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**Theme of Feminism in Lyrics Alley Written by Leila Aboulela**

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**Abstract**

The term "feminism" refers to a variety of sociopolitical movements and ideas that seek to define and promote gender equality in terms of politics, the economy, the individual, and society. The struggle against gender stereotypes and the enhancement of women's educational, professional, and interpersonal opportunities have been written by many contemporary writers. Sudanese writer Leila Aboulela also tackles feminism through her complex stories and characters, which frequently center on the points where female characters have challenged faith, culture, and identity conflict. Her writings shed light on Muslim women's lives, dispelling myths and bringing attention to their complexity. Characters in Aboulela's works frequently struggle with their cultural identities as they balance conventional roles with contemporary expectations, and this struggle can be seen in her book, LYRICS ALLEY. Her female protagonists like NABILAH and SORAYA in "LYRICS ALLEY" can be seen fighting against stereotyped roles and conventions in society. They want to be free to make their own decisions about relationships, careers, and personal ideologies. The significance of agency in feminist discourse is emphasized by this resistance. This paper is an attempt to highlight how Leila Aboulela has given a strong voice to her female characters through NABILAH and SORAYA to fight against injustice in her work "LYRICS ALLEY".

**Keywords:** Feminism, Arab Women, different waves of feminism.

Islamic feminism represents a branch of feminism that focuses on the position and rights of women within the context of Islam. Emerging in Europe during the late 18th century, feminist movements have advocated and persist in advocating for women's rights. These rights encompass the ability to vote, engage in employment, receive equal compensation, possess property, obtain education, and

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enjoy equal rights in Marriage. Leila Aboulela is a Sudanese-born author, essayist, and playwright currently residing in Aberdeen, Scotland. She spent her formative years in Khartoum, Sudan, before relocating to Scotland in 1990, where she embarked on her literary journey. As of 2023, Aboulela has released six novels and numerous short stories, which have been translated into fifteen different languages. Just like other Islamic feminists, Leila Aboulela also promotes the rights of women, advocates for gender equality, and seeks social justice, all within the context of Islamic principles. Her novel "LYRICS ALLEY" explores the theme of feminism, featuring two resilient female characters who refuse to tolerate social discrimination based on their gender.

Leila Aboulela's work "LYRICS ALLEY" is influenced by the most well-known work by Mary Wollstonecraft named "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)", in which she makes the case that women are not inherently less intelligent than men, despite their appearance to be such. She creates a rationally based social structure and recommends that men and women should be treated as equal creatures. Aboulela, through her narrative craft, amplifies the same thought for women who frequently find themselves on the periphery. Her stories illuminate their experiences, journeys, viewpoints, and social injustice. Her Individuals strive for independence in their personal decisions, encompassing aspects such as relationships, career trajectories, and personal convictions. This defiance underscores the significance of agency within feminist discussions. The core principle of feminist theory posits that throughout the history of human civilization, women have been relegated to a subordinate position by a social discourse dominated by masculine perspectives and the prevailing traditions of Western philosophy. To discover their distinct identity, women must establish their self-definition in contrast to the male-centric ideals and beliefs that have been transmitted through generations. The evolution of the contemporary Western feminist movement can thus be categorized into three distinct waves. The initial wave of feminist

The movement emerged during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The second wave of the feminist movement emerged in the 1960s and was linked to a variety of intellectuals who advocated for equal legal and social rights for women. The major works of second-wave feminism include Simone de Beauvoir's book, "The Second Sex" (1949), Elaine Showalter, "The Literature of Their Own" (1977), Kate Millett, "Sexual Politics" (1969), Ellen Moers, "Literary Women" (1976), Mary Ellmann, "Thinking About Women" (1968). The third wave of the feminist

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movement began in the 1990s and extended into postcolonial feminism, ecofeminism, and gender studies.

Arab women encounter numerous challenges, including limited access to education, which subsequently impacts their employment prospects. Additionally, they face issues such as violence, forced marriages, and insufficient opportunities to engage in the public sphere of their nations. Leila Aboulela has tried to highlight these challenges through her writing in *Lyrics Alley*, in which we have two major characters who try to fight for their equal rights in society. One of them is Nabilah, a woman from Cairo who, after Marriage to a much older man, shifts to a completely different city named Umdurman. After Marriage, she struggles with the new environment. Sometimes, she is able to accept everything, like her husband's previous wife and his children from the previous Marriage, but on most days, she used to break down. It was not an easy process for her, but Leila Aboulela depicted her character as the most powerful of all. The other important character who fights for her rights is a sixteen-year-old girl named Soraya. She is a girl with so many hopes regarding her education and Marriage, but being born into a stereotypical family, she always had to sacrifice her dreams. Her father was always against her wishes, but her inner spirit was so high that she always revolted against her oppression. Thus, we have a glimpse of how Leila Aboulela's works contribute to feminist discourse by presenting rich, complex portrayals of Muslim women. The portrayal of female characters in "LYRICS ALLEY" is quite different; both the female characters, whether it is Nabilah or Soraya, do not give up easily to the circumstances. Nabilah encountered numerous challenges following her Marriage, primarily due to the lack of acceptance from her husband's family. She often felt deprived of the joys typically associated with marital bliss. Additionally, she was dissatisfied with the new city she had moved to after her wedding. Although she was a modern woman with an open mind, the transition to her husband's family left her feeling as though everything had changed. Her husband was drawn to her physical appearance but struggled to connect with her on a deeper emotional level. While he could provide her with financial support and physical comfort, he failed to comprehend her feelings of isolation in this new social setting. As Marriage represents a crucial turning point in an individual's life, frequently accompanied by substantial changes, particularly for women. The shift from being single to entering into matrimony transcends mere status alteration; it embodies a complex and profound transformation that influences numerous facets of a woman's life, and Nabilah was completely alone in her transformation process.

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Despite these challenges, Nabilah emerged as a resilient modern woman who refused to succumb to the pressures of social changes, embodying strength and determination. She knew how to take care of herself and her children. She is remarkable for her confidence, strength, courage, and honesty. Her strong decision-making abilities came to the forefront when her daughter became a victim of her co-wife's actions; she resolved to put an end to the situation. She wanted to end the feeling of being inferior because she was a second wife. Each action of injustice inflamed her. Moreover, she had no defect in her personality, and when she found that her husband was not able to take a stand for her daughter, she decided to leave her husband and was ready to face all the challenges after her divorce. Through the character of Nabilah, Leila Aboulela has shown similarities of thought with Virginia Woolf, who endeavors to advocate for women's rights and autonomy, particularly for those who are married. She emphasizes the importance of their rights to express themselves, think independently, and possess their own identities, names, and emotions. In her portrayal of married women, she challenges the stereotype of women as "the Angel of the house" and instead presents a defiant figure who demands equal treatment both within the domestic sphere and in society at large. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's*

*Own* (1929) is recognized for its advocacy of both a physical and metaphorical space for women authors in a literary landscape largely controlled by patriarchal influences.

Historically, Arab societies have operated under patriarchal structures. This has frequently led to women experiencing restricted access to education, job opportunities, and involvement in political processes. In certain conservative communities, the roles of women have predominantly been limited to the domestic sphere, emphasizing family and household duties. Another significant character who tries to break this patriarchal structure is Soraya, a striking sixteen-year-old girl known for her bold and spirited nature. She aspires to study biology and chemistry despite her father's objections. Soraya harbors a sense of rebellion against the social injustices imposed upon her by her father. She never made herself succumb to circumstances. She was very much inspired by her aunt, an Egyptian lady named Nabilah. She is completely different from her sisters, who got married at an early age and were bound to do household only. Soraya did not want to follow her sisters as she had certain dreams regarding her career and Marriage, and because of this revolt in her nature, she became a victim of domestic abuse many times by her father. She wanted to have short hair and smoke cigarettes like other modern women. She was

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always confident in her decisions. She wanted to educate herself and believed that education has nothing to do with gender, which is one of Wollstonecraft's central arguments in the *Rights of Woman*, which is that women should be educated in a rational manner to give them the opportunity to contribute to society. Thus, through the characters of Nabilah and Soraya, we can see how her narratives take paths of self-exploration and empowerment. Their challenges and victories reflect the wider feminist pursuit of independence and personal satisfaction.

Therefore, the literary works of Leila Aboulela frequently deal with the themes of feminism, identity, and the intersections of culture, particularly as experienced by Muslim women. Numerous authors have examined the condition of women in pre-Islamic Arabia, and their conclusions have varied significantly. Leila Aboulela, in her work "Lyrics," describes various aspects of strong female characters. Her characters are complex, with an internal desire for personal growth and empowerment, and their struggles and triumphs illustrate the broader feminist quest for autonomy and fulfillment. She does not depict her female characters as frail or defenseless; instead, she represents them as an embodiment of robust femininity. A defining trait of her female characters is their ability to navigate challenging circumstances, confront injustice, and overcome setbacks, all while demonstrating a strong desire to learn, unwavering determination, and remarkable perseverance. Thus, in the context of female empowerment within the Arabic-speaking world, it is essential for young Arab women to have access to role models. Frequently, these role models can be discovered through the medium of writing.

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