

# Women as migrants in the season of migration to the north



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*Inna nisah shayatin khuliqna lana*

*Na' udhubillah min sharri shayatin*

*Women are devils created for us*

*We seek refuge in Allah from the ill luck of the devils (Al- Mawardi Adab al-Din 140).*

Tayeb Salih's chef-d'oeuvre *Season of Migration to the North* has many themes like colonialism, orientalism, corruption, issues of sex, modernism, education and sufferings of women. However, the subjugation of women during the post-colonial period in Sudan wedged my attention. The social issues of misogyny and female circumcision in the text by Salih calls for attention to study the plight of women in Sudan at that time. It becomes imperative for the postcolonial criticism to question the role of gender in the novel which involves patriarchy, colonialism, and racism weaved together in one text. Salih's novel focuses on gender and colonial identities and show how men strongly hold a position which results in downfall of the colonizer and the colonized, men and women. Together, colonialism and patriarchy often create a disturbed gender formation and thus, " the category of race often destabilizes gendered colonial identities" (Hassan 309). After an enlightening discussion about the text, the condition of women in Arabic society made me curious to further research on their survival and treatment in the society in that era.

Through this essay, I attempt to portray the contrasting female characters of Bint Majzoub and Bint Mahmoud and their survival under gender prejudice

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and patriarchy. Furthermore, I will briefly shed light on female circumcision prevalent in Arabic society which is suggestively discussed in the text.

The presence of colonial rule created a male-based society which resulted in an aggravated situation for an African woman. They were neglected, mistreated, exploited which made them feel like an outsider. They were not allowed to participate in any discussion which engaged men, they were not allowed to pursue education, they were only expected to cook, give pleasure to men and rear children. In her article “ Women in Achebe’s world”, Rose Ure Mezu argues that patriarchy existed largely during the postcolonial period where the man ruled, and women were looked upon as merely a “ part of men’s acquisitions”. According to Mezu, the women at that time were “ traditionally subordinated to sexist cultural mores”. The women in African society are usually referred as muted or voiceless. In *Of Woman Born* , Adrienne Rich rightly describes patriarchy as: “ the power of the fathers: a familial, social, ideological, and political system in which, by direct pressure —or through tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and division of labor—men determine what parts women shall not play, and the female is everywhere subsumed by the male” (Rich 57-58). Parallel to these contexts, in *Season of Migration to the North*, Wad Rayyes personifies a man who visualize woman as an object and abusing a woman as his personal right. “ Islam is his excuse for this behavior (though he objects to the circumcision of women on aesthetic grounds), as he confuses the maxim that “ women and children” rather than “ wealth and children” are the adornments of this earth” (Davidson 387). He finds pride in telling rape stories to his friends, “ I put the girl in front of me on the donkey, squirming

and twisting, then I forcibly stripped her of all her clothes till she was naked as the day her mother bore her” (Salih 59).

Women in Sudan clearly had no identity of their own. Their existence was solely dependent on the society they lived in, and largely on the male community. To create their own identity, women in Sudan engaged in henna dying and cooking. Henna Dying kept their creative abilities alive and projected their beauty and physical appearance at its best. Many African female authors assert that, to maintain their identity, women in Sudan constantly kept themselves busy in cooking and maintaining household chores. It is believed by the Sudanese women that looking good and cooking good food will gain the attention and goodwill of their male partners. One of the noteworthy traditions in constructing the identity of a Sudanese women is circumcision. In their childhood, Sudanese women are circumcised. Circumcision gives a girl womanhood, social status and an opportunity to win the best man in the community. She attains a respectable and dignified status. On the other hand, a woman who is uncircumcised is outcasted and is declared as an unfit match for marriage. In the text, on his return from Europe, we see Bint Majzoub mockingly stating to the narrator, “ We were afraid, you’d bring back with you an uncircumcised infidel for a wife” (Salih 3).

While our purpose is to explore and examine the paradoxical nature of two female characters (Bint Majzoub and Bint Mahmoud) in the text, I would begin by exploring two main groups of claims that feminism holds. According to McAfee, feminism includes two group of claims: normative and descriptive. “ The normative claims concern how women ought (or ought <https://assignbuster.com/women-as-migrants-in-the-season-of-migration-to-the-north/>

not) to be viewed and treated and draw on a background conception of justice or broad moral position; the descriptive claims concern how women are, as a matter of fact, viewed and treated, alleging that they are not being treated in accordance with the standards of justice or morality invoked in the normative claims". To put in simple words: Normative claim treats men and women equally in terms of rights and respect. Whereas, descriptive women are usually deprived of respect to rights and respect, compared with men. In my perspective, Bint Majzoub falls in the category of normative claim, as she strongly portrays a woman who mirrors how she should be viewed or treated in a patriarchal society. Her boldness and extrovert nature have gained her the status to sit with the men and discuss about matters. On the other hand, Bint Mahmoud belongs to the descriptive claim because of her acceptance of the fact that women are men's property and that they are nothing without the Other. She believes that whatever rights she is enjoying now is because of her husband Mustafa Said. She truly conduces to the clang of dismissive women who has no self-identity and is dependent on the Other.

Hosna Bint Mahmoud was a noblewoman. As discussed above, she was a typical Sudanese woman who liked to be at service of her husband and took pride in her beauty. She was a loyal and a dedicated wife who loved her husband because he was the father of her children. According to her " he was a generous husband and a generous father" (Salih 71). Sudanese women gained a social and dignified status in the society through marriage. However, death of her husband marked a huge vacuum in Bint Mahmoud's life which eventually made her realize that she still desires marriage and a partner. This desire runs contrary to that of Bint Majzoub. The most

important contrast in their characteristics lie here where Bint Mahmoud desire for another marriage unlike Bint Majzoub who belongs to a group of Sudanese women who are referred to as those “ who desire wedlock no more” (Qur’an 4 verse 33). Women like Bint Majzoub desire freedom and “ they are waiting brides not of life but death” (Ayinde 104).

In my perspective, the masculine traits shown by Bint Majzoub in her identity are probably to invalidate the identity of women as submissive and weak. She drinks alcohol, smokes cigarette and engages in erotic talks with men, but at the same time she shares the same platform with men in taking important decisions for the village. This combination makes her powerful and respectable in the male dominant society prevalent at that time. Being a widow of rich notables of Sudan, Bint Majzoub had the power to rise above the cultural chains of Sudan and enjoy the financial independence and luxuries unlike other women in the village. Likewise, Bint Majzoub could easily survive the economic crisis of the village independently without a man. It is praiseworthy to see that she chose to be a self-made woman who raised her voice and believed in it thus winning confidence of men in the village and sharing equal rights with them. In Quran such women who is a protector of herself and the others is called “ Qawwamah” (Qur’an 4 verse 29). Eventually, Bint Majzoub becomes the representative of powerful women in the men’s world. While we see Bint Majzoub clearly making space for herself by raising her voice in the men’s world, perhaps it is the inability of Bint Mahmoud to create that space for her as she strongly believes in cultural hierarchies of Sudan within which the Sudanese women is expected to be voiceless, weak and yet survive.

Bint Mahmoud has a different perspective in terms of living a different life after her husband's death. She wants to create a distinct identity and safeguard her feminism by staying within the boundaries of the gender hierarchy prevalent in her society. So, though she wants to remarry, she doesn't want to be controlled by imposed decisions on her by others. "Salih portrayed a traditional society beset by colonial history, where stifling patriarchy subjects women not only to discursive but also to systematic physical violence" (Hassan 320). Upon Mustafa's death, Bint Mahmoud was forced by her father to remarry Wad Rayyes against her will. To get a woman married forcibly is a "flagrant violation of Islamic law that explicitly forbids forced marriages" (Hassan 320). Bint Mahmoud dismisses her father's orders by swearing "if they force me to marry, I'll kill him and kill myself" (Salih 76). On one hand, Mahmoud is struggling by refusing to the orders of her father and on the other she wishes to change her life by finding a man she likes. In middle of the wrath of her father, Bint Mahmoud gathers courage to ask narrator to marry her and save her from Wad Rayyes who is a womanizer. This act of Bint Mahmoud is not appreciated by the villagers and the narrator's mother. With no option, Bint Mahmoud is forced to marry Wad Rayyes. Rayyes turns violent on refusal by her to touch her which forces Hosna to kill him and kill herself. "The mutilated body of Hosna Bint Mahmoud and the castrated body of Wad Rayyes bear witness to the destructiveness of a phallogentric masculinity" (Hassan 321). This act of violence is an evidence of the society where a women's existence is completely dependent on her father, brother or husband. Even if she desires to create a life for herself, she is not allowed which in turn forces her to kill herself.

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Death of Wad Rayyes introduces us to another woman who did not exist until her husband died. Mabrouka is Wad Rayyes's first wife. She was an obedient wife who built her own world with her husband and lived muted ignoring the habits of her husband. The persona of woman in society at that time implies that woman must raise her voice only to mourn during the death of her husband. Upon hearing about her husband's murder, the body language of Mabrouka is poise and calm unlike the tradition and norms of the society. Instead of mourning, Mabrouka coldly tells all the women gathered outside her house, " Good riddance! Wad Rayyes dug his grave with his own hands, and Bint Mahmoud, God's blessings upon her, paid him out in full" (Salih 101). The poise in the body language of Mabrouka offers an uncanny opinion of the unexpected resilience and calmness that the female is capable of amid the most trying situations. By maintaining silence and sturdiness, Mabrouka demonstrates her self-control and stands out more strongly than Bint Majzoub. " Hosna is dead, but no longer can a woman be looked on merely as property or raped without a second thought" (Davidson 396). Thus, we see Mabrouka, Bint Majzoub and Bint Mahmoud are trying to find meaning to their identities in a society which has deep-rooted cultural, social and patriarchal hierarchies. " Bint Majzoub, Bint Mahmoud and Mabrouka may appear to belong together without being the same" (Ayinde 107). We can call them the identities of the female, the feminist and the feminine.

The feminine nature of Bint Majzoub is not limited to sarcasm on women and her status in the society at that time. In a way, by viewing women from the male perspective Bint Majzoub is gaining respect of the men in the village and she eventually becomes a representative of her sex among the male



dominant society. Bint Majzoub plays a major role in reflecting on the identities of the women by passing judgements and commenting on important issues discussed by men of the village. She constantly remarks on how women perceive about themselves and the way women relate to each other in a patriarchal society. In the novel, she has her own way of setting up examples for women and help them understand the importance of self-advocacy. At many instances in the text, we can see that Bint Majzoub is more intellect in taking decisions than her male counterparts. In response to a comment by Wad Rayyes on marriage, Bint Mahmoud said, “ Wad Rayyes, you’re a man who talks rubbish. Your whole brain’s in the head of your penis and the head of your penis is as small as your brain” (Salih 67). This statement by Bint Mahmoud clearly indicates closure of a discussion. By saying such a strong statement against a pun, she wants all the men present there know that a woman knows the thin line between the genders. Also, this comment brings out the female inside Bint Majzoub who wants to show men that she is the one who gives birth to the man, she feeds them and later, she accepts his love by allowing him inside her body.

As discussed earlier, the aspects of normative claim are revealed throughout the text in the character of Bint Majzoub. In the patriarchal society that Salih has portrayed in his novel, Bint Majzoub plays a proactive role by becoming a leader rather than being led by the men. She is the first person to reach at Wad Rayyes house when he is murdered. She immediately takes the control of the situation by instructing the narrator and Bakri saying “ stop the people from entering the house. Don’t let any woman enter the house” (Salih 99-100). By passing this instruction, Bint Majzoub is no longer considering her

as a woman and clearly indicating that the woman in her is distinct from the gathered women outside that house. She leads everyone to follow her instructions because she believes in the power of her voice that she possesses which gives her the identity and thus she is recognized and responded by the villagers.

Even if they have separate characteristics and distinct qualities, Bint Majzoub, Bint Mahmoud and Mabrouka are challenged by culture, gender and nature. Together, they review the sufferings and status of women in a patriarchal setup and by withstanding to these limitations they prove their worth and existence. I think Salih beautifully landscapes the idea of liberation through two contrast characters. By acting like men and losing virginity, Bint Majzoub defines her way of freedom from the patriarchal slavery, whereas Bint Mahmoud kills the physical bodies of two people who are forced to live together under the institution of marriage and defines her way of liberating herself from a forceful life.

Salih's attempt to portray the social issues of misogyny and female circumcision in this novel call for attention that forces the women at that time to live a slaved life and how they succumb to it in their own way. With their separate ideologies, we learn that a women's identity is not meant for an end, instead it is meant to end the hierarchy and patriarchy prevalent in the society. Thus, these three Arab women truly represent Sudanese culture by creating their own identity in their own way and giving confidence to other women to live boldly in a male dominant world.

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