



## The Depiction of Women in Ladan Osman's *The Kitchen-Dweller's Testimony*

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### Abstract

The study examined the depiction of women's roles and spaces in Ladan Osman's poetry collection *The Kitchen-Dweller's Testimony*. Somali society places women mainly in domestic and reproductive spaces, and contemporary poetry often mirrors these expectations. Using qualitative textual analysis, the study selected poems that foreground domestic chores, motherhood, marriage, beauty practices, and experiences of violence. Purposive sampling was applied to identify poems where female speakers confront or internalise patriarchal demands. The analysis was guided by post-secular feminism and stylistics to show how imagery, metaphor, and voice reveal the daily labour of women and their restricted mobility. Findings show that women are portrayed as caregivers, food preparers, bearers of children and guardians of family honour, and that these roles are enforced through socialisation in the family, religion and clan. The poems also expose scenes of surveillance, sexual objectification and gender-based violence which keep women indoors and silent, even when they are injured or recovering. At the same time Osman gives the women interior spaces of imagination where they dream of flight, water and self-possession, which signals a search for wider social participation. The study recommends that scholars and cultural actors treat Somali women's poetry as a record of gendered experience and as a site for public education on women's rights. It also proposes that Somali community leaders and refugee support agencies promote programmes that reduce domestic burden and protect women from violence so that the wider social space opened in the poems can be realised in practice.

### Introduction

Poetry is a crucial element of Somali expressive culture, and Somalia is well known as a land of poets. Somalis have a strong affinity for poetry and are skilled at writing it. Somalia is a "Nation of Poets" and a "Nation of Bards," according to Laurence (1970). Because of the Somalis' essentially pastoral lifestyle, Somali poetry is first and foremost oral poetry. This means that the initial realisation, composition, distribution, and conservation occur without the need for literature (Ingiriis, 2015).

Somali poetry covers a wide variety of subjects and styles that adapt and develop over time and with the culture. Initially, Somali poetry depicted work songs that reflected rural activities involving camels. Recent poetry highlights the importance of Somali women in twentieth century Somalia. Somalia is a patriarchal society (Said, 1982). In general, males possessed ultimate control in a culture of male patriarchy, as examined via socio-cultural lenses, while women were considered home guardians. The female gender is often faced with cruel practices including: female-child dissociation, involuntary marriage, withholding of a female-child in her biological family for reproduction,



widowhood habits, Female genital mutilation (FGM), involuntary sex and abuse, refusal of the right to inherit, bias in leadership, physical assault, purdah, discrimination on acquisition of education and employment chances (Gabriel, 2012).

Ladan Osman writes *The Kitchen-Dweller's Testimony* (2015) from Somalia. This text is striking not only for the magnificence of Osman's diction from a poetic perspective, but also for her boldness in interrogating issues such as the politics of race, gender-based violence against women, and the struggles of living in diaspora. *The Kitchen-Dweller's Testimony* delves into themes of love and yearning, divorce, intense longing, and the myriad ways we inflict harm on ourselves and those around us. The text focuses on the depiction of women in the Somali society as portrayed in the collection, particularly emphasising women's roles and spaces within a patriarchal framework.

Gender encompasses the societal and individual interpretations assigned to male and female identities, while gender roles dictate the expected behaviours deemed suitable for each gender. Gender construction and role assignment are closely linked, as an individual's biological sex forms the basis for their gender identity and the imposition of gender roles. Osman's poetry collection explores how women negotiate these roles and scrutinises the celebration of women's achievements in traditionally female domains. The textual analysis of gender roles reveals the productive and management roles of women. Productive roles encompass tasks undertaken by both men and women to fulfil family requirements. In contrast, management roles involve activities aimed at securing and sustaining the resources necessary for family welfare, as well as those related to socio-political decision-making. Gender roles are acquired through institutionalised gender frameworks disseminated through diverse channels, including social, economic, legislative, political, traditional, and cultural institutions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theory of socialist feminism guides this study. Socialist feminism, a derivative of broader feminist movements, traces its roots back to the ideals of early communitarian socialism. It saw a resurgence in the late 1960s, influenced significantly by the civil rights movement, which brought issues of social injustice and gender equality to the forefront of public consciousness (Linda, 2013). This resurgence marked the development of a distinct form of feminism that integrates a critique of the traditional feminist discourse on the oppression of women. It posits that female subordination is intricately linked to multiple oppressive structures, including race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality.

The connection between socialist feminism and Marxist theory is particularly poignant in understanding the broader implications of inequality, oppression, and labour on female subjugation. This theoretical alignment suggests that the oppression of women is not only a result of their unequal status in the workplace but also stems from their roles within the domestic sphere. It critically looks at and confronts economic, that is, class differences, and cultural, mainly patriarchal discrimination. Its central tenet is that women's subjugation stems from capitalism and patriarchy. Somali is culturally patriarchal. Ladan Osman is a diaspora Somali female poet. As a voice in diaspora, she represents a more authentic voice that can speak without fear of retribution. Thus, the choice of the text aligns with the theory of feminism, the strand of socialist feminism, and helps us bring out the place of women in the selected poems and, by extension, in society.

### **Cultural Discrimination in Contemporary Society**

In many cultures, men enjoy significant advantages through leadership privileges, control over the means of production, and other resources, resulting in a cultural preference that allocates comparatively fewer resources to the development of women. This disparity leads to pronounced gender inequalities in governance, employment, education, health, and ownership of productive capital. Gender plays a pivotal role in determining the ease with which resources and opportunities



for growth are accessed. It is observed that most societies perceive females as less independent, which adversely affects their political involvement and perpetuates difficulties that span from childhood to adulthood for women (Agbalajobi, 2009).

Despite the critical role women play in Somalia's political development, prevailing cultural and religious values continue to hinder the full acceptance of their contributions. In Somali society, women are primarily viewed as homemakers, a perception that confines them to middle-level positions rather than leadership roles, as they are also expected to fulfil domestic responsibilities. This societal structure supports the notion that it is natural and expected for males to seek power and ascend to top political positions. In contrast, it is unusual and often discouraged for women to pursue similar ambitions. In many communities, including Somali, women are expected to be subservient to men, and aspirations to surpass men in positions of power are viewed unfavourably (Yassin et al., 2015).

In response to these cultural constraints, women in the Somali region have turned to writing to challenge discrimination and express their viewpoints. By writing poems, memoirs, autobiographies, and other non-fiction work, these women not only assert their own legacies and perspectives but also reconstruct the history of the Somali region. Through their literary contributions, they offer alternative interpretations of major geopolitical events, thereby reshaping the narrative traditionally dominated by male perspectives (Mohamud, 2015). The Somali women have been discriminated against when it comes to the performance of oral poetry to audiences, this is due to their being restricted from moving freely, unlike their male counterparts (Sainab, 1991). Considering the pastoral nature of the Somali, this restriction on women prevents them from composing and performing poetry, while men enjoy the freedom to do so; hence, the contrast in the number of male poets compared to women.

Male memorisers have intentionally sidelined female poets, thereby denying them publicity (Sainab, 1994). This means that there is a bias towards female-composed poetry, which then further restrains potential women poets from realising their full potential.

### **Women's Participation in the Workforce**

Females make up half of the world's population. Their position in economic and social growth lags behind that of males. On the contrary, women's participation and representation in recognised political structures, particularly in top leadership offices tasked with making decisions on the use of those riches, is quite minimal (Bari, 2005). Today, Emily Dickinson can be considered one of American poetry's most original voices, particularly when one studies the voice of the woman that emerges from her poetry. Among not only American authors, but also British authors, Dickinson has secured a position. In relation to female authors such as Elisabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, George Eliot, and the Brontës, the poetry of Dickinson can be analysed for its representation of silenced female voices. In particular, the poems of Emily Dickinson demonstrate a similar feature that reconstructs literature's male hierarchy.

Somali society is a society centred on a patriarchal clan system, where lineage is traced through tradition. Females are considered passive members who belong neither to their father's clan nor to their husband's. Such numerous clan links are an advantage in group interactions, but they have also found it difficult for them to engage in Somalia's social activities (Dini 2010). Whereas women had made some progress in terms of public service jobs under Siad Barre's regime, after he was overthrown as president in 1991, the new government sidelined women, as no single woman was appointed to serve in government despite them constituting 50% or more of the nation's population (Sainab, 1994). This has disadvantaged women in terms of empowerment, the articulation of societal issues affecting them, and the advancement of gender parity.



### **Objectification of Women**

The historical and contemporary objectification and exploitation of African women are deeply entrenched in both the colonial legacies and ongoing societal norms. One of the most striking historical cases involves Sarah Baartman, a woman from South Africa who was brought to Europe in the early 19th century and exhibited as a public spectacle. Her treatment was emblematic of a broader pattern of racial and sexual exploitation. Her body was objectified and hypersexualised, turning her into a symbol of colonial exploitation and racialised sexism. This example underlines a disturbing legacy where African women are seen primarily through a lens of sexual exploitation. The repercussions of such historical abuse continue to resonate today, as African women are often still subjected to hypersexualisation and objectification in various forms of media. These portrayals typically depict African women as licentious, with supposedly insatiable sexual appetites, reducing their social and personal identities to mere objects of sexual desire. Such stereotypical portrayals not only degrade these women but also strip them of their agency, perpetuating a culture of sexual harassment and violence that silences their voices and erases their experiences.

Adichie's *"We Should All Be Feminists"* is an influential work that argues for a redefinition of feminism and gender roles, not only within African societies but globally. Through her writings and public engagements, Adichie advocates for equality and critiques the patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender disparity. Her approach is particularly compelling because it combines personal narrative with broader social analysis, making the case for feminism as a universal framework that benefits society as a whole by fostering more equitable relationships (Adichie, 2014).

### **Presentation of the place of Women through Imagery**

The struggle for gender equality and the exploration of women's experiences through literature have been pivotal in many cultures, including among the Somali diaspora. In the Somali region, where cultural narratives have historically prioritised men's experiences and legacies, contemporary female writers have emerged as critical voices, integrating the experiences of Somali women into the broader historical narrative (Mohamud, 2015). These writers use literary techniques such as imagery and symbolism to critique gender norms and highlight the plight of women in patriarchal societies, offering new perspectives and reshaping the historical narrative to include women's experiences.

In Somali society, the dominant cultural emphasis has historically been on men's contributions, often overshadowing women's roles and achievements. This marginalisation is compounded by orthodox views that limit women's participation in public and historical spheres (Mohamud, 2015). However, the recent contributions of female writers have begun to challenge these conventions by using their narratives to reflect and critique the societal norms, effectively reshaping the cultural narrative.

Forough Farrokhsad, in her poem "Window," utilises vivid imagery to portray the constraints placed on women in male-dominated cultures. Farrokhsad describes the female protagonist as a doll – an object meant only to be seen, not heard – encapsulated in a world of false pretences and oppressive silence (Farrokhsad, 1967). The imagery of being 'crucified with pins, in a book' dramatically underscores the violence done to women who are forced into passivity and silence, highlighting the physical and psychological containment of women and the painful, often invisible, struggle against such constraints.

Somali female diaspora writers have been particularly vocal in using their literary works to speak on behalf of women, challenging traditional roles and advocating for greater freedom and equality (Mohamud, 2015). These writers not only reflect the challenges faced by Somali women but also connect these experiences with broader global struggles for gender equality. Through their narratives, they provide a voice to those who have been silenced and offer new perspectives on the strength and resilience of women.



## **Methodology**

A research design acts as the foundation for carrying out a study, determining how data will be collected, analysed and interpreted (Creswell, 2012). A case study design was applied to investigate the representation of women in poetry, the case of Somali women in the selected anthology. This design allows for a detailed look at the poems with the broader conversation on gender. By focusing on this specific text, the study aims to uncover the nuanced portrayal of women and examine how cultural, social, and personal dynamics are reflected and constructed through poetry.

## **Target Population**

The target population for the study was the selected Somali female-authored anthology, *The Kitchen-Dweller's Testimony* (2016), by Ladan Osman, who was born in Somalia. She earned a Bachelor's degree from Otterbein College and a Master of Fine Arts from the Michener Centre for Writers at the University of Texas at Austin. Her acclaimed book, "The Kitchen-Dweller's Testimony," secured the esteemed Sillerman 1st Book Prize. The title of the selected anthology piques the researcher's curiosity; the term "kitchen dwellers" prompts the researcher to read, analyse, and draw conclusions about the place of Somali women in this anthology. The study used Purposive sampling. The sample for the proposed research included all sections that address the place of women in the contemporary Somali diaspora, as depicted in *The Kitchen-Dweller's Testimony*.

## **Data Analysis**

In this study, a qualitative data analysis approach was employed, specifically utilising textual analysis as the primary method for examining the collected data. Textual analysis is a detailed methodology that involves the decoding and deconstructive examination of texts. In this research, content analysis was the chosen strand of textual analysis, with special emphasis on thematic and stylistic elements in the selected poems. The analysis was strategically guided by the research objectives, ensuring a focused examination of the textual material that aligned with the study's goals. Furthermore, theoretical frameworks such as post-feminism theory and stylistics were integrated into the textual analysis to critically examine the societal norms that confine women to specific roles. This theoretical lens helped to highlight and critique the patriarchal structures that mandate specific social positions for women.

## **Results**

### **Depiction of women in 'The Kitchen-Dweller's Testimony'**

*The Kitchen-Dweller's Testimony* (2015) is written by "Ladan Osman" from Somalia. This text is striking not only for the magnificence of Osman's diction from a poetic perspective, but also for her boldness in interrogating issues such as the politics of race, gender-based violence against women, and the struggles of living in diaspora. "*The Kitchen-Dweller's Testimony*" delves into themes of love and yearning, divorce, intense longing, and the myriad ways we inflict harm on ourselves and those around us. This section focuses on the depiction of women in the Somali society as portrayed in '*The Kitchen-Dweller's Testimony*'.

### **Gender roles**

Gender encompasses the societal and individual interpretations assigned to male and female identities, while gender roles dictate the expected behaviours deemed suitable for each gender. Gender construction and role assignment are closely linked, as an individual's biological sex forms the basis for their gender identity and the imposition of gender roles. Osman's poetry collection explores how women negotiate these roles and scrutinises the celebration of women's achievements in traditionally female domains. The textual analysis of gender roles reveals the productive and management roles of women. Productive roles encompass tasks undertaken by both men and women to fulfil family requirements. In contrast, management roles involve activities aimed at securing and



sustaining the resources necessary for family welfare, as well as those related to socio-political decision-making. Gender roles are acquired through institutionalised gender frameworks disseminated through diverse channels, including social, economic, legislative, political, traditional, and cultural institutions.

A close analysis of the data reveals that in Somali culture, housekeeping and domestic chores are predominantly performed by women. Such chores include daily routine tasks such as cooking, washing, and serving visitors, as shown in the poem "Sugar" below:

...My mother bought a large bag,  
For my brother's return,  
He likes his tea very sweet, she said...

The poem above shows that women prepare meals such as breakfast for their families. In the poem "Sugar", the persona narrates how her mother would prepare tea for her son. The poem insinuates that mothers are always responsible for preparing meals for the family. Thus, gender roles and perceptions reveal that gender roles are not biologically made but are produced culturally. Hence, the meanings of poems are primarily dependent on the meanings that people ascribe to their own experience and interactions with others (cf. Miller, 2005). The poem "First Red Dress" reveals that women do house chores, as shown:

...my mother's hands smell like detergent,  
Her palms a little moist...

The data reveals that attempts made by a woman seeking to please the man as futile, as shown in the poem "Women brewing":

...she ripped the stitches from her C-section  
Wow! From the kitchen

The analysed data reveal that women are responsible for reproduction. This means they are perceived as child-bearers, caregivers, and mentors in the home. Mothers are often perceived as the creators of society, given that they are the makers of the future generations. Some poems show that a fundamental role that provides a woman with an identity is the role of childbearing, as shown in the poem 'Trouble' below:

...I have a child in my womb  
I have child in my womb  
Everything is messed up. The sea doesn't blow  
The wind rivers and sea in the wrong direction  
How will I get along with this man wolfing me?  
How will I get along? He herds me.

The data above reveal that in Somali culture, the construction of femininity is embedded in the concepts of fertility and reproduction, which are directly linked to the notions of motherhood, procreation, and lineage longevity. Despite the mistreatment that comes with this role, the woman has to persevere. The woman states that 'everything is messed up. The sea doesn't blow'. The poems portray women according to conventional gender norms and expectations, perpetuating stereotypical views of gender roles and perceptions. Stereotyping encompasses the depiction of how individuals perceive others and the reasons behind such perceptions. Persistent adherence to stereotypical gender roles and perceptions hampers ongoing initiatives aimed at promoting gender awareness and empowering women across the continent.



### **Women, Beauty, and Fashion**

Another concept explored in Osman's poems is the concept of beauty in Islam. According to Islam, "God is beautiful, and He loves beauty." Beautification in Islam is through clothes, shoes, hijab, jewels and make-up too, as shown in the poem "*Proud Flesh*":

Can the stars blossom with artificial light?  
Further decorate a woman born with earrings?  
One earring small and plain,  
The other wood finely turned  
Sisters who are two kinds of beautiful (Osman,2015)

Women are expected to be clean at all times to reflect beauty, but the challenge of inadequate basic needs like water poses a challenge to them. This means they only bathe once a week and then go about the rest of the days cleaning only the visible parts of their body, as shown in the poem "*Verse of Hairs*":

Verse of Hairs  
...for the daughters' heads at dusk on Sundays after each has come out of her bath...  
...Smelling like the chlorine in tap water lotioned from head to toe, because the rest of the week, they'll only do their faces and elbows and whatever is showing...  
A mother might cry trying to put a tail or braid  
Where she can't. Or the sample of fungus on a scalp...  
Or buds in the baby girl's hair  
...A mother can cry. (Osman, 2015)

The poem shows how women are exposed to a number of health risks, such as fungi on their scalps, due to inadequate water, as brought out by the persona in *the poem*.

Women are expected to dress according to set standards. In the poem "*First Red Dress*" (Osman, 2015, p.) writes;

...Go out in that dress  
And you'll get split like a watermelon  
Down there...

The persona reminds the woman to dress appropriately as per the society's expectation, where Muslim women are required to wear the hijab in front of any man they could theoretically marry. Dressing in Muslim is part of the beauty. Women who dress against the norm are exposed to violence. She wishes she had the freedom to put it on, as she felt she looked better in it. The data analysis shows that strict guidelines on dressing deny Somali women the right of self-determination. The manner of dress, whether for men or women, should be a matter of personal choice.

### **Sexual objectification**

Misogynistic ideology is also reflected in poems that degrade the being of women as sexual objects that satisfy the pleasure of men. Such poems reveal the concept of heterosexual hostility in Somali society. Such poems epitomise the hostility and distress faced by women for their sexuality and beauty, as shown in the poem "*Intangible quality*" (Osman, 2015)

We are not always yolk  
Sometimes we are yellowed grease  
On the side of the skillet  
Running headlong into flame  
I enjoy watching men's eyes eat women like breakfast.  
There is so much passes



Between thighs meets chair  
And shine in pupil

In the above poem, the woman's aura and attractiveness are portrayed negatively. It is insinuated that men derive pleasure from seeing women. Hence, women are a source of pleasure, as the persona narrates. The poem unveils the oppression faced by women. It explores the intricate dynamics between power, sexuality, and hegemonic masculinity, which often leads to the imposition and perpetration of unwanted sexual assault against women. It encapsulates the poet's perspective on the societal perception of the African woman: merely regarded as a decorative object to be admired but ultimately disregarded.

### **Discussion**

The findings reveal that *The Kitchen-Dweller's Testimony* portrays women as confined to domestic spaces, where their value is measured by their ability to fulfil household and reproductive duties. The poems "Sugar," "First Red Dress," "Western Gate," "Women Brewing," "Hotel Party," and "Water" demonstrate that women's daily lives revolve around housekeeping, serving visitors, cooking, and ensuring the comfort of their husbands and children. These roles are culturally and socially assigned, showing that gender roles are not biologically determined but are produced and maintained through socialisation processes within the family, religion, and broader Somali cultural structures. The women in these poems perform their duties diligently, even in pain or sickness, revealing the internalisation of societal expectations that glorify female submission and sacrifice. As seen in "Western Gate," women's dreams and ambitions are confined within domestic boundaries, with their worth tied to nurturing and servitude. The depiction reflects a patriarchal ideology that limits women's mobility and reinforces the belief that their proper place is within the household, performing domestic and caregiving roles while remaining obedient and silent.

The study observes that in Somali culture, women are depicted as domestic beings, which is later used as proof of women's weakness and incompleteness. The findings show that biased beliefs, such as domestic chores being a preserve for women, predispose girls to think that their place is in the kitchen or homestead. It is also such biased beliefs that place women in subordinate positions. Women's activities are mainly confined to indoor spaces, and their role has been reduced to that of homemakers, nurturers, and child bearers. *The Kitchen-Dweller's Testimony* reveals that Somali women's spaces are defined and confined by patriarchal ideologies that view domestic roles as the ideal feminine identity. Osman, however, provides women with voices that speak of endurance, imagination, and self-awareness. Through vivid imagery, symbolism, and personal reflection, she exposes how societal expectations restrict women while simultaneously portraying their emotional strength and silent resistance within those constrained spaces.

### **Conclusion**

The exploration of Somali women's portrayal in *The Kitchen Dwellers' Testimony* anthology, authored by a diaspora Somali woman, delves deeply into the intricate tapestry of societal norms, cultural expectations, and the lived experiences of women within Somali society. It is important to note that both past and contemporary poets have brought out women's subjugation, oppression and suffering. This shows why the issue of the place women hold in our literary world, which mirrors society, should concern not just feminist literary critics but also everyone who respects and values women. Hence, there is a need for continued research on the place of women both in the literary sense and in our society.



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