



CAN THE ABJECT WOMAN'S BODY SPEAK? POWER AND VOICE IN *ADAB AM QILLAT AL-ADAB* BY NAWAL EL SA'DAWI

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Although Nawal El Sa'dawi's novels have been extensively studied, the bodily and affective mechanisms of her short fiction remain largely unexamined. This gap matters because bodily shame, fear, and obedience often naturalize patriarchal authority more effectively than explicit coercion. This study closes that gap by analyzing how patriarchal morality, religious anxiety, class hierarchy, and racialized exclusion make women's bodies experience shame, sin, fear, obedience, and alienation in three short stories from Sa'dawi's *Adab am Qillat Al-Adab*, read through Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. The study employs a qualitative, psychoanalytic, literary-critical design, with data drawn from close reading and cross-story comparison of bodily signs. The findings show three connected patterns. *First*, women's speech about the body, money, sex, and the womb is treated as a threat to propriety in *Adab am Qillat Al-Adab*. *Second*, *Hālat Fatāh min Daftar Aḥwāl* 'Iyādatī turns piety, fatherly authority, and public gaze into bodily fear. *Third*, *Laysa Lahā Makān fī al-Jannah* presents the poor black female body as obedient, hungry, overworked, and excluded even from imagined paradise. Across the three stories, power becomes lived through bodily affect. These findings indicate that abjection in Sa'dawi's short fiction is not only a private feeling of disgust or guilt but a social process that converts women's bodies into morally suspect, economically valued, racially marked, and symbolically expelled bodies. The study contributes to Arab feminist literary criticism by showing how Sa'dawi transforms bodily shame into a critique of power, extending her literary legacy well beyond the novel form itself.

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INTRODUCTION

Nawal El-Sa'dawi's fiction occupies a decisive position in modern Arabic feminist literature because it renders the female body a contested site of power. *Adab am Qillat Al-Adab* is especially revealing in this regard: its short stories compress gendered conflict into scenes of speech, piety, hunger, race, labor, and sacred imagination. The anthology treats the body as a social border where propriety, sexuality, class discipline, religious anxiety, and literary judgment meet. This study reads three stories, *Adab am Qillat Al-Adab*, *Hālat Fatāh min Daftar Aḥwāl 'Iyādatī*, and *Laysa Lahā Makān fī al-Jannah*, as a coherent corpus for examining bodily abjection. Across these narratives, external institutions shape women's lives while bodily experience registers power as shame, sin, usefulness, invisibility, or exclusion. Focusing on these embodied effects makes the anthology particularly productive for a comparative study of abjection. Broad critical assessments of Sa'dawi's career, together with recent case studies of individual Arab women writers, confirm this centrality across the wider tradition (Malti-Douglas, 2024; Al-Khalili & Shureteh, 2025).

Previous scholarship on Nawal El-Sa'dawi has predominantly centered on *Woman at Point Zero* (*Imra'ah 'inda Nuṭṭah Al-Ṣifr*), particularly its representation of patriarchal violence, legal oppression, imprisonment, and trauma. These studies show how violence against women is institutionalized through the family, law, state authority, and cultural norms (Addison, 2020; Ahmadi, 2021; Amireh, 2000; Atiyat et al., 2022; Gohar, 2016). Other scholars read the novel through the lenses of radical and transnational feminism, postcolonial struggle, and the intersecting structures of gendered and political domination (Ghorbanpour & Sabbagh, 2024; Kök & Bakırtaş, 2024; Niu, 2022; Thampy, 2021; Tugume, 2021).

More recent readings emphasize existential agency, critical consciousness, and narrative resistance, showing how Sa'dawi's female characters preserve their voices and challenge institutional authority despite sustained oppression (Alqaryouti, 2025; Amri, 2025; Rather, 2025). This scholarship establishes Sa'dawi's importance within transnational feminist criticism and explains how domination becomes normalized across private and public institutions. Its dominant objects and categories, however, remain the novel, oppression, agency, and resistance. Less attention has been given to the bodily processes through which women internalize shame, fear, and moral guilt. The intimate mechanisms of embodied discipline thus remain comparatively under-theorized within otherwise rich political, feminist, and postcolonial readings of Sa'dawi.

Another scholarship expands the discussion beyond explicit patriarchal violence by examining gender discourse, linguistic sexism, cultural representation, memory, and the symbolic production of femininity. These studies show that women's identities and social positions in Sa'dawi's writing are constructed through language, communal expectations, cultural codes, and dominant systems of representation (Aulia et al., 2024; Fadhilah et al., 2024; Istifadah & Rohmana, 2022; Juhana et al., 2021; Marita, 2021; Syah et al., 2021). Related scholarship on bodily autonomy, social pathology, economic exchange, and human dignity demonstrates how women's bodies become sites of regulation, commodification, marginalization, and resistance (Bukhari & Bashir, 2025; Lakda et al., 2024; Were, 2021; Nuraulia et al., 2025; Ojiakor & Obika, 2018; Otu, 2016; Purnawati, 2024).

Ecofeminist and intersectional perspectives further connect gendered embodiment with broader structures of social, cultural, class-based, and environmental domination (Hardiansyah et al., 2026; Susiana et al., 2025). This body of work makes clear that

Sa'dawi's women are shaped by language, community norms, economic relations, cultural memory, and symbolic codes as well as by direct violence. However, how linguistic propriety, religious fear, classed labor, and racialized exclusion converge as a bodily mechanism across different stories remains less fully explained. This gap calls for a comparative account of abjection that connects these forces to distinct bodily signs and affective experiences.

Scholarship dealing directly with the present corpus remains comparatively limited. [Latifi et al. \(2019\)](#), for example, examine *Adab am Qillat Al-Adab* and argue that Sa'dawi critiques patriarchal religious constructions through a radical female subject who rejects the established symbolic order. Their analysis confirms the anthology's significance for discussions of gender, religion, and female subjectivity. Studies of *Laysa Lahā Makān fī al-Jannah* employ structural analysis and Islamic gender criticism to clarify its narrative construction and to critique patriarchal ideology ([Cahaya, 2026](#); [Rizalman et al., 2024](#)). These studies illuminate subjectivity, literary structure, and ideological conflict, yet the female body is seldom treated as the principal site where domination becomes lived experience. The present article shifts attention to bodily signs and affects through which women are rendered abject within literary, religious, classed, and racialized systems. This focus asks how power becomes materially and affectively sensible in the body before it develops into resistance or refusal, a gap persisting across scattered readings of her other stories ([Fatah, 2026](#); [Rizalman et al., 2025](#); [She, 2015](#)).

A further strand of scholarship provides the theoretical basis for examining abjection and gendered embodiment. [Kristeva \(1982\)](#) defines the abject as that which disrupts identity, system, and order by unsettling boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, and clean and unclean. Within Sa'dawi's studies, [Abdullah et al. \(2015\)](#) apply Kristeva's concept of abjection to *Woman at Point Zero* and demonstrate its relevance to gendered exclusion. Their study focuses on a single novel, whereas the present research compares three short stories from *Adab am Qillat Al-Adab* and examines the relationships among bodily markers, affective responses, and various social mechanisms across the corpus. Comparative applications of Kristevan abjection to gendered embodiment elsewhere in world literature, from grotesque bodily imagery in Turkish and British fiction to psychoanalytic readings of diasporic narrative, confirm the theory's broader interpretive reach ([Şentürk, 2023](#); [Gholami, 2024](#)).

Broader studies of embodiment likewise show that shame and bodily degradation are produced by social norms, cultural judgments, and moral classifications, rather than arising naturally from the body ([Ryan et al., 2022](#); [Salwa, 2025](#); [Wafa & Akmal, 2024](#); [Whiley et al., 2023](#)). [Tyler \(2009\)](#) warns that abjection theory can reproduce contempt toward women's bodies when bodily difference is treated as inherently impure or disgusting. That warning is methodologically important here. Sa'dawi's stories are read as critiques of the discourses that classify women's bodies as improper, sinful, dirty, useful, or excludable. This framing places psychoanalytic vocabulary within feminist and cultural accountability and resists treating abjection as an abstract, universal condition of the female body.

Based on the systematic literature review above, the novelty of this study lies in its corpus, theoretical angle, and analytic movement. This study centers on three short stories from *Adab am Qillat Al-Adab*, a corpus that has received less sustained attention than Sa'dawi's major novels. Bodily abjection is treated as the primary analytic object, with feminism, patriarchy, religious critique, and narrative structure examined in terms of their effects on embodiment. The analysis connects textual markers of the body with affective responses and social mechanisms. The study extends earlier scholarship by

tracing how patriarchal morality, economic valuation, religious anxiety, domestic labor, and racialized sacred imagination enter the female subject through bodily experience before they become explicit social critique. Its claim to originality is grounded in the stories' bodily lexicon and in the comparative movement from textual sign to affect and social mechanism.

The problem addressed in this article is how Sa'dawi's three selected short stories transform women's bodies into abject borders between propriety and obscenity, piety and fear, service and deprivation, earthly hierarchy and imagined paradise. The study asks three questions. *First*, what forms of bodily abjection are represented in the selected stories? *Second*, how are women's bodies connected to shame, sin, fear, obedience, and alienation? *Third*, how does Kristeva's theory explain Sa'dawi's critique of patriarchy, morality, class, race, and religion? By tracing bodily signs and affects, the article shows how social power becomes intimate, sensory, and self-disciplinary, and how the abject body can also become a literary instrument for exposing the order that produced its abjection. Such reading is urgent because bodily shame often naturalizes authority more effectively than explicit coercion. It also clarifies why psychoanalytic reading matters for Arabic feminist criticism.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative literary-critical design with a psychoanalytic feminist orientation. The design is qualitative because the data consist of words, scenes, narrative descriptions, symbolic images, and relations of meaning; numerical measurement is not part of the analytical procedure. The literary-critical orientation allows the study to examine diction, narrative situation, character construction, imagery, and symbolic opposition as textual evidence. The psychoanalytic orientation is needed because the analysis focuses on anxiety, desire, prohibition, disgust, repression, fear, and unstable boundaries between self and other. The feminist orientation frames these psychic disturbances as socially produced by gendered authority. Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection serves as the principal theoretical lens, particularly her account of the abject as a border disturbance that threatens identity, order, cleanliness, and symbolic stability. This design enables the study to interpret bodily shame without treating women's bodies as naturally abject. It also makes the method sensitive to Sa'dawi's Arabic diction and narrative compression.

The primary data source is Nawal El-Sa'dawi's Arabic anthology *Adab am Qillat Al-Adab* (El-Sa'dawi, 2017). The Hindawi edition used in this study contains fifteen short stories. All fifteen were screened during an initial reading, after which three were purposively retained: *Adab am Qillat Al-Adab*, *Hālat Fatāh min Daftar Aḥwāl 'Iyādatī*, and *Laysa Lahā Makān fī al-Jannah*. Selection followed three criteria: the story had to contain explicit bodily signs; those signs had to intersect with moral or religious vocabulary; and the sample had to preserve narrative variation. The first story foregrounds language and literary propriety, the second religious fear and self-surveillance, and the third classed, racialized, and domestic exclusion. These criteria make the sample textual, theoretical, and comparative while keeping it narrow enough for sustained close reading.

Data were collected through close reading in four stages. *First*, each selected story was read in full to identify plot structure, speaking position, conflict, and dominant symbolic oppositions. *Second*, body-related words, gestures, images, and scenes were marked in the Arabic text. *Third*, the marked units were grouped according to their relation to shame, sin, fear, obedience, hunger, labor, gaze, race, and exclusion. *Fourth*,

the units were reread through Kristeva's concepts of abjection, border, rejection, the improper, the unclean, and the disturbance of order. The data units include phrases, sentences, dialogues, images, and narrative sequences. The English renderings are analytic translations prepared for this study. Their reliability was checked through line-by-line comparison with the Arabic quotations, with particular attention to passages carrying key interpretive terms and affective nuance. Lexical items central to the argument were retained in transliteration when an English equivalent risked flattening cultural or affective nuance. Where literal and idiomatic renderings diverged, the Arabic wording and immediate narrative context governed the interpretation.

Data analysis followed the steps of condensation, coding, interpretation, and cross-story synthesis. Condensation reduced long narrative passages to representative textual markers that directly linked the body with affect and authority. Coding combined deductive categories derived from Kristeva's theory, including boundary disturbance, impurity, rejection, fear of contamination, and unstable subjectivity, with inductive categories emerging from Sa'dawi's text, such as women's language, economic valuation, fatherly authority, religious anxiety, invisibility, hunger, blackness, domestic labor, and paradise. Interpretation connected each marker to the discourse through which the body was rendered abject and to the female character's response. Cross-story synthesis then compared mechanisms of abjection to identify recurring patterns, narrative variation, and shifts in the relation among body, authority, and subjectivity. For analytical consistency, every quotation was examined for three features: how it names or images the body, how it connects embodiment with social authority, and what affective consequence it generates, including shame, sin, fear, obedience, or alienation.

RESULT

The first research question concerns the forms of bodily abjection represented in the selected stories. The analysis shows that Sa'dawi constructs bodily abjection through three interrelated fields. In the first, the female body becomes abject when women speak about desire, money, marriage, the womb, and the relation between sexuality and honor. In the second, religious fear and fatherly authority lead a female character to experience her own body as a possible source of sin. In the third, poverty, blackness, hunger, labor, and obedience make a woman useful to others while excluding her from dignity. Although each field corresponds to one selected story, together they reveal a broader pattern: abjection emerges when social discourse attaches moral danger to bodily presence. The results are presented through textual evidence within each subsection so that quotation, context, and interpretation remain together, and the analytical movement is visible at the point where each claim is made.

The Speaking Body: Language, Womb, and Economic Shame

In *Adab am Qillat Al-Adab*, abjection begins before the narrator fully understands the forbidden language her female friend speaks. The narrator says that her mind does not grasp everything, yet her body catches the words through "a slight shiver" mixed with "fear" and "sin".

Excerpt 1 في طفولتي كانت لي صديقة وحيدة، تقول ما لا يقوله الناس، لم يكن عقلي يلتقط كل ما تقوله، وإن أدركه جسدي بقشعريرة خفيفة لا تخلو من اللذة، يشوبها بعض الخوف أو الإحساس بالإثم. لم يكن عقلي يفهم كلمات كثيرة غامضة يُردها الناس كل يوم، منها

كلمة الإثم ويوم الحساب. (El-Sa'dawi, 2017: 13)

Fī ṭufūlatī kānat lī ṣadīqah waḥīdah, taqūlu mā lā yaqūluhu al-nās, lam yakun 'aqlī yaltaqītu kulla mā taqūluhu, wa-in adraḥū jasadī bi-qash'arīrah khafīfah lā takhlū min al-ladhdhah, yashūbuhā ba'd al-khawf aw al-iḥsās bi-al-ithm. Lam yakun 'aqlī yaḥḥamu kalimāt kathīrah ghāmiḍah yuraddiduhā al-nās kulla yawm, minhā kalimat al-ithm wa-yawm al-ḥisāb.

'In my childhood, I had only one friend, who spoke of things that others would not say. My mind could not fully grasp everything she said, although my body registered it through a faint shiver that was not entirely devoid of pleasure, tinged with a degree of fear or a sense of sin. My mind did not understand many of the obscure words that people repeated every day, among them "sin" and "the Day of Judgment.'

Excerpt 1 shows patriarchal morality acting first on the body. The female subject feels guilt before she can fully conceptualize the words. Kristeva's abjection clarifies the scene because the friend's speech disturbs a boundary that protects propriety from sexuality and literary discourse from bodily truth. Meaning is registered somatically through the shiver before it is intellectually organized. Sa'dawi presents shame here as a learned bodily reflex produced by social prohibitions on women's speech about the body. The body becomes an early archive of censorship, storing the affective force of prohibition before the narrator can name its logic.

The same story connects abjection with the economic grammar of marriage. The friend asks why a father's financial support for a mother should demand fidelity, and whether a woman who earns money may demand the same fidelity from her husband. This question exposes the hidden exchange among money, obedience, sexuality, and moral judgment. The narrator had imagined that her value increased with the money a man paid, whereas the friend insisted that a woman's value decreased when measured by a man's payment. This reversal makes the body economically abject. It is priced, guarded, and evaluated under the language of honor. Sa'dawi's critique is precise: shame does not belong to the woman who questions marriage, but to the structure that converts fidelity and sexuality into property relations. The female body becomes abject when respectability depends on its exchange value. Its moral vocabulary hides an economic arrangement that Sa'dawi makes analytically visible.

The strongest reversal appears when the friend names the womb. She describes *the womb of a woman* as a source of sacred origin, although it had been treated as *shame and disgrace*.

Excerpt 2 هذا العالم كله خرج من رحم المرأة، إنه مكان مقدس؛ أعني رحم المرأة، هذا الجزء من جسدي، الذي كان مبعث الخزي والعار، فأصبح المكان حيث الشرف والفخر، كان سبب السقوط، فأصبح سبب الصعود. (El-Sa'dawi, 2017: 15)

Hādhā al-'ālam kulluhu kharaja min raḥim al-mar'ah, innahu makān muqaddas; a'nī raḥim al-mar'ah, hādhā al-juz' min jasadī, alladhī kāna mab'ath al-khizy wa-al-'ār, fa-aṣbaḥa al-makān ḥaythu al-sharaf wa-al-fakhr, kāna sabab al-suqūṭ, fa-aṣbaḥa sabab al-ṣu'ūd.

'This entire world emerged from a woman's womb. It is a sacred place (I mean the woman's womb), that part of my body which had once been a source of shame and dishonor, but which became a site of honor and pride. What had once been regarded as the cause of downfall became the source of elevation.'

The narrator covers her ears when hearing *rahim* 'womb', showing how deeply abjection has been internalized as modesty. The friend, however, turns the same body part into a sign of honor and pride. The story does not treat the womb as naturally abject; it exposes the discourse that first marks the maternal body as improper and then uses literary judgment to silence women who reclaim it. In this context, *Adab am Qillat Al-Adab* functions more as a disciplinary label than as an aesthetic judgment. Speech about money, desire, and the womb is expelled from respectable literature because it reveals bodily dependencies that patriarchal propriety seeks to conceal. The insult directed at women's speech is thereby converted into a critique of cultural authority.

The Fearful Religious Body: Piety, Gaze, and Self-Surveillance

In *Hālat Fatāh min Daftar Aḥwāl 'Iyādatī*, bodily abjection is produced through religious fear. The female character dreams of flood, fire, bleeding feet, and falling from the *ṣirāt*, the bridge over hell. She wakes in sweat, recites *Al-Fātiḥah* (the Qur'an's opening chapter), thanks God for the remaining time for repentance, and washes repeatedly. The data are condensed in the image of her body swaying before falling, then washing five times.

Excerpt 3 منذ العام الماضي بدأت تحمق في الليل بلا نوم، وإن نامت رأت الطوفان يغرق الأرض، وسيدنا نوح يركب السفينة ويمضي بدونها، ترى نفسها في الآخرة، ماشية فوق الصراط من تحتها النار، قدمها دامتان، جسمها يتأرجح قبل أن يسقط. تفتح عينها فتجد نفسها راقدة فوق سريرها ملفوفة بالبطاطين، غارقة في عرقها، تقرأ الفاتحة، تحمد الله أنها لم تمت بعد وأمامها فرصة للتوبة. تنهض إلى الحمام، تغتسل خمس مرات.
(El-Sa'dawi, 2017: 21)

Mundhu al-‘ām al-māḍī bada’at tuḥaddiqu fī al-layl bilā nawm, wa-in nāmat ra’at al-ṭūfān yughriqu al-arḍ, wa-sayyidunā Nūḥ yarkabu al-safīnah wa-yamḍī bi-dūnihā. Tarā nafsahā fī al-ākhirah, māshiyah fawqa al-ṣirāt min taḥtiḥ al-nār, qadamāhā dāmiyatān, jismuhā yata’arjah qabla an yasquṭ. Taftaḥu ‘aynayhā fatajīdu nafsahā rāqidah fawqa sarīriḥā malfūfah bi-al-baṭāṭīn, ghāriqah fī ‘araqihā, taqra’u al-Fātiḥah, taḥmadu Allāh annahā lam tamut ba’d wa-amāmahā furṣah lil-tawbah. Tanḥaḍu ilā al-ḥammām, taghtasilu khamṣa marrāt.

'Since the previous year, she had begun staring into the night, unable to sleep. Whenever she did fall asleep, she would see the Flood engulfing the earth and the Prophet Noah boarding the Ark and sailing away without her. She would see herself in the Hereafter, walking across the *Ṣirāt* with the flames of Hell beneath her. Her feet were bleeding, and her body swayed before plunging downward. She would open her eyes and find herself lying in bed, wrapped in blankets and drenched in sweat. She

would recite al-Fātiḥah and thank God that she had not yet died and still had an opportunity to repent. She would then rise and go to the bathroom, wash herself five times, and put on a long, loose-fitting garment.'

The repeated washing marks the body as a suspected stain that must be purified again and again. Sa'dawi directs her critique toward a disciplinary form of religiosity while preserving a distinction between that regime of fear and faith itself. The woman learns to distrust her body as though bodily presence already carried moral danger. Abjection is located in ritual anxiety and compulsive self-suspicion, while spiritual devotion remains analytically distinct. The body becomes the medium through which moral suspicion is felt and repeated.

Fatherly authority intensifies this fear by arranging the character's entire bodily visibility. She sleeps to the sound of her father reciting the Qur'an; no strange man has seen her face, and she has barely spoken to anyone. Her clothing allows nothing to appear except *two small holes in black cloth*.

Excerpt 4 ثم ترتدي الثوب الواسع الطويل، حول رأسها تلف القماش السميك، تقف أمام الله لتصلي، لا شيء يظهر منها إلا ثقبين صغيرين موضع العينين في القماش الأسود. (El-Sa'dawi, 2017: 21)

thumma tartadī al-thawb al-wāsi' al-ṭawīl, ḥawla ra'sihā taluffu al-qumāsh al-samīk, taqīfu amāma Allāh li-tuṣallī, lā shay'a yaẓharu minhā illā thaqbayn ṣaghīrayn mawḍi'a al-'aynayn fī al-qumāsh al-aswad.

'She would wrap a thick cloth around her head and stand before God in prayer. Nothing of her body remained visible except two small openings for her eyes in the black fabric.'

The image is crucial because the body is present but nearly erased. Face, voice, skin, and movement are reduced to minimal visibility. Social virtue is imagined as disappearance. In Kristevan terms, the body is treated as a border that must be sealed because it threatens symbolic order. The girl's piety becomes inseparable from surveillance, and concealment becomes the measure of safety. Sa'dawi exposes how religious language can be reorganized by patriarchy into a technology of bodily self-erasure. The female subject survives socially by reducing herself to a permitted fragment of sight. Visibility itself is treated as a threat requiring regulation.

The statue scene deepens the body's alienation from itself. The statue is stone, yet it becomes more sensuously present than living men because it allows the character to encounter the body without ordinary social exchange. The word *jism* slips from her closed lips, and the word itself causes a shiver in her body.

Excerpt 5 فلتت الكلمة من بين شفتيها المطبقتين بلا صوت "جسد". الكلمة في حد ذاتها تبعث في جسدها رعشة، لا تعرف تماما أين تكون الرعشة. عيناها من خلال الثقبين من تحت القماش السميك تختلسان النظر إلى جسدها، في صدرها قلب ينبض، وفي رأسها عروق، يصعد الدم إليها كهواء ساخن، عقلها يدرك أن صديقها ليس إلا تمثالا من الحجر، لكنها ترى في عينيه نظرة متحركة توشك على النطق. (El-Sa'dawi, 2017: 25)

Fallatat al-kalimah min bayni shafatayhā al-muṭbaqatayn bilā ṣawṭ: "jasad." Al-kalimah fī ḥadd dhātihā tab'athu fī jasadihā

ra'shah, lā ta'rifu tamāman ayna takūnu al-ra'shah. 'Aynāhā min khilāl al-thuqbayn min taḥt al-qumāsh al-samīk takhtalisāni al-naẓar ilā jasadihā. Fī ṣadrihā qalb yanbiḍ, wa-fī ra'sihā 'urūq; yaṣ'adu al-dam ilayhā ka-hawā' sākhin. 'Aqluhā yudriku anna ṣadīqahā laysa sillā timthālan min al-ḥajar, lakinnahā tarā fī 'aynayhi naẓrah mutaḥarrikah tūshiku 'alā al-nuṭq.

"The word slipped soundlessly from between her tightly closed lips: "body." The word itself sent a tremor through her body, though she could not determine precisely where the sensation arose. Through the two openings beneath the thick fabric, her eyes furtively surveyed her body. A heartbeat within her chest, while veins pulsed in her head as blood surged toward it like heated air. Her mind understood that her companion was nothing more than a stone statue; yet in his eyes, she perceived a living gaze on the verge of speech."

The scene registers the shock of recognizing a body that has been pushed out of consciousness as dangerous. Its force exceeds a straightforward account of erotic desire. Public laughter then completes the mechanism: when people see her move toward a young man, their gaze turns accidental movement into moral evidence, and fear follows her into the street, the office, and the home. The physician cannot cure the fever because the illness is both symbolic and somatic. She has learned to confuse visibility with sin. Abjection thus becomes a public pedagogy that teaches the girl to police herself through shame.

The Obedient Body: Race, Hunger, Labor, and Exclusion

In *Laysa Lahā Makān fī al-Jannah*, abjection becomes openly material through Zainab's blackness, poverty, hunger, labor, and repeated obedience. The narrative describes narrow eyes, a long, thin face, and skin so dark that it approaches blackness. Set against white light and the wide eyes of the *ḥūr* 'the maidens of paradise', this darkness places Zainab at the edge of both social and sacred imagination. Poverty is only one dimension of her exclusion; racialization also makes her body appear less worthy of visibility, pleasure, and reward. Sa'dawi consequently extends abjection beyond sexuality to the beauty codes that exclude the body before it speaks. Race, gender, and poverty converge to make Zainab serviceable on earth and nearly unimaginable in paradise, linking color, labor, and afterlife imagery within a single structure of exclusion.

The word *ḥāḍir* condenses Zainab's social position. The story states that she knows no word other than *ḥāḍir*.

Excerpt 6. قبل الفجر حين تلکزها أمها وهي راقدة، لتحمل السباخ فوق رأسها، لا تعرف إلا حاضر. وإذا ربطها أبوها في الساقية بدل البقرة المريضة لا تقول إلا حاضر. وزوجها لم ترفع عينها في عينه مرة واحدة، وحين يرقد فوقها وهي مريضة بالحى لا تنطق إلا حاضر.
(El-Sa'dawi, 2017: 54)

Qabla al-fajr, ḥīna talkuzuhā ummuhā wa-hiya rāqidah, li-taḥmila al-sibākh fawqa ra'sihā, lā ta'rifu illā "ḥāḍir." Wa-idhā rabaṭahā abūhā fī al-sāqiyah badala al-baqarah al-marīdah, lā taqūlu illā "ḥāḍir." Wa-zawjuhā lam tarfa' 'aynayhā fī 'aynihi marratan

wāḥidah, wa-ḥīna yarqudu fawqahā wa-hiya marīdah bi-al-ḥummā, lā tanṭiqu illā “ḥāḍir”.

‘Before dawn, when her mother prodded her awake to carry manure on her head, she knew no response other than, “Yes.” When her father harnessed her to the waterwheel in place of the sick cow, she uttered nothing but, “Yes.” She had never once raised her eyes to meet her husband’s gaze, and when he lay upon her while she was ill with fever, the only word she spoke was, “Yes”.’

Sa’dawi’s narrative constructs Zainab’s repeated utterance of *ḥāḍir* as an index of coerced submission; genuine consent is absent from the conditions in which the word is spoken. Her replacement of the sick cow at the waterwheel collapses the distinction between human subject and animal labor, revealing how class, kinship, and patriarchal authority reduce her body to a functional resource. She is appropriated at once as agricultural labor, domestic service, familial property, and a sexual object. Her personhood is organized around constant availability to others, while refusal becomes linguistically and bodily inaccessible. Abjection takes shape through this sustained dehumanization, as obedience settles into an embodied habit produced by prolonged domination.

Hunger makes this dehumanization sharper. Zainab carries food to men in the field, but she never stops to open the bread.

Excerpt 7 تراودها نفسها وهي سائرة في منتصف الطريق أن تتوقف تحت ظل شجرة وتفتح الرغيف، لكنها في كل حياتها لم تتوقف مرة واحدة، وفي كل مرة تراودها نفسها تستعيز بالله من الشيطان، حتى يبلغ بها الجوع مداه، فتقطع من جانب الطريق عود سريس أو جعبيض، تمضغه تحت أسنانها كاللبان. (El-Sa’dawi, 2017: 54–55)

Wa-turāwiduhā nafsuhā wa-hiya sā’irah fī muntaṣaf al-ṭarīq an tatawaqqafa taḥta zill shajarah wa-taftaḥa al-raghīf, lakinnahā fī kull ḥayātihā lam tatawaqqaf marratan wāḥidah. Wa-fī kull marrah turāwiduhā nafsuhā, tasta’idhu bi-Allāh min al-shayṭān, ḥattā yabluḡha bihā al-jū’u madāhu, fa-taqṭa’u min jānib al-ṭarīq ‘ūda sirīs aw ja’dīḍ, tamḍaghuhu taḥta asnānihā ka-al-lubān.

‘As she walks along the road, she is sometimes tempted to stop beneath the shade of a tree and unwrap the loaf of bread. Yet throughout her entire life, she has never once allowed herself to do so. Whenever the impulse arises, she seeks refuge in God from Satan. Only when her hunger becomes unbearable does she pluck a stalk of *sirīs* or *ja’dīḍ* from the roadside and chew it between her teeth like gum.’

Sa’dawi frames hunger as a site where bodily deprivation is moralized and separated from its material causes. Zainab’s need for nourishment is translated into the language of sin and temptation, allowing structural injustice to recede behind religious self-discipline. Her labor sustains the circulation of food, yet her own body is denied its benefits, exposing an unequal distribution of resources and bodily entitlement. The same logic extends beyond hunger. Familial authority and religious promises redirect suffering into obedience, while the invocation of paradise after domestic violence turns

endurance into virtue and return into duty. Submission is cast as moral righteousness, masking the coercive conditions under which Zainab survives.

The final image radicalizes the critique: she reaches a closed heavenly door, sees her husband with two white women, and concludes, *laysa fī al-jannah makān al-mar'ah sawdā'* 'there is no place for the black woman in Paradise'. Sacred promise repeats earthly exclusion. The story thereby joins material exploitation to eschatological abandonment. The body receives neither nourishment, protection, nor heavenly recognition.

Affective Mechanisms of Abjection

The second research problem concerns the attachment of shame, sin, fear, obedience, and alienation to women's bodies. Across the three stories, these effects emerge from social relations and disciplinary systems. In *Adab am Qillat Al-Adab*, shame emerges when the body and womb are named, while sin enters when language touches sexuality and the economic basis of marriage. In *Hālat Fatāh min Daftar Aḥwāl 'Iyādatī*, fear grows from self-surveillance and from a public gaze that turns bodily movement into moral suspicion. In *Laysa Lahā Makān fī Al-Jannah*, repeated *ḥāḍir* embodies obedience, while Zainab's hungry, black, laboring body remains alienated from dignity and paradise. Abjection functions here as an affective technology: women feel guilty, frightened, or obedient before they can articulate the structures producing those feelings. Affect becomes evidence of power and shows how domination is sensed before it is conceptually named.

Sa'dawi also gives the body a critical function. In *Adab am Qillat Al-Adab*, the friend breaks the code of silence by naming the womb and claiming possession of herself. Her counter-speech refuses a system in which critics, husbands, fathers, or money determine the value of the female body. The other two stories offer darker trajectories, yet each exposes the logic of power. The religious girl's fear reveals the cost of piety organized through bodily invisibility, while Zainab's exclusion reveals the cruelty of a paradise imagined through patriarchal and racial hierarchy. In these scenes, the abject body becomes evidence against the order that produced its abjection. Sa'dawi makes bodily shame legible as a social, symbolic, and political construction, turning suffering into a structure through which power can be read.

DISCUSSION

The third research question concerns how Kristeva's theory explains Sa'dawi's critique of patriarchy, morality, class, race, and religion. Sa'dawi's three stories reveal three interrelated configurations of bodily abjection: the speaking body, the fearful religious body, and the obedient racialized laboring body. The female body becomes abject when it unsettles the symbolic order regulating speech, morality, labor, race, and sacred worth. Kristeva's account of disturbed borders helps clarify this process, but Sa'dawi gives the disturbance a distinctly social and feminist force. The friend's speech about the womb and marriage violates the boundary between *Adab* and *Qillat Al-Adab*; the religious girl's body is caught between piety and desire; and Zainab's body is suspended between human dignity and economic instrumentality. Bodily abjection is thus a narrative structure through which gendered power becomes legible in physical signs. The female body is made socially dangerous when it speaks, desires, hungers, labors, or claims dignity within systems that require silence, concealment, and service.

The affective dimension of abjection shows how shame, sin, fear, obedience, and alienation become part of female subjectivity. Kristeva's concept is useful because affect can signal an unstable symbolic border: the subject trembles, recoils, obeys, or withdraws when the line between the acceptable and the prohibited becomes uncertain. Sa'dawi politicizes that instability by locating its source in patriarchal norms that define female speech as obscene, desire as sinful, hunger as invisible, labor as a natural duty, and racialized embodiment as exclusion from sacred beauty. Shame, fear, and obedience form an emotional grammar of domination. They allow power to continue even when direct punishment is absent because the body has learned to police itself. This passage from external authority to internalized subjectivity explains why affect is central to the analysis.

Seen through Kristeva's theory, Sa'dawi turns the abject border into a political diagnostic tool. The borders in these stories separate respectable literature from obscene speech, piety from fear, marriage from ownership, service from exploitation, whiteness from sacred beauty, and paradise from racialized exclusion. Kristeva supplies a vocabulary of disturbance, exclusion, and unstable subjectivity; Sa'dawi locates those processes within recognizable structures of family authority, literary respectability, religious discipline, domestic hierarchy, class exploitation, and racialized imagination. The abject body becomes a sign of power precisely where power presents itself as modesty, virtue, obedience, honor, or divine reward. Sa'dawi's achievement lies in exposing the symbolic systems that make gendered oppression appear natural, moral, and sacred. This diagnostic capacity extends beyond literary analysis: recent scholarship applies Kristevan abjection to religious and identity-boundary violence, while related work distinguishes Islamic feminist reinterpretation from Arab secular critique of patriarchal religious authority (Ismail & Firas, 2026; Dāvidsone, 2025).

This emphasis on bodily and affective experience both confirms and extends a major cluster of Sa'dawi scholarship. Previous studies show that women's suffering in Sa'dawi's fiction emerges through institutional power, gendered violence, and narrative testimony, especially in representations of law, imprisonment, trauma, sexuality, and confinement in *Woman at Point Zero* (Addison, 2020; Ahmadi, 2021; Ghorbanpour & Sabbagh, 2024; Gohar, 2016; Rather, 2025; Thampy, 2021). This work establishes the structural character of Sa'dawi's feminist critique and identifies the institutions through which patriarchal power regulates women's lives. The present study develops that insight by asking how institutional domination becomes bodily experience. In the selected short fiction, power is registered through trembling, shrinking, washing, hunger, exhaustion, silence, and the inability to refuse. Such reactions show how external authority is translated into shame, fear, and obedience at the level of the body. The short-story form intensifies this process through condensed bodily images and affective gestures. This economy of form makes the everyday operation of gendered power visible without relying on the extended narrative of imprisonment or testimony that dominates readings of *Woman at Point Zero*.

A similar development emerges from scholarship on discourse, culture, bodily autonomy, and literary representation. Existing studies show how language, cultural norms, and ideological systems contribute to gender hierarchy in Sa'dawi's work (Aulia et al., 2024; Fadhillah et al., 2024; Were, 2021; Purnawati, 2024; Susiana et al., 2025). Research on *Adab am Qillat Al-Adab* and *Laysa Lahā Makān fī al-Jannah* has also highlighted religious discourse, narrative strategy, and gender ideology (Cahaya, 2026; Latifi et al., 2019; Rizalman et al., 2024). Together, these studies establish the importance of cultural and ideological structures in defining women's social position.

This study repositions the body as the mediating space between discourse and subjectivity. Women's language becomes threatening because it challenges control over the female body; religious discourse becomes disciplinary because it produces fear and self-regulation; and class and race become literary forces because they shape hunger, labor, beauty, exclusion, and vulnerability. The analytical gain lies in demonstrating how symbolic systems are experienced physically and emotionally. Embodiment makes visible the process by which discourse moves from an external cultural code into an intimate structure of feeling and conduct.

The theoretical discussion of abjection and embodiment further strengthens this conceptual framework. Previous scholarship demonstrates that women's embodied shame is socially and culturally produced, not an inherent property of the female body (Abdullah et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2022; Salwa, 2025; Wafa & Akmal, 2024; Whiley et al., 2023). Such studies explain how gender norms classify bodily experiences as unacceptable, impure, or abnormal, thereby regulating bodily identity and emotional experience. Within Arabic feminist short fiction, Sa'dawi expands the concept of abjection beyond conventional associations with maternal, sexual, wounded, or grotesque bodies. Her stories include the speaking body that challenges silence, the veiled body controlled by social expectations, the hungry body shaped by inequality, the exhausted working body, the black body excluded from dominant ideals of beauty, and the obedient body disciplined into submission. This reading also answers Tyler's (2009) warning that abjection theory can reproduce misogynistic assumptions when the female body itself is cast as the source of impurity. Here, shame and impurity belong to the social systems that construct women's bodies as problematic. Sa'dawi's fiction thereby offers a feminist revision of abjection theory grounded in the ideological production of exclusion.

The broader implication of this study lies in a politicized model of Kristevan abjection for modern Arabic feminist literature. The model connects three analytical levels: the textual bodily marker, the affective response, and the social mechanism. Small textual signs such as *jism*, *raḥim*, *ḥāḍir*, hunger, blackness, washing, and veiling can thus be read as condensed indicators of wider structures of gendered power. The approach also distinguishes religion as an ethical horizon from patriarchal uses of religious vocabulary as fear, deferral, and discipline. This distinction avoids reducing Sa'dawi to an anti-religious position and clarifies her critique of morality when it becomes a mechanism of bodily injury. Recent readings of Sa'dawi's other work similarly expose religious authority as a patriarchal instrument of gendered discipline, reinforcing this distinction (Khan & Ansari, 2025; Latifi et al., 2019). More broadly, the article contributes to feminist literary studies, Arabic literary criticism, and embodiment studies by showing how close reading can move from bodily detail to social critique while retaining the specificity of literary form.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the female body in the three selected stories from *Adab am Qillat Al-Adab* becomes an abject border where patriarchy, morality, class, race, religion, and literary propriety meet. The first form of abjection appears through women's speech about the body, money, sexuality, and the womb; such speech is marked as *qillat adab* because it exposes the hidden economy of patriarchal honor. The second form appears through religious fear, fatherly authority, concealment, and public gaze, which train the female body to experience visibility and desire as sin. The third

appears through Zainab's black, hungry, laboring, and obedient body, excluded from earthly dignity and imagined paradise. Shame, sin, fear, obedience, and alienation emerge as social effects that Sa'dawi turns into literary evidence against the systems that produce bodily abjection. The abject body is both an object of domination and a medium of critique.

The study is limited by its focus on three short stories and by its use of Kristevan abjection as the principal theoretical frame. It does not compare Sa'dawi's Arabic diction with published translations, examine manuscript history, or analyze reader reception across different interpretive communities. Future research may compare these stories with Sa'dawi's novels, autobiographical writings, and essays, or with works by other Arab women writers who connect the body with religion, class, race, and sexuality. Further studies may also combine abjection with affect theory, intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, discourse analysis, or narratology to test whether the pattern identified here is specific to Sa'dawi's short fiction or belongs to a wider Arabic feminist poetics of embodiment. Such work would deepen understanding of how literary bodies register power before they become explicit political arguments. These extensions would also clarify the broader relevance of Sa'dawi's short-story poetics. This would strengthen comparative scholarship on gendered embodiment in Arabic literature.

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The first author is responsible for formulating the research concept, conducting a systematic literature review, analyzing the data, and writing the initial draft of the manuscript. The second author contributed to the development of the research design, the validation of the methodology, the critical review of the manuscript, and the supervision of the research process. The third author provided conceptual input, contributed to the interpretation of the findings, and reviewed the manuscript to enhance its depth and theoretical analysis. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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