever wanted to write on such subject. None of the profusion of novels published either before or after the 2nd millennium can be called a crime fiction. Looking closely, Omaima Alkhamis's, a Saudi female columnist and novelist, recent novel *Saja Visit* (2013) makes use of a crime scene to explore a hidden silent social crime. It is the crime of culture and society towards women. The author represents the real world without aggravating or altering censorship of many who would consider women's demand of asserting their rights a revolt against all tradition and accepted social codes. She is cautious not to challenge them in the open and she might be accused

of opposing all accepted social taboos and might even be accused of undermining religion.

## METHODOLOGY

The paper will use the feminist approach to analyze the novel as it is the most suitable one to study the novel's aims. The novel's subject is the criticism of some social and cultural wrongs done to the woman and also it condemns the patriarchal culture and that responds to the definition of the feminist approach:

Most feminists believe that our culture is a patriarchal culture:

that is, one organized in favor of the interests of men. Feminist

literary critics try to explain how power imbalances due to

gender in a given culture are reflected in or challenged by literary

texts. (Guerin et al., 1999: 196)

it is a feminist novel and it shows that clearly as its

subject is the gender imbalance relationship. It is a continuation of the author's sequence of writings on women and the awareness of the female identity and demands in the society

### **the Role of the Crime Scene**

The author succeeds in choosing the crime scene to tackle the social problems and genders relationships when she places the crime within a privileged social class. Her choice of the genre is new to Saudi writings as writers tend to prefer love stories or dramatize the Saudi current social problems, in their depiction of some of the economic or social shortcomings. Omaiama as usual has her own distinguished experimental narrative technique which captures the reader's attention and applies Tom Wolf's remark on crime fiction: "the purpose of the fiction was, among other things, to chronicle a society's "status details." (Palumbo). Meaning to make the reader aware of the social, cultural and political states of the world described. The role of the crime and events that follow is to reveal something about the society and the pressure it practices on its members where the story takes place.

### **The Source of the Dilemma**

The novel is simply a family drama dealing mainly with women and the social pressure on them. It prolongs for three generations, its narrators are mostly women from different generations to reflect the cultural and social changes and how the woman deals with them according to her time and personality. Female characters are essential to the plot development, the female's struggle to cross the invisible boundaries and their own ways to overcome them are described vigorously.

The female presence is heavily felt, in fact the male character is hardly seen until the crime is committed then he is introduced. This summon of the male is a must as detective post and police force are purely a male job in Saudi, and to show the man's strong authority The reader finds him/herself in Riyadh and introduced to the custom, tradition and the rich life style. The reader is also made aware of the society's treatment of women and its conventions as to help the reader understand the circumstances and motivations that lay behind these conventions. Also, the sense of place is important to give a sense of credibility to the story and events: many real neighborhoods in Riyadh, stores, cafes, and shopping centers are mentioned and the reader is made familiar with all the locations.

Omaima writes beautifully and reflectively about this frustrated fractured family; who lives in a huge mansion headed by the father, business tycoon, and his relationships with his family members. Right from the first

few pages the reader meets enclosed women world.

### **Analysis**

The novel takes place in Riyadh city, as mentioned earlier, the most conservative part of the Kingdom. However the reader is introduced to a rich elite powerful and, and as most of Saudi families, an extended family. The center of this drama is a prominent male, Abu-Mansour, who is the head of the family but his presence is denied as most of the males in the novel. The readers learn and meet him through the female's narration and point of views. The family lives in a big compound that has many villas for the wives and children, many servants are mentioned. The mansion is a hell to some while to others it is a salvation. The life seems to be a modern luxurious one. Hind is one of Abu-Mansour's many daughters from a previous marriage. She is an intelligent beautiful college student, but lacks the coziness of the family and parental love although her grandmother, Lwulwa, is doing her best to compromise for the lost natural home. Suddenly, this quiet cool atmosphere is shattered by the news of a crime within the compound, specifically inside Hind's garden. The victim is Ibrahim Asery, Abu-Mansour's household financial man to his women, he has been brutally injured and 5 million riyals that were in his briefcase have disappeared. No one saw the crime or the criminal. Everybody is waiting for his recovery and to make things even worse for Hind's position in the middle of this chaos is the traces of shoes' prints found in the crime scene: they are for a man! And a high heel prints too! Who are the male and female there at the night of the crime? Hind's villa is not inhabited by any man, so how the shoe did's print came there? While Ibrahim is in a comma, many secrets and passions are revealed: pain, sorrows, fears, illegal love affairs, imprisonment, hopes, and the struggle to become. The reader is now aware of a different crime that is committed but not condemned, questions arise: is the woman a free being in this family? Whose responsibility to free her? Is it a cumulative cultural crime? Is she capable of stepping over these cultural boundaries and assert herself?

The author benefits from the plot and story to show the woman's fear of the man and the power he embodies which the culture and society grant him. It also exposes the social changes in a certain part of the kingdom. Saja's visit goes in hand as a crime novel with what the novelist L. J. Sellers says:

Crime fiction confronts the realities of life across various cultures more often and more honestly than mainstream/literary fiction does. Crime novels are suited to exploring provocative social issues and showing how those hot-button subjects affect various people's lives, often from diverse perspectives.

What he says is applicable to the novel we are dealing with. The familial relationships are tested, examined and many emotions are exposed: passion, deceit, neglect, jealousy, and many more. The reader cannot but sympathies with these elite women who have multiple relations with past, present and life itself.

The youthful Hind who does not have the mother's presence to provide her with love and protection has a loving grandmother, who, nevertheless, pulls her back to the female enclosed backwater. Hind is a child of divorce and does not experience the family life also she lacks security as the father is a polygamy man. He furnishes her with money and luxury but not with love. These facts introduce the reader to one of the social victims, the mother, Alanoud, after her disappointment in her first marriage she embraces religion in a blind passion after marrying a supposed religious man. She submerges herself in charitable deeds, and financial ones for the sake of her second husband. Religion to this mother, Alanoud, seems to be obeying and seeking man's approval. She rarely asks about her daughter and mother. Although her religion instructs her to be attentive to her mother's needs but she neglects that. She is scared of asserting herself and her past life and give in to the man's, her husband, instructions regarding her actions and visits.

### Socio-Cultural Pressure

To understand her cold attitude towards her mother and child, the narration through the grandmother's stream of consciousness gives an account of her past. Alanoud stands on an alien ground in her first marriage to Abu-Mansour and her social surrounding imposes on her a certain way of acting and behaving, she seems to view herself as dislocated because of her lack of natural spouse love and the difference in age and social class. She was part of a bargain, her youth in exchange with wealth. As she comes from a low middle class background with no education or job, her mother's only hope to secure the family future is the traditional way to climb the social ladder: marriage. Her picture was sent to Abu-Mansour and her approval was not important. In that marriage there were bitterness and inner frustration as she fails to capture his full attention and passion. She did not choose to marry him, her mother says about her reaction towards the proposal: 'when Abu-Mansour proposed to Alanoud I and her father were very happy, we did not even try to listen to her murmurs or what were they or see the terror in her beautiful eyes' (SV 79). She blames her mother for all the pain she went through. She could not ignore or swallow the insult to her femininity that while he was in her room he was calling the other wife and planning to pay her a visit on the same day. Although she never says a word to her mother but she never also forgives the wrong done to her (SV 75). She

punishes her mother by ignoring her femininity and she knows that hurts the refined older lady: "she visits with eyes with no trace of eyeliner, she pays no attention to her appearance or hair, her cologne bottles always empty" (73). Now she refuges in religion as she comprehends it, it is mingled with finance and jealousy. She has escaped from Abu-Mansour multi women life to another man who is also shared with another woman. Her first experience left her a body without a soul as Hind puts it: "he { Abu-Mansour } has sipped her youthfulness and left her a cold dull cup of coffee" (11). She complains of her daughter's attitude towards her but she forgets that she has lost her the minute she consents to another tyranny in her life, her husband. The supposed religious man forgets the fact that she is a mother before her marriage to him and does not allow her to stay long or even take their children to visit their grandmother or their sister. The reader does not know them or hear about them. Nevertheless, Alanoud never complains about that as if he is her ultimate fate that she give in to. The disappointment of the first marriage left her a wreck. She seems to be a victim of her society standards, her life spans around the husband and how to please him:

She {Alanoud} does not regret leaving her children scattered among their relatives' houses, every year she accompanies her husband campaign to the holy land during the pilgrimage season, making the best to have him for herself two whole weeks without his first wife. She calls him tens of times pretending to ask questions regarding the female pilgrims with her while all she wants is to hear his voice. (74)

Therefore, the reader does not know why does she reject the father of her child because of the other women sharing him with her and accept another who has a first wife. Does that an accusation of society who does not accept divorce or is it another punishment to the mother especially that he is below the expectation of the ambitious mother?

Hind presents wealth and security to the grandmother who is very conservative. She is a university student, rich, and served by modern technology. She does not have the frustration which the two ladies from previous generations have. But she always feels as an outsider; she is not close to any of her numerous brothers and sisters not even to her parents. The grandmother in her fear of losing or hurting Hind has, unintentionally, damaged the girl's relationship with her half brothers and sisters as she comments on why she never disciplines her " the world is tough on her {Hind} and I cannot be too, she is just a child" (46). She enforces her feeling of loneliness and being forsaken by both mother and father. The grandmother, out of ignorance, implements in the child the fear of all those around her.

The choice of Hind's name is meaningful. It stands in Arabic language for wealth. However, it is not the modern wealth but it refers to ancient heritage, it is to own 100 camel or above. This illusion has an echo in modern Hind. She embodies the traditional expectations of a woman: pretty, descends from a good wealthy family, obedient or seems to be to the man figure either father or brother. She is surrounded by three circles, reputation, gender, and grandmother's fear. The strongest of these circles is the gender; as Mansour Almhouos explains the restraints put on women in the Arab world because of their gender: "Islamic law is not applied on the social world as the woman started to lose her freedom and gradually chains were added on her, that led to man's overpower and social status" (79). The cause of that in the Saudi society as Almhouos states "social and traditional background besides the economic motivation as the family used to depend on the man as the only bread-winner for the family" (78). And also as Friedrich Engels explains: "In the great majority of cases today, . . . the husband is obliged to earn a living and support his family, and that in itself gives him position of supremacy" (quoted in Irigary 121). Of course to many that has changed especially to middle class families but not to all the elite. To go against the man's will mean to lose all the luxury, comfortable life and influence. Hind knows that especially being an only child and the unspoken fear from losing the luxurious life is transferred to her from the grandmother.

Hind is in love with a young man from a prominent family; this love affair is exposed to the reader in the course of the crime investigation. However, Love affairs are not socially accepted in Saudi and most likely will destroy a woman's reputation but the grandmother sacrifices Hind in order not to alarm her and takes a side against her and that will lead to the loss of the house and Hind has to move within her father's house.

Hind's fear of her father and brothers is tremendous. Unlike the grandmother whose fears are based on financial needs, she is worried about her reputation and being a respected person. This fear springs from the fact that society connect between sexuality and love affair although the two are two different things. What Sally Ledger wrote is applicable to Hind circumstances: "sexuality had to be family-based and for procreative purposes only." (113). Of course such sexual relationships in the Saudi society is out of the question as it is a religious community that condemned such an act but some people like to believe that one thing leads to another. Her fears are understandable as it is not only social view but also her father and brothers the man overwhelming authority. It does not occur to her to explain to them her feelings or the seriousness of the relationship and what makes it even worse is the fact that she let her beloved in the night of the crime. The crime reveals all the secrets. The grandmother's longing for a man's warm presence in her life. The mother's neglect of

her daughter as she is absent from the whole struggle of her mother and daughter's dilemma.

Hind is the product of social changes in its process of grow and development. She is aware of the man's imposed power over her. Unlike her mother and granny, she does not accept it or take it as natural but she revolts softly in her own way. Her thoughts on women and men and their roles in her immediate family are exposed to the reader. Her intelligence is vivid as she deals with Sultan on equal base and does not show weakness or submission in their relationship. Even when she goes beyond her ways and agrees to meet him it was for once and she sets the roles.

### **The Hope**

Hind, surprisingly, manages to keep her secret and reaches marriage shores with the blessing of all the family. As a member of the young generation she is educated and aware of the suffering of the other women around her, especially, her step mothers who come and go in her father's life as it pleases him. Hind does not consent to the traditional arranged marriage and refused to be chosen by to be mother in law. She made her own choice and in doing so she asserts herself and emphasizes her rights. She overcomes the social fear of the social fabric as Sally Ledger has expressed about the Victorian society but I find it applicable here: "the . . . desire to defend marriage as an institution was underpinned by a belief that, without conventional marriage and domestic arrangements, the social fabric . . . would begin to crumble" (12) She chooses someone near her age and social class but that would never be possible without modern technology. The reader reads excessive use of Bluetooth, face book, and text messages. She is capable of virtual meetings with her beloved at any time they want. This dense use of technology which is rare in Saudi literature is used to show that the new Saudi female through education and wide knowledge of the world has become stronger in the face of conventions and old myths. She is capable of asserting herself without being frustrated or going into extreme. The novel like fairy tales ends happily as to emphasize the author optimistic view of the future and the woman struggle which rises from being secondary to their brother fellows.

### **CONCLUSION**

However, a hopeful view of a change in the social relationships and a call and a demand for women to assert their rights is reflected in the chosen closure. The political power has been supporting women as Donna Abu-Nasr states:

The king has sped up the changes. He grants women the right to vote and run in the 2015 municipal elections . . . and in January (2013) appointed the first female members to the consultative Council, naming 30 women to the 150-member advisory body.

But it is still the woman's call to deal with the social pressure making use of the political power support.

In conclusion, the novel tends to suggest an optimistic view of the future. It is also a female response towards a tradition that has been powerful for centuries. Nevertheless, the response is not violent but it shows a woman full awareness of her rights and duties towards her society, she acts patiently to achieve what she aspires.

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