

NOTES ON THE FLESH

SHAHD ALSHAMMARI
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Reviewer Profile

Shilpaa Anand teaches at the Department of English and serves on the committee of the Persons with Disabilities Cell at Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU) in Hyderabad. She has an M.A. in English from the University of Hyderabad and a Ph.D. in the interdisciplinary Disability Studies program from the University of Illinois at Chicago. In her doctoral work, she explored the conceptual history of disability in the Indian context. More recently, her research has focused on culturally distinct notions of corporeality and corporeal difference. Dr. Anand has co-edited the annual disability issue of Café Dissensus web magazine, along with Nandini Ghosh.

Shahd Alshammari's first book, *Notes on the Flesh*, was published in 2017 and brings together stories of her youth in post-Gulf War Kuwait. Published as a collection of short stories, intended to serve as biomythography, the stories are of women and men making sense of their bodies in terms of social status, as sexual selves, but most significantly as embodiments that rebelled against social stigma of different kinds. What did it mean, at that time, to be the child of a Kuwaiti Bedouin and an upper-class Palestinian? How did one fall in love in a space that rejected all romantic relations that did not have religious and legal approval? Who decided the lines between being perfect and being imperfect?

The stories lay bare how the notion of perfection comes to be constituted as the opposite of strict yet conveniently defined, imperfections like 'divorcee', 'diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS)', 'half-Bedouin', 'rebellious young woman', 'reluctant motherhood', 'not having legal status', 'infertile', 'of mixed-race', 'emotionally weak', and 'disabled'. Predominantly narrated in the first-person voice (which is probably one of the reasons that Alshammari refers to the book as "part-memoir" in the prologue) the authorial voice often assumes multiple subjectivities apart from that of the dominant author-persona, confusing the reader about who the speaker of a narrative is. Having been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in her youth, Alshammari identifies as a disabled woman and works at a university in Kuwait teaching English literature with research interests in women's studies, Critical Disability Studies, Mad Studies as well as postcolonial studies. Given the author's interest in disability studies, the book can best be read as a gradual uncovering of the complex socio-cultural-politico-historical construction of the 'strong' and 'perfect' personhood. The present review of Alshammari's collection concentrates on the intersectional normativization of gender and disability within the Kuwaiti-Arab context.

One of the recurring themes of *Notes on the Flesh* is the struggle to not be weak in the face of adversity. The author recounts, among her memories of high school life, being told not to be 'weak' by her mother who she describes as "ever-so strong, ever so lovely mother" (Alshammari, 2017). Young Sarah (the persona that Alshammari gives herself), then in high school and ostracized by everyone else as a result of false allegations made by her best friend, is confused and cries because she does not know what she had done wrong. As readers, we may see this moment as common and unremarkable. It is only when the idea of being weak is revived in other stories, even in the ones that are not about Sarah, that we begin to wonder at its significance in a collection of short stories that identifies itself as being, among other things, "part-illness narrative" but "mainly... about women". Sarah recalls being told not to be weak, again, this time by her father, when she is graduating from school, almost friendless, being treated with coldness by her best friend. Her father says, "Never show the enemy weakness. ... You must pretend to be brave, in the hope that you may fool your opponent" (Alshammari, 2017) and so Sarah learns to become an adult, to wear faces that are not her own, and "to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" (Eliot, 1963).

Sarah's encounter with 'weakness' as an aspect or vulnerability of the spirit or will, gradually changes into a material experience when she learns to live with a disabling disease, a proverbial 'weakness of the flesh'. It is instructive that the title of Alshammari's text in its use of the word 'flesh' (one that normatively invokes sexual morality) in this context seems to also be invoking the idea of disablement as a violation of normatively moral able-bodiedness.

Towards the middle of the compilation, in the stories that detail Sarah's diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis, the word returns to Sarah. She is in England with her father for medical tests and her mother who is still in Kuwait tells her on the phone that she had been raised to be a strong woman and that "weakness is never an option" (Alshammari, 2017). At barely eighteen, as she begins to come to terms with her diagnosis, Sarah recalls that crying is not an option even if she is faced with daily pain, or her best friend asserts that she deserves to be ill. Crying is not an option even though facing people has become uncomfortable because of the symptoms of MS that she manifests.

In a story titled 'The Ideal Woman' that appears in Part Two of the collection, Noor, who cannot marry Mansoor because she is a Shiite and he Sunni with a Filipino mother, is accused of being weak. Mansoor attacks her for being weak when she chooses to marry another. For her, that would be the only way to have "a chance at life" and to have the baby she so wants.

Alshammari exposes the irony of her society's insistence that women not be weak by giving us characters who display tremendous steeliness to fulfil their desires or assert their independence. Other so-called 'weak' women include Sarah's mother who overcomes post-partum depression and embraces the child she did not want to have, Amal, who divorced her abusive husband, but is unable to marry the one she loves on account of being a divorced woman, and thus 'imperfect'.

The desire to be 'perfect' is another aspiration that flows through the collection of stories. By dwelling on this crucial tactic of normativity, the author seems to be emphasizing that the desire to be 'perfect', leaves behind a wreckage of relationships as different characters are gently cajoled or forcefully instructed to attain this ideal. Alshammari, in the guise of Sarah, chimes in, "our society was obsessed with perfection. Everyone strived for perfection, for idealism, for a perfect image, no matter how much suffering it entailed. Stigma was everywhere. People continued to disappoint, regardless of gender, social status, and illness" (Alshammari, 2017).

Rami, who had been interested in marrying Sarah, panics when she tells him that she has MS. His panic is expressed in apprehensions about the possibility of their children having MS and in the worry that he could not bear the sight of her in a wheelchair if she needed one later in her life. Perhaps one of the most insightful observations Sarah makes in this story and one that lends an element of black humor, is when she describes how Rami needed "constant consolation" that she would be okay and would not disappoint him in fulfilling her expected role of being a perfect wife. Disablement emerges in the stories as a concept that is constituted by gendered notions of perfection, normalcy and able-bodiedness.

In 'An Encounter', the male protagonist-narrator is divorced because he is infertile and unable to give his wife the satisfaction of motherhood. The situations in the characters' lives seem to demonstrate that disability, as gender, is enduringly intersectional.

Sarah's story of living with MS is propelled forward through her descriptions of romantic relations. The book could easily have been called Love in the Time of MS! Probably one of the most endearing male characters is Ghazi, Sarah's classmate in the university: part Russian, and thus, an outcast like her. In the story 'Intimacy and a Life-Bond', we meet Sarah

as a university-going English literature major who enrolls at the university defying the advice of her doctor who had told her that a university education would only worsen her situation because MS was a degenerative disease. It is here that she meets Ghazi, a classmate, who flirts with her, discusses Shakespeare, and makes her a disk of his favorite songs. This story, which appears in the latter half of the book, marks a significant point of departure in the illness-narrative. Ghazi's response to Sarah's MS is very different from Rami's. Being the son of a doctor, he seems to know more about auto-immune disorders than others, and yet he is the only one who treats Sarah as the expert of her own illness experience (and not the medical professionals). Ghazi develops a numerical scale of pain using percentages that would help him know how much pain she had on a given day, considering that MS was unpredictable, and symptoms varied from day to day.

Disability activists and disability studies scholars have consistently critiqued biomedicine for disempowering people with disabilities by quantifying them and consequently reducing them to labels that would receive generic treatment. This story powerfully reveals that it is not so much the systems that are inherent to the field of biomedicine that are disempowering but the fact that disabled people are usually not in control of the measures and descriptors.

Shahd Alshammari, explains the glaring absence of "illness narratives that come from the Arab world that center around a female protagonist" as the motivation for writing the book. (Alshammari, 2018). While her book does bring to center-stage a disabled woman protagonist, thereby throwing a challenge to Arab Studies as well as the discourse of Arab feminism, the volume's seminal contribution to what has come to be known as Literary Disability Studies is achieved by enabling a fresh insight into the concept of 'the unreliable narrator'. A familiar idea in conventional literary studies, the unreliable narrator is most often found in first-person narratives and is one who cannot be trusted because they may appear as a character in the very work that they are narrating. They are also labelled as such because of their role in deliberately misleading the reader by concealing or misinterpreting an event or a character. Alshammari's book is replete with instances that exhibit her narratorial unreliability; primarily because the reader is often misled to believe that the narrative 'I' is Sarah's before realizing that the first-person narrator is in fact a man. Regardless, *Notes on the Flesh*, by the author's admission, places before us a conundrum. The book appears to be interrogating the audacity of literary studies to develop and employ a concept such as 'the unreliable narrator' when the 'unreliability' may be a characteristic feature of a disabling condition such as MS.

In the prologue to her collected volume, Alshammari describes her book as,

... a collection of moments, of reflections. The stories tend to flow in no order at all. There are moments when I am your unreliable narrator. There are moments when I recall the events as they happened, and yet there are times where I have tried to fill the gaps and inconsistencies. My memory fails me, as my body has failed me, and this is but an attempt at reconstructing the experience of love, loss, meaning, and purpose. (Alshammari, 2017.)

The book asks readers and literary critics to contend with the materiality of disability, in this case, the subject position of a writer whose memory and body are conditioned by nature

of MS, before embracing it metaphorically. By reconceptualizing the unreliable narrator, Alshammari seems to be doing two things. First, she is making perspicuous the inherent ableism of disciplines such as English literature that present unreliability as a problem. Second, somewhat contrarily, she is laying bare the interconnectedness between disability and narratology, where literary concepts such as the unreliable narrator and stream-of-consciousness narrative betray their very existence as literary analytical tools to the pervasiveness of disability experiences.

Above all, the book appears to be asserting, through a domination of narratorial space, the narrative voices of disabled women who are often considered unreliable narrators of their circumstances, conditions and experiences.

References

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