



Exploring the Social Fabric: Women's Struggles and Resilience in Ulfat Idilbî's Novel "Dimashq Yâ Basma al-Ḥuẓn"

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Citation: Dr. Noor Uddin Ahmed, et.al (2024), Exploring the Social Fabric: Women's Struggles and Resilience in Ulfat Idilbî's Novel "Dimashq Yâ Basma al-Ḥuẓn", *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(10), 571-576

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i10.8374

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Ulfat Idilbî (d. 2007) was a pioneering Syrian novelist whose work left a profound mark on Arabic literature, particularly in her exploration of gender, society, and nationalism in 20th-century Syria. Idilbî's writing gave a powerful voice to Syrian women, reflecting the intricate socio-political environment of her time, including the French Mandate, the emergence of Arab nationalism, and the fight for Syrian independence. One of her most acclaimed novels, *Dimashq Yâ Basmā al-Ḥuẓn* (Damascus, Smile of Sadness), delves into themes of feminist defiance, national identity, and the consequences of colonialism. This article delves into Idilbî's literary contributions, with particular attention to her feminist outlook, the historical and political context of her works, and her enduring influence on Arabic literature.

Keywords: Ulfat Idilbî, Syrian literature, feminism, nationalism, colonialism, women's rights.

Introduction:

Ulfat Idilbî (1912 – 2007) is celebrated as a pioneering Arab novelist who dedicated much of her literary work to advocating for women's rights and liberating them from the constraints of a traditional Syrian society. Through her narratives, Idilbî highlighted the struggles of women, their yearning for freedom, and how their participation in public life could shape not only the local context but also broader Arab and Syrian issues. In her acclaimed novel "Dimashq Yâ Basmā al-Ḥuẓn" (Damascus, Smile of Sadness), Idilbî addresses the inner and outer struggles of women, shedding light on various social challenges, including backwardness, injustice, and societal disdain. The protagonist, 'Sabriya', is a vivid representation of these struggles. A courageous figure, Sabriya resists both the British and French occupations, yet finds herself rejected by her society, confined by its restrictive customs, traditions, and familial expectations. Throughout the novel, Sabriya is portrayed as a woman stripped of her rights, identity, and freedom—living a marginalized existence without a true voice or sense of agency.

This exclusion of Sabriya, and by extension many women like her, mirrors a broader societal rejection of female participation in real life. Syrian women, as depicted in Idilbî's work, often face immense social pressure and endure the brunt of oppressive customs and traditions, particularly within a patriarchal society where men dominate and make decisions even regarding women's personal and daily lives.

Ulfat Idilbî's novel doesn't merely present Sabriya as an individual character but uses her as a symbol for the collective suffering of women in Syrian society. Through the novel *Dimashq Yâ Basmā al-Ḥuẓn* (Damascus, Smile of Sadness) Idilbî delves deeply into the emotional, psychological, social, and familial issues women experience. Her study of these themes reveals a society that views women with disdain, marginalizing them while upholding outdated traditions that only reinforce male dominance. Sabriya's struggle for identity and recognition is thus a powerful metaphor for the broader plight of women in similar circumstances.

In Idilbî's portrayal, women are seen grappling with an intense yearning for dignity and equal treatment, and her narrative speaks to the universal struggle against the ingrained patriarchy that pervades many aspects of daily life. Through her literature, Idilbî offers a voice to those often silenced, and she uses Sabriya's story to

shine a spotlight on the long-overlooked realities of women under the weight of oppressive societal structures.

Description:

A Brief Biography of the Writer:

Syria has produced many brilliant and exceptional figures who have played a significant role in the development of Arabic language and literature in Syria, whether in prose, poetry, short stories, plays, or novels. Among these prominent writers, poets, novelists, and scholars, one of the most notable figures in the history of modern Arabic literature that Syria takes pride in is Ulfat 'Umar Pasha al-Idlibî. Her full name was Ulfat 'Umar Pasha al-Idlibî. ¹ She was born in the al-Salihiya neighborhood of Damascus in November 1912 (1331 AH) to Damascene parents—her father, Abu al-Khair Omar Pasha, descended from Jabal Qâsyûn, and her mother, Najîba al-Daghistanî. ² Raised in the heart of a traditional Damascene environment and a noble and prominent family, she grew up in a household that valued literature, language, and culture. She developed a deep love for her land, respected its heritage, and held its civilization in high regard. Ulfat was the only daughter among five brothers.

Her fame spread widely across the Arab world, particularly in Syria, and she became well-known for her contributions to what is referred to as “women’s literature.” ³ She began her education in her hometown, initially learning at home with her mother from an early age. Ulfat had a passion for literature and language, a love for reading and studying, a keen research interest, and a strong desire to write and create. She studied at Al-Afif Primary School and later enrolled in the Teachers’ School. As mentioned in her important novel *Dimashq Yâ Basmat Al-Huzn* (Damascus, Smile of Sadness), the Teachers’ School was the only secondary school for girls in all of Syria then.⁴

The esteemed writer Ulfat 'Umar Pasha al-Idlibî passed away on Thursday, March 22, 2007, at the age of 96, in Paris, where she had been staying at her son Yasser’s home. ⁵ Her soul ascended peacefully to the heavens, leaving a valuable legacy of stories, novels, research, articles, lectures, and more. This cultural heritage of literary and cultural studies, along with her significant social novels and short stories, is characterized by its realism and focus on Eastern life. As a result, she is considered one of the greatest contemporary Syrian female writers.

The Suffering of Women Portrayed in the Novel:

Human life is never free from problems and hardships, whether these challenges occur at home, in the market, in school, college, university, or the workplace. Every society faces various social issues that affect it, including illiteracy, slavery, poverty, unemployment, child labor, early marriage, and drug trafficking, among others.

The themes that the author addresses in this valuable novel are social issues and the concerns and struggles of Arab women, particularly Syrian women, about marriage, divorce, love, separation, longing, yearning, deprivation, betrayal, and feelings of alienation. The writer mentions all these emotions with rare boldness and striking honesty. This novel stands out for its freshness and seriousness in addressing social topics, especially those concerning Syrian women, presented in an artful and compelling form.

In her novel *Dimashq Yâ Basmat Al-Huzn* (Damascus, Smile of Sadness), the novelist explores the intense suffering endured by the protagonist, "Sabriya," in her daily life, as she lives confined to her home. The author also places significant emphasis on the struggles, misery, and concerns of Syrian women within the patriarchal Syrian society through her short stories and novels. She accurately and thoughtfully addresses many of the daily problems faced by women, offering a deep and reflective perspective. Additionally, she provides strong support for women’s rights, encouraging Syrian women to play an active role in all fields of life, without feeling dependent on men to solve their personal and psychological issues.

Through her writings, the author urges Syrian Arab women to break the chains and overcome the difficulties they face in society. Here, I briefly highlight the most important social issues that the author portrays in the novel.

(1)The Woman’s Surrender to Her Traditional Role:

The novel *Dimashq Yâ Basmat Al-Huzn* (Damascus, Smile of Sadness) presents an important issue here: social upbringing and its influence on the role of women in the future. Sabriya, the main character, was deprived of continuing her education, confined to the home, and engaged in household chores. She was intelligent and skilled in her tasks and continued to perform this role throughout her life. Sabriya learned all the necessary skills from her mother, including weaving, washing, cooking, milking, fetching water, and cleaning the house during the different seasons of summer and winter. She maintained these responsibilities until her death. In her society, girls are raised with a sense of shame and prohibition, taught to serve men, and are expected to show respect and obedience to their fathers, brothers, and husbands.

The author highlights this matter through Sabriya’s words: “Every day, my mother would wake me up before sunrise to help her clean the house and prepare breakfast. In our country, girls are trained to serve men from the moment they become aware, whether they are fathers, brothers, husbands, or sons. By the time they grow up, serving them becomes second nature”. ⁶

A woman spends all her time performing household chores, such as cleaning and organizing the home in the

best possible way, from her early years until the end of her life, whether the furniture is modest or not. When the husband and children return from work or school, they find a clean house, which eases their fatigue and exhaustion, and provides them with comfort and reassurance. If the woman does not perform the household tasks, who else will? Yet, many men fail to acknowledge the significant role that women play in their practical lives.

(2) The Attempt to Deprive Women of Inheritance:

The deprivation of women from inheritance is a significant social issue because when women are denied their inheritance, they experience psychological problems such as constant anxiety and tension, a loss of self-respect, a lowered sense of self-worth, and a lack of self-confidence.

Depriving women of inheritance contradicts the principles of the Islamic religion and is, in fact, unlawful. Those who engage in this unlawful act are ignorant and far from the teachings of Islam and the laws of the Qur'ân and Sunnah. Denying women their inheritance has become a dangerous phenomenon in Syrian society due to cultural traditions and male dominance, where women are considered to have no value or importance in society, and thus, no right to inheritance. Women often do not demand their inheritance rights for several reasons, the most important being fear of oppression, which manifests as direct or indirect threats from brothers or society.

Sabriya's brothers, Mahmoud and Ragheb, tried to force her to give up her inheritance. Just ten days after their father's death, they were already discussing in their room the sale of the family home once the forty-day mourning period had passed.

Sabriya was not with them at the time because she had gone to visit her father's grave. Her brothers seized the opportunity to plan the sale of the house, considering it necessary since property prices were high. Mahmoud asked, "If we sell the house, where will my sister Sabriya live?" Ragheb, trying to calm his wife, said, "Don't worry, we'll rent a small house for her to live in alone." His wife, however, objected, saying, "What a brilliant idea, but in my opinion, it is not appropriate for your unmarried sister to live alone in a rented house." Ragheb then said, "That's not a bad idea, but our father left all his wealth to his sons, so Sabriya won't inherit anything from our wealthy father." Ragheb's wife also wanted to expel her from the house immediately.

In the novel, Ragheb's wife states firmly, "The day your sister enters this house, I will leave it."⁷ Sabriya refused to give up her right to the inheritance and stood firmly against her brother and his wife, saying, "They will only be able to throw me out of my house over my dead body."⁸

From the Islamic perspective, depriving women of inheritance is a major injustice and a grave sin. Islam is a religion of justice and equality. Islam gave women their rightful share and protected their rights. God Almighty has outlined their share of the inheritance, as stated in Surat An-Nisa: "Allah instructs you concerning your children: for the male, what is equal to the share of two females. But if there are only daughters, two or more, for them are two-thirds of one's estate; and if there is only one, for her is half."⁹

Furthermore, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, "Whoever denies the inheritance of their heir, Allah will deny them their inheritance from Paradise on the Day of Judgment".¹⁰ Denying women their inheritance is a practice of pre-Islamic ignorance. Islam came to bring people from darkness to light, from the oppression of other religions to the justice of Islam, and from the narrowness of this world to its vastness. It liberated women from being buried alive and from being denied inheritance. Islam gave women respect, rights, and freedom, and ensured equality between men and women in rights and duties without discrimination based on gender. The Prophet (peace be upon him) recommended treating women with kindness, mercy, and goodness, but due to cultural influences, women have lost this high status and have been deprived of their dignity, honour, and rights.

(3) Society's Harshness Towards Infertile Women:

The harshness of society towards infertile women is a serious issue because everyone desires to have a son or daughter in their life. If a woman does not conceive after marriage, society views her with disdain and contempt, as if she has lost her dignity and humanity. Men often believe that a woman exists solely for childbirth. However, medical studies have proven that infertility affects both men and women, and it is not necessarily the woman's issue alone.

Many infertile women endure extreme suffering, bearing the heavy burden of blame and accusations from their families and society. It is human nature for people to look at a woman's flaws and punish her without considering their shortcomings. A barren woman who cannot bear children lives under immense psychological pressure, constantly resisting dark thoughts and a severe sense of worthlessness, feeling that her existence no longer has any justification. She also faces many societal pressures both inside and outside the home, and even at work. Her family life becomes a living hell due to the constant gossip and insinuations as if infertility is something she controls. Thus, the infertile woman spends her days in the pain of being deprived of motherhood, compounded by society's harsh judgment.

The author of the novel eloquently illustrates this when Mahmoud marries a woman, and after five years without children, she is subjected to harassment by Mahmoud and his family, as well as by the villagers. They criticized her for not bearing children five years after her marriage, even though she visited numerous doctors

for treatment during this time. Sabriya's mother, who was ill, lamented and blamed her bad fortune, saying to herself that their family name would die out, and their lineage would come to an end after they passed away. She expresses her sorrow, saying: "What bad luck we have... our family name will disappear... Mahmoud married a barren woman, and Ragheb married a suspicious woman, and suspicious women rarely give birth."¹¹

This is how barren women live in our Arab and Syrian society, feeling broken and incomplete. They cannot live with dignity, love, and respect unless they can bear children.

(4) Society's Failure to Acknowledge Women's Hard Work and Their Marginalization in Life:

We observe that many men consider household chores to be the sole responsibility of women, starting from a young age. They feel ashamed and embarrassed to help with these tasks, even though the work done by women is often comparable to that of men. This stereotype still prevails in our society. Cooking, cleaning the house, washing clothes, and bedding, among other tasks, are almost exclusively done by women, with men seldom assisting. Women perform arduous work both inside and outside the home, working tirelessly and with great effort. Despite this, men often fail to acknowledge or respect the significance of their labour.

"I never stopped moving for a moment. I would wake up at sunrise, clean my father, change his clothes and bed sheets, feed him, give him medicine, wash the courtyard floor, tidy the house, do the laundry, cook, make coffee for the guests, and answer the door that was knocked at every moment."¹²

These are the daily tasks that women perform, yet all they receive is injustice, oppression, and disrespect in society. The belittling of women is evident in traditional practices during feasts and celebrations, where women are not allowed to eat until the men have finished their meal, nor are they allowed to attend social gatherings. The author highlights these problems effectively, stating, "I had never attended funeral gatherings before, because the customs in my country at that time did not allow young girls like me, who had not yet turned fifteen, to attend funeral feasts unless they were married, or the deceased was a close relative. If the deceased had not been my grandfather, I would not have been allowed to attend."¹³

Unmarried girls and young women are not permitted to attend funeral feasts unless a close relative has passed away. If one of them does attend, society severely criticizes and blames her. Society even casts a negative judgment on her with sayings like, "One girl celebrates, another mourns, and other stays up late with the divorced women."¹⁴

(5) Inequality and the Absence of Freedom:

Undoubtedly, the issues of inequality and the lack of freedom are significant and long-standing. These disturbing problems were widespread in Arab and Syrian society in the 19th century. People committed these vile and disgraceful acts, becoming entangled in them to achieve their desires and dreams.

The issue of inequality and the absence of freedom were among the social concerns addressed by the author in her novel, expressing its realities and the reasons for the spread of this phenomenon in Syrian society. "I remained my father's only child during his entire illness, ten full years when I would only see you fleetingly, like completely strange guests. I was the sole person responsible for every job as if he had no other children besides me. So, I have the right to remain his only child after his death too."¹⁵

This quote indicates that Sabriya had been taking care of her father for ten whole years after he suffered a stroke. She provided enormous services such as cleaning the house, washing her father, washing his clothes, giving him medicine, and preparing food for guests. Her two brothers, Ragheb and Mahmoud, did not help in caring for their father and only visited him occasionally, like strangers, leaving all the responsibility to Sabriya. For this reason, Sabriya constantly felt a deep sense of distress. As depicted in the novel, "At times she likened herself to a wild dog tied by a chain around her neck, fastened to a stake planted in this ancient house",¹⁶ and she longed for death to find peace and rest. Sabriya mentioned that her classmates had become teachers, school principals, or respected employees, while she had spent her life serving her bedridden father.

The author highlighted the lack of freedom for women: "Was a woman created in this country only for grief and hardship? ... This is unbearable. I can't ignore it for a single moment or leave the house. I have been buried alive in this house for ten years now. Day and night, he calls out: Sabriya... Sabriya... When God will take Sabriya and relieve her of this torment."¹⁷

Sabriya felt the loss of her freedom as she was solely responsible for caring for her father. She had no opportunity to leave the house, even for a moment, as if she were buried alive in that room. In another part of the novel, the author describes the absence of freedom: "I wandered through these narrow corridors like an animal trapped in a cage,"¹⁸ suggesting that she was imprisoned like an animal in a cage.

The author portrayed this social issue effectively: "Sometimes I feel like a wild dog tied by a chain around its neck, fastened to a stake planted in this ancient house. Whenever the wild dog tries to break free from its leash, the chain tightens around it, cutting into its flesh, causing more pain and making it bleed. My mind rejects this form of slavery, but I cannot break free from it."¹⁹

This quote makes it clear that Sabriya, the main protagonist of the novel, suffers from a complete absence of freedom in her daily life. She felt like a wild dog, tied by a chain fastened to a strong stake, unable to escape or free herself. She was oppressed by her older brother Ragheb, who severely mistreated her, even wanting to imprison her inside the house to prevent her from leaving, not even going to school.

As the author explained: "They want to take me out of school one year before I get my diploma! They want to imprison me at home! ... And a mad scream erupts from my depths and dies in my throat like the groan of a wounded animal in a dense forest." ²⁰

It is clear from the excerpt that her family was extremely oppressive and violent towards her, denying her rights and freedom. Sabriya suffered from inequality and lack of freedom from a young age. She tells her brother Ragheb, "You deprived me of my right to life, you killed me twice... When you fabricated lies about me to our father until you convinced him to take me out of school one year before I got my diploma. You did all this because you were jealous of me; I was excelling in my studies while you were failing... And you killed me when you deprived me of marrying the one, I love." ²¹

When Sabriya fell in love with Adel, a noble, generous, and excellent student, Ragheb began to oppress her severely. Adel was the son of a baker and sold bread himself. When Adel sent his mother to Sabriya's family to propose, Ragheb rejected the proposal and insulted her deeply due to the class disparity between the families. Sabriya's family was wealthy, while Adel's family was poor.

As depicted in the novel: "Today, my mother went to your family to propose to you, to save you from your situation, but your brother Ragheb drove her away and insulted her deeply, saying: 'We do not marry off our daughters to bakers' sons.'" ²² On another page, the author expressed this insult vividly: "The son of a dog came now to violate our honour... I know how to deal with him, we always walk with our heads held high... The baker's son came now to lower our heads in front of people." ²³

Ragheb said that marriage between Adel and Sabriya was impossible, while Sabriya wanted to marry Adel. When Ragheb learned that Sabriya wanted to marry Adel and would not marry anyone else, he brutally killed Adel on the road.

As for her brother Ragheb, he married a prostitute he had fallen in love with. "I love this woman... What do you have to do with me? I will marry her according to the law of God and His Messenger, and I brought her here to introduce her to you before we get married. My father said in astonishment: 'You will marry a prostitute? My son will marry a prostitute?'" ²⁴

Sabriya always cried for Adel, her tears flowing throughout her life. She lamented her situation, saying: "No one feels my tragedy anymore, not even my father and mother... They all got used to my silence, my sadness, and my bewilderment." ²⁵ She added, "As for us women, everything is closed to us in this country." ²⁶

These excerpts reflect the issue of inequality and lack of freedom that was fully rampant in Syrian society in the 19th century.

We must adhere to freedom because it is essential for every individual, like water, air, food, and fire. Freedom is the liberation from imposed constraints and pressures that bind human energies and productions, whether they are material or moral. The writer urged the Syrian people to pursue education and culture to eliminate inequality and lack of freedom from society.

Discussion:

Ulfat Idilbî, a Syrian writer born in 1912, stands as a pioneer of modern Arabic literature, using her voice to highlight the struggles of women in a traditional patriarchal society. She is renowned for her advocacy of women's rights and their liberation from oppressive societal constraints. Her most acclaimed novel, *Dimashq Yâ Basmât Al-Huzn* (Damascus, Smile of Sadness), offers a profound portrayal of Syrian women's struggles, with the protagonist, Sabriya, symbolizing the collective suffering of women trapped by both familial and societal expectations.

In *Dimashq Yâ Basmât Al-Huzn*, Idilbî emphasizes themes of backwardness, injustice, and the repression of women's rights. Sabriya, while resisting colonial oppression (the British and French occupations), is marginalized and denied personal freedom by her family and society, reflective of the broader plight faced by women in Syrian society. The novel poignantly illustrates how women are often deprived of inheritance, bound to traditional roles, and subjected to harsh treatment, particularly in matters like infertility. Women like Sabriya, despite their courage and intelligence, are stripped of their agency, leading lives confined to household tasks while yearning for dignity and equality.

Through her writing, Idilbî exposes the gendered inequality and lack of freedom in Syria, criticizing the traditional customs that confined women to marginal roles. Her literature serves as a platform to voice the collective suffering of women and challenges the societal norms that continue to oppress them. Sabriya's struggles for recognition, identity, and personal freedom stand as a metaphor for the broader issues faced by many women in the Arab world, making Ulfat Idilbî's work a timeless call for justice and equality.

Conclusion:

The renowned novelist Ulfat Idilbî has skilfully highlighted the socio-political and cultural struggles faced by women, particularly in rural Syrian society. Her works, including the pivotal novel "Damascus, O Smile of Sadness", serve as a vehicle for addressing critical social issues, such as the oppression of women, rigid

traditions, and the complexities of human rights in both rural and urban settings.

Central to her literary mission is a deep concern for the lives of women in marginalized communities. The novelist illustrates the harsh realities of rural Syrian women, whose lives are often constrained by outdated customs, gender-based discrimination, and oppressive social norms. She shines a light on the daily struggles these women face, from forced marriages and lack of autonomy to broader social issues like poverty and political marginalization. Her commitment to portraying these struggles reflects her broader advocacy for gender equality and social justice.

Furthermore, the novelist uses her work to critique the societal norms that perpetuate injustice and inequality. She passionately calls for reform, urging societies, particularly in the Arab world, to abandon outdated traditions that oppress both women and men. Her works do not merely depict suffering but also serve as a clarion call for change, addressing issues of tyranny, aggression, and the urgent need for respect for human rights regardless of gender, race, religion, or ethnicity. Her message extends beyond women's issues to include broader themes of social reform, advocating for justice and equality for all members of society, whether they are Muslim or non-Muslim, male or female, Arab or non-Arab.

The novelist's ability to weave personal narratives with larger socio-political concerns allows her works to resonate on both emotional and intellectual levels. By focusing on individual stories, she humanizes broader societal issues, making them accessible and relatable to a wide audience. Her style combines emotional depth with critical insight, ensuring that her novels are not only engaging stories but also important social commentaries.

Her novel "Damascus, O Smile of Sadness" is a particularly significant example of her work, as it encapsulates many of the themes that permeate her writing. In it, she tackles issues of loss, displacement, and the search for identity against the backdrop of political unrest. The novel's portrayal of Syria's tumultuous social and political landscape serves as a microcosm for the challenges faced by women and other marginalized groups within the broader Arab world.

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