



Representations of Disability in Modern Arabic Narrative: A Comparative Socio-Emotional Study of *Asrār Qawqa‘a* and *My Beloved Is Mute*

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Abstract. This study examines the representation of disability in contemporary Arabic narrative through a comparative socio-narrative analysis of two novels: *My Beloved Is Mute* (Ḥabībatī Bakk mā) by the Saudi novelist Mohammed Al-Salem and *Asrār Qawqa‘a* (Secrets of a Cochlea) by the Jordanian writer Shahira Munir Al-Hasan. The article investigates how the two novels employ disability mutism and hearing impairment not merely as bodily conditions, but as symbolic and social structures that reveal exclusion, stigma, emotional alienation, and struggles for recognition within conservative Arab societies. The study adopts a descriptive-analytical and comparative approach grounded in close textual reading of narrative structure, paratextual thresholds, characterization, psychological and social conflict, representations of women with disabilities, and the relationship between disability, love, and marriage. It also draws on disability studies and socio-cultural approaches to narrative representation. The analysis demonstrates that both novels challenge stereotypical portrayals of people with disabilities as passive or marginal figures. Instead, disability emerges as a narrative mechanism that exposes the violence of social norms, particularly regarding women, emotional relationships, and marriage. While *My Beloved Is Mute* foregrounds emotional deprivation and the rhetoric of silence through an epistolary romantic structure, *Asrār Qawqa‘a* emphasizes empowerment, resilience, and social integration through educational, familial, and emotional support systems. The study concludes that suffering in both novels is produced less by disability itself than by social perceptions and exclusionary structures. It further reveals the persistence of “double marginalization” experienced by women with disabilities and highlights the role of Arabic narrative in reshaping awareness toward disability as a human experience rather than a deficit.

Keywords: Disability in Arabic literature; hearing impairment; romantic narrative; social stigma.

1. Introduction

Contemporary Arabic literature has increasingly become a fertile space for addressing marginalized voices and interrogating complex social and human issues that were previously treated with silence, reduction, or stereotypical representation. Among these issues, disability occupies a particularly sensitive position because it intersects with questions of identity, communication, dignity, social participation, and emotional legitimacy. Disability is no longer approached merely as a biological or medical condition confined to the body; rather, it has emerged in modern literary and cultural studies as a social and symbolic construct shaped by systems of perception, power, exclusion, and recognition. Consequently, literary narratives dealing with disability often reveal not only the suffering associated with bodily difference, but also the mechanisms through which society produces marginalization, stigma, and emotional alienation.

In recent decades, disability studies have significantly influenced literary criticism by shifting attention from the “defective body” toward the social structures that transform difference into exclusion. This intellectual transformation has encouraged scholars to reconsider how literature represents people with disabilities and whether such representations reinforce stereotypes or challenge dominant cultural assumptions. Within this context, narrative discourse acquires a vital role because literature possesses the ability to humanize lived experiences, reconstruct social awareness, and create spaces for empathy, recognition, and critical reflection. Fiction, in particular, becomes capable of uncovering hidden dimensions of suffering that statistical, medical, or institutional discourses often fail to capture.

Despite the growing international scholarly interest in disability representation, Arabic literary criticism has only recently begun to engage systematically with this field. Traditional representations in Arabic literature frequently oscillated between pity, symbolic exploitation, ridicule, or moral idealization, while the lived experiences of disabled individuals remained largely absent or marginalized. However, contemporary Arabic novels have increasingly attempted to present disability through more complex and realistic perspectives, emphasizing the humanity, agency, emotional depth, and social struggles of disabled characters. This transformation reflects broader cultural shifts in Arab societies concerning inclusion, rights, education, and public awareness of disability-related issues.

Within this emerging literary landscape, the novels *Asrār Qawqa‘a* (Secrets of a Cochlea) by the Jordanian writer Shahira Munir Al-Hasan and *My Beloved Is Mute* (Ḥabībatī Bakk mā’) by the Saudi novelist Mohammed Al-Salem represent important contemporary examples of Arabic narrative engagement with disability. Although each novel approach disability from a distinct narrative and thematic perspective, both works place disabled

characters at the center of the narrative experience and examine the interaction between bodily difference and social reality.

My Beloved Is Mute constructs a deeply emotional and romantic narrative centered on mutism as both a communicative disability and a symbolic form of silence. The novel explores love, emotional deprivation, longing, and social rejection within a conservative environment where disability becomes entangled with questions of marriage, social legitimacy, and personal choice. Through its epistolary structure and emotionally charged language, the novel transforms silence into a narrative strategy that exposes the fragility of emotional relationships under the pressure of familial authority and social norms. Disability in this context is not merely an individual condition; it becomes a metaphor for broader forms of social silence, emotional repression, and exclusion.

By contrast, *Asrār Qawqa'a* approaches hearing disability through a socio-psychological and developmental lens. The novel foregrounds the daily experiences of deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals while emphasizing themes of resilience, education, communication, and self-realization. It critiques social practices based on pity, mockery, and marginalization, while simultaneously presenting supportive models of family, friendship, education, and emotional relationships. The narrative also pays special attention to women with disabilities and the forms of “double marginalization” they experience within patriarchal social structures, particularly regarding marriage and social acceptance.

The significance of studying these two novels together lies in the possibility of developing a broader understanding of disability representation in contemporary Arabic narrative. While *My Beloved Is Mute* emphasizes emotional tragedy and symbolic silence, *Asrār Qawqa'a* highlights empowerment and the reconstruction of identity through social integration. Together, the two texts reveal the diversity of narrative approaches through which Arabic literature negotiates disability as a human, emotional, cultural, and social experience.

Moreover, the comparative dimension of this study enables an exploration of how different narrative techniques such as epistolary narration, symbolic silence, psychological realism, and social narration shape the reader’s perception of disabled characters. It also allows for a deeper examination of how disability intersects with gender, love, family authority, religion, and cultural expectations in Arab societies. In both novels, suffering does not arise solely from bodily impairment itself, but rather from social perceptions that equate bodily “completeness” with human value, emotional worthiness, and social legitimacy.

This study therefore seeks to contribute to the growing field of disability representation in Arabic literary criticism by analyzing how the two novels challenge dominant stereotypes and reconstruct disability as a lived and meaningful human experience. Its further attempts to demonstrate that literature can function as a form of cultural resistance against exclusionary discourses by giving voice to marginalized experiences and by exposing the social conditions that transform difference into suffering.

The study adopts a descriptive-analytical comparative approach grounded in close textual reading of the two novels. It examines narrative structure, titles and paratextual thresholds, characterization, emotional and social conflict, representations of women with disabilities, and the symbolic functions of silence and communication. Through this approach, the study aims to uncover the ways contemporary Arabic narrative participates in reshaping cultural understandings of disability and redefining the relationship between the individual and society.

Ultimately, the importance of this research extends beyond literary analysis alone. It also engages broader ethical and cultural questions concerning inclusion, recognition, emotional justice, and human dignity. By examining disability in contemporary Arabic fiction, the study highlights literature's capacity not only to reflect reality, but also to question social assumptions, challenge exclusionary mentalities, and imagine more humane forms of coexistence grounded in empathy, respect, and equality

2. Problem Statement

Despite the increasing presence of disability-related themes in contemporary Arabic narrative, the representation of people with disabilities in modern Arabic literature remains relatively underexplored within literary and critical studies. Much of the existing scholarship has traditionally focused on disability from medical, educational, or sociological perspectives, while fewer studies have examined how Arabic narrative discourse constructs disability aesthetically, emotionally, and socially. Consequently, disabled characters in Arabic fiction have often been approached through stereotypical frameworks based on pity, marginalization, symbolic deficiency, or emotional simplification, without sufficient attention to the complexity of their lived experiences and social realities.

Contemporary Arabic novels, however, have begun to present disability as a multidimensional human experience closely connected to identity, communication, emotional relationships, and social participation. In this context, disability no longer appears merely as a bodily impairment; rather, it functions as a symbolic and socio-cultural construct that reveals broader issues related to exclusion, stigma, family authority, gender inequality, and emotional alienation. Such representations raise important critical questions concerning the relationship between literature and society and the extent to which narrative discourse can challenge dominant perceptions surrounding disability in Arab cultures.

The problem of this study emerges from the need to investigate how contemporary Arabic narrative represents disability within emotional and social contexts, particularly in relation to silence, communication, love, gender, and social legitimacy. The study specifically focuses on two contemporary Arabic novels: *Asrār Qawqā'a* by Shahira Munir Al-Hasan and *My Beloved Is Mute* by Mohammed Al-Salem. These two novels offer distinct yet interconnected representations of disability: hearing disability in *Asrār Qawqā'a* and mutism in *My Beloved Is Mute*. Both texts position disability at the center of emotional and social experience, while simultaneously exposing the role of society in either

deepening suffering or enabling empowerment and inclusion. Accordingly, the central problem guiding this study can be formulated as follows:

How does contemporary Arabic narrative represent disability as a socio-emotional and cultural experience, and to what extent do the novels *Asrār Qawqa'a* and *My Beloved Is Mute* reveal that suffering originates not only from disability itself, but also from the social structures, cultural perceptions, and emotional exclusions imposed upon disabled individuals? The study further seeks to explore how the two novels construct disability through narrative techniques, symbolic silence, emotional conflict, and representations of women with disabilities, while examining whether these narratives reproduce traditional stereotypes or contribute to developing a more humane and inclusive literary discourse surrounding disability in modern Arabic literature.

2.2 Research Questions

1. How is disability represented in contemporary Arabic narrative in *Asrār Qawqa'a* and *My Beloved Is Mute*?
2. To what extent do the two novels portray disability as a social and emotional experience rather than merely a medical condition?
3. How do silence, communication, and narrative voice contribute to constructing the image of disability in the two novels?
4. What role does society play in shaping the suffering or empowerment of disabled characters within the narratives?
5. How are women with disabilities represented in relation to love, marriage, and social acceptance in the two novels?
6. How do the novels reveal the relationship between disability, social stigma, and emotional alienation?

Research Objectives

1. To examine the representation of disability in contemporary Arabic narrative through the novels *Asrār Qawqa'a* and *My Beloved Is Mute*.
2. To analyze how disability is constructed as a socio-emotional and cultural experience rather than merely a medical condition.
3. To investigate the role of silence, communication, and narrative voice in shaping the representation of disabled characters in the two novels.
4. To explore the psychological and social dimensions associated with disability in the selected narratives.
5. To identify the impact of societal attitudes, stigma, and exclusion on the lives of disabled characters.
6. To examine the representation of women with disabilities and the issue of “double marginalization” in relation to gender, love, and marriage.

3. Methodology and Scope

3.1. Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical comparative approach to investigate the representation of disability in contemporary Arabic narrative through the novels *Asrār Qawqa'a* by Shahira Munir Al-Hasan and *My Beloved Is Mute* by Mohammed Al-Salem. The descriptive dimension of the study focuses on identifying and presenting the major narrative, social, and emotional aspects related to disability in the two novels, while the analytical dimension seeks to interpret the symbolic, psychological, and socio-cultural meanings embedded in the texts.

The study further employs a comparative perspective in order to examine similarities and differences between the two novels in their treatment of disability, emotional relationships, silence, communication, and social integration. This comparative framework enables a deeper understanding of how contemporary Arabic fiction constructs disability within different narrative structures and cultural contexts.

The analysis is based on close textual reading of the selected novels and concentrates on several major elements, including:

1. paratextual thresholds, especially the titles and their symbolic implications;
2. characterization and the representation of disabled characters;
3. narrative voice and modes of communication, including silence, letters, writing, and sign language;
4. psychological and social conflicts associated with disability;
5. representations of women with disabilities and the issue of double marginalization;
6. the relationship between disability, love, marriage, and social stigma;
7. figurative and emotional language as a tool for constructing narrative meaning.

The study also draws on selected concepts from disability studies, socio-cultural criticism, and narrative theory in order to interpret how disability functions not merely as a bodily condition but as a symbolic and social experience shaped by cultural perceptions and institutional structures.

In addition, the research benefits from relevant literary and theoretical references concerning disability representation in Arabic and Western literature, alongside critical works related to romantic narrative, social stigma, and identity formation. The study also incorporates insights from the personal interview conducted with Shahira Munir Al-Hasan on 4 February 2025 as a supplementary source for understanding the motivations behind *Asrār Qawqa'a* and the formation of its narrative vision.

3.2. Scope of the Study

This study is limited to a comparative socio-emotional analysis of two contemporary Arabic novels:

1. *Asrār Qawqa'a* (Secrets of a Cochlea) by Shahira Munir Al-Hasan.
2. *My Beloved Is Mute* (Ḥabībatī Bakk mā') by Mohammed Al-Salem.

The research specifically focuses on representations of hearing disability and mutism as narrative and symbolic structures within the selected texts. It examines how disability intersects with emotional relationships, social stigma, gender roles, silence, and identity construction in contemporary Arab societies. The study is confined to the internal textual analysis of the two novels and does not extend to a broader survey of all disability representations in Arabic literature. Similarly, the research does not aim to provide medical or psychological evaluations of disability; rather, it approaches disability from literary, social, and cultural perspectives.

The temporal scope of the study is limited to contemporary Arabic narrative, while the thematic scope centers on socio-emotional representations of disability and their relationship to issues of communication, marginalization, and social inclusion.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Disability Between the Medical and Social Models

Disability studies have undergone significant theoretical transformation over the past decades, moving from narrowly medical interpretations toward broader social and cultural understandings of disability as a lived human experience shaped by environmental, institutional, and social factors. This shift has deeply influenced literary and cultural criticism, especially in the analysis of narrative representations of disabled characters and the ways literature constructs bodily difference, identity, and social belonging.

The two novels also emphasize the role of communication systems in redefining disability. Sign language, writing, gestures, and alternative forms of expression challenge the assumption that speech and hearing are the only legitimate means of human interaction. Such representations destabilize dominant concepts of “normality” and foreground diversity as part of human experience rather than as deviation from it. Furthermore, the social model helps explain the phenomenon of “double marginalization” experienced by women with disabilities in both novels. Female disabled characters face exclusion not only because of bodily difference, but also because of patriarchal structures that measure women’s social value according to physical “completeness,” marriageability, and conformity to traditional gender expectations. Disability therefore intersects with gender to produce intensified forms of social vulnerability and emotional exclusion.

In recent decades, however, contemporary Arabic narrative has begun to engage more directly and realistically with disability as a social and human experience. This transformation corresponds with broader cultural and social developments related to human rights, inclusion, education, and public awareness of people with disabilities. Modern Arabic novels increasingly attempt to move beyond simplistic portrayals based on pity or sensationalism and instead present disabled characters as active participants in society who experience love, ambition, conflict, disappointment, and self-realization. Definitions of disability vary across classical and modern Arabic dictionaries. The term *i'āqa* (disability) derives from the root (‘-w-q), which conveys meanings of prevention, obstruction, delay, and discouragement. *Mu‘jam al-Rā‘id* defines “to impede” (*a‘āqahu*) as preventing someone from accomplishing a task or preoccupying him from it (Mas‘ūd, 1992). Some modern dictionaries define disability as harm that results in an impairment of an organ or a total/partial incapacity (Abū al-‘Azm, 2005). A recent study notes that juristic/terminological definitions vary due to the breadth of the concept (‘Alī, 2024).

Terminologically, a definition close to that used by international health institutions appears: disability/impairment is a functional loss or limitation (mental, physical, sensory), total or partial, permanent or temporary, congenital or acquired, affecting an individual’s ability to meet needs and carry out activities normally, with psychological and social repercussions (‘Alī, 2024). Among disability types (visual, intellectual, physical, hearing), this study centers on hearing disability, defined by al-Qaryūfī (2006) as a dysfunction that limits an individual’s capacity to hear sounds such that spoken language becomes difficult to understand. Its effects on language development vary with degree of loss, age at onset, residual hearing abilities, and training.

4.2 Disability in the Qur’an: Ethical and Semantic Dimensions

A Qur’anic reading shows attention to human dignity and psychological well-being, without a discourse that dehumanizes or legitimizes humiliation. References appear to the deaf, mute, and blind; yet in some contexts these are used metaphorically to denote mental rigidity and impaired awareness, as in: “Deaf, dumb, and blind—so they do not understand” (al-Baqarah 2:171). Disability is also framed within the ethics of trial and patience: “We will surely test you... and give glad tidings to the patient” (al-Baqarah 2:155–156). The surah *‘Abasa* (“He frowned”) further highlights equality and non-discrimination through “when the blind man came” (‘Abasa 80:2), understood as an ethical correction against turning away from people with disabilities. The study also invokes the story of Jacob’s loss of sight out of grief for Joseph (Yūsuf 12:84), drawing on al-Ṭabarī’s exegesis (2001) to emphasize that sensory loss does not diminish human worth.

4.3 Disability in Western Literature: Helen Keller as an Example

Nielsen (2004) notes that characters with disabilities have been present in Western literature since the nineteenth century, with shifts in how disability is conceptualized in the American novel. Helen Keller stands as a prominent model: she lost hearing and sight in childhood, became a writer and activist, and was associated with an educational experience that sparked debates over communication methods, especially oralism versus sign

language. Crow (2000) discusses the problem of turning Keller into a simplified “icon” that flattens the complexity of lived experience, stressing the need to represent disability in literature beyond idealization or emotional exploitation.

4.4 Disability in Arabic Literature: Scarcity of the Term and Unstable Representation

Al-Shammari (2023) observes the relative scarcity of studies and articles on disability in Arabic literature and considers “disability literature” a relatively recent term in Arabic contexts. Danāwar (2021) notes that classical Arabic literature sometimes treated disabled individuals negatively through labeling and mockery (e.g., “the lame,” “the night-blind”), and sometimes positively through pride and defiance. Modern Arabic literature, however, tends toward improving social and rights-based conditions and uses narrative as a mirror that critiques exclusionary mentalities and produces “intellectual disabilities” that obstruct inclusion.

4.5 The Role of Arabic Literature in Disability Issues

Al-Shammari (2023) stresses the importance of disability’s presence in literature because literature mirrors reality and can convey impactful humanitarian messages. This requires portraying disabled characters realistically and positively—without casting them as pitiable victims or exaggerating them as superhuman heroes—while also making texts accessible through varied media (audio/digital), in recognition of diverse readerships.

4.6 Sign Language Skills

Al-Jawāldah (2012) presents sign language as a visual-manual system linking gesture to meaning, dividing it into: (1) a full sign language used in deaf communities, and (2) finger-spelling to represent letters. It is built on elements such as timing, handshape, movement direction, location, speed, and facial/body expressions.

4.7 The Psychological and Social Dimensions of Disability

According to ‘Alī (2024), people with disabilities may face frustration, isolation, hypersensitivity, reduced self-confidence, fear of failure, and even depression. The role of family and society remains decisive in transforming the experience from breaking point to empowerment. Socially, the study critiques attitudes based on pity, inferiority, or verbal harm and emphasizes the need for appropriate infrastructure and equitable opportunities in education and employment.

4.8 The Marginalization of Women with Disabilities

The article advances the notion of “double marginalization” for women with disabilities in Eastern societies: they face constraints rooted in patriarchal authority even before disability, and those constraints intensify once disability is added. The study draws on Hall (2016), who notes higher exposure of women with disabilities to poverty, unemployment, and violence, and points to disparities in social perceptions of disabled men versus disabled women.

4.9 Disability and Marriage

Al-Jawāldah (2012) argues that marriage remains a sensitive issue for deaf individuals due to economic, social, educational, and familial pressures. ‘Alī (2024) adds that marrying a disabled person is often regarded as “strange” in many societies, and rejection intensifies when the disabled person is a woman. Social fears about childbirth and “reproducing disability” can push some disabled individuals to withdraw from their right to love and marriage to avoid stigma.

4.10 Challenging Disability: Arab Models

Danāwar (2021) notes that disabled individuals often face difficulties even in securing basic rights; nevertheless, many achieve remarkable success when willpower and support are present. The study cites two figures: Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (Ḥusayn, 1992) and Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī (al-Fayūmī, 2022), as examples of transforming disability into a driver of knowledge and creativity.

5. Applied Section: Reading *Asrār Qawqa‘a*

5.1 Why *Asrār Qawqa‘a*?

According to the study’s materials, the novel is among the few texts that foreground the voices of people with hearing disabilities in modern Arabic narrative and grants them presence as active subjects rather than as a social margin. This applied reading tests the theoretical framework within a concrete narrative space.

5.2 The Title and Its Significance

At first glance, the title evokes “prison/withdrawal into a shell.” Yet the cover according to the reading features hands forming signs reminiscent of sign language, shifting the meaning toward the “cochlea of the ear,” as an allusion to cochlear implantation and as a semiotic threshold that merges disability with tools of overcoming it (Safwat, 2011). Thus, the title becomes a composite: inner secrets/hearing/isolation and hope for opening onto the world.

5.3 Hearing Disability in the Novel: Breaking the Pattern and Establishing Recognition

The novel demonstrates an awareness of dismantling the image of disabled people as helpless or socially inactive. The author selects a protagonist with a hearing disability and highlights her abilities, talents, and educational and social trajectory. The family’s role recurs as the “cornerstone” in building personality: support produces confidence; abandonment produces fracture.

The characters are presented as social realities: suffering does not arise from disability alone, but from harsh social attitudes, mockery, and the assumption that bodily difference cancels social worth.

5.4 *Asrār Qawqa‘a* and *The Story of My Life*: A Comparison with Helen Keller

The material compares the protagonist “Ḥayāh” with Helen Keller in terms of childhood hearing loss, the extension of suffering into psychological and social spheres, and the presence of hope and achievement. Communication strategies differ: Ḥayāh sometimes prefers writing and silence to avoid social embarrassment and learns sign language, whereas Keller—according to Nielsen (2004) leans toward oral communication techniques. The novel also highlights the school’s and teachers’ role in integrating deaf students through socially “unusual” activities (such as dance), showing that hearing disability does not preclude hobbies or accomplishment.

5.5 Religion in the Novel: Acceptance, Trial, and Compensation

The novel mobilizes the logic of “trial” and “acceptance of divine decree” within its characters’ structures. The protagonist’s mumps infection and the resulting hearing loss provoke varied reactions: the mother objects and clings to fear, while the protagonist later inclines toward acceptance. Models of gratitude and acceptance recur (Nawwār, Azad), turning disability from a “curse” into an experience invested in self-reconstruction. The novel also traces forms of compensation: visual skills, attention to appearance, excellence in computing and languages, and mastery of ballet despite the absence of hearing (with a reference to an example cited in the material: p. 159). The article further notes the symbolism of names: “Ḥayāh” (life) connoting continuity and benefit; “Bāsimah” (smiling) contrasted with her anxiety and pessimism; and “Nawwār” (radiant/light) aligned with her hopeful spirit.

Nevertheless, contemporary Arabic narrative still reveals the persistence of societal stigma and discriminatory attitudes. Many novels demonstrate that suffering often originates less from disability itself than from the reactions of society—mockery, pity, exclusion, underestimation, and the denial of equal opportunities. Literature thus becomes a critical medium for exposing how social structures contribute to emotional pain and marginalization. The novels *Asrār Qawqa’a* and *My Beloved Is Mute* represent important examples of this contemporary narrative transformation. In *My Beloved Is Mute*, disability is intertwined with emotional deprivation, social silence, and impossible love, revealing the restrictive nature of conservative social norms surrounding marriage and bodily difference. In *Asrār Qawqa’a*, hearing disability becomes a means of exploring social integration, communication, resilience, and identity formation while simultaneously critiquing pity-based attitudes and exclusionary practices.

Both novels therefore participate in reshaping the literary image of disability in modern Arabic narrative. Rather than reducing disabled characters to objects of sympathy or symbolic deficiency, the narratives foreground their humanity, emotional depth, and social struggles. Through these representations, contemporary Arabic literature increasingly contributes to broader cultural discussions concerning dignity, inclusion, equality, and recognition. Accordingly, disability in Arabic narrative can be understood not merely as a thematic issue, but as a critical lens through which literature interrogates social values, cultural norms, and systems of exclusion. Contemporary Arabic fiction thus plays an important role in reconstructing public awareness of disability and in promoting more humane and inclusive representations of difference within Arab cultural discourse.

4.3 Romantic Narrative and Emotional Conflict

The romantic narrative constitutes one of the most enduring and influential modes in literary tradition, both in Western and Arabic contexts. It is primarily grounded in the centrality of emotional experience, where love, longing, loss, and desire shape the progression of events and determine the psychological development of characters. In its classical form, the romantic narrative privileges subjectivity and internal reflection over external action, often presenting love as a transformative force that reveals the depth of human emotion while simultaneously exposing the fragility of social and moral structures. Within Arabic narrative tradition, the romantic mode has developed in close interaction with social, cultural, and religious frameworks that often regulate emotional expression and shape the boundaries of acceptable relationships. As a result, romantic narratives in Arabic literature frequently reflect tensions between individual desire and collective norms, particularly in relation to family authority, gender roles, and social expectations surrounding marriage. This tension produces a distinctive narrative structure in which emotional fulfillment is often delayed, obstructed, or rendered impossible by external constraints.

Emotional conflict lies at the heart of the romantic narrative. It emerges when internal desires clash with external realities, creating a space of psychological tension that drives the narrative forward. This conflict may take various forms, including the struggle between love and duty, passion and reason, individual choice and familial obligation, or emotional attachment and social prohibition. In many cases, romantic narratives resolve this conflict through separation, tragedy, sacrifice, or unresolved longing, thereby reinforcing the idea that emotional intensity is often inseparable from suffering. In contemporary Arabic fiction, romantic narrative structures have increasingly been reconfigured to reflect complex social realities, including issues of disability, marginalization, and communication barriers. Within this context, emotional conflict is no longer limited to conventional romantic obstacles such as class differences or family opposition, but extends to deeper existential and communicative dimensions. Disability, for instance, introduces new layers of emotional complexity by reshaping the ways in which love is expressed, received, and understood.

In *My Beloved Is Mute*, by Mohammed Al-Salem, the romantic narrative is deeply shaped by the presence of mutism as both a communicative limitation and a symbolic form of silence. The absence of reciprocal verbal communication intensifies emotional conflict, transforming love into a space of longing, confession, and unfulfilled desire. The epistolary structure of the narrative further reinforces this emotional asymmetry, as one voice dominates the expression of feelings while the other remains largely silent, thereby producing a persistent sense of absence and emotional imbalance. Here, love is not simply obstructed by social norms, but also by the fundamental limitations of communication, which amplify the experience of emotional isolation.

Similarly, romantic and emotional conflict in *Asrār Qawqa'a*, by Shahira Munir Al-Hasan, is shaped by hearing disability and its social implications. Although the novel emphasizes empowerment and inclusion, emotional relationships are still mediated by societal

perceptions of disability, particularly in relation to marriage and social acceptance. The emotional conflict arises from the tension between personal desire and social judgment, as well as from the struggle to assert emotional legitimacy in a context that often associates disability with inadequacy. In this sense, love becomes a site where social stigma is negotiated and contested.

Across both novels, romantic narrative functions as a space where emotional conflict reveals broader social contradictions. Love is not merely an individual experience but a socially regulated phenomenon shaped by cultural norms, communication systems, and institutional expectations. Disability intensifies this dynamic by introducing barriers to communication and social recognition, thereby deepening emotional tension and highlighting the fragility of intimate relationships within restrictive environments.

Furthermore, emotional conflict in these narratives is closely linked to the concept of silence. Silence operates not only as the absence of speech but also as a symbolic condition that reflects emotional suppression, social exclusion, and communicative breakdown. In romantic contexts, silence becomes both a source of suffering and a narrative device that intensifies longing and emotional depth. It transforms love into an experience defined as much by absence as by presence.

Ultimately, romantic narrative and emotional conflict in contemporary Arabic fiction reveal the intersection between personal emotion and social structure. They demonstrate how love is shaped, constrained, and redefined by external forces, and how disability can function as a critical lens through which the complexities of emotional life are explored.

4.4 Women with Disabilities and Double Marginalization

The representation of women with disabilities in literature occupies a critical intersection between gender studies and disability studies, where issues of identity, power, and social exclusion converge. Within this framework, the concept of “double marginalization” is used to describe the compounded forms of discrimination experienced by women who are both female and disabled. This dual condition places them at the intersection of two dominant systems of exclusion: patriarchal structures that regulate women’s roles in society, and ableist cultural norms that define disability as deficiency, dependency, or social limitation.

In many traditional Arab social contexts, gender roles are strongly shaped by cultural expectations related to marriage, motherhood, physical appearance, and social conformity. Women are often evaluated through socially constructed standards of femininity, which emphasize beauty, emotional availability, and reproductive capacity. Within such a framework, disability may be perceived as a disruption of these expectations, thereby intensifying social stigma and reducing opportunities for emotional and social integration. Consequently, women with disabilities may experience not only marginalization due to their physical or sensory condition, but also gender-based restrictions that limit autonomy and self-determination.

From a literary perspective, Arabic narrative has historically tended to underrepresent or stereotype women with disabilities, often portraying them as passive, dependent, or emotionally fragile figures. However, contemporary Arabic fiction increasingly challenges these conventions by presenting more complex and multidimensional representations. Disabled female characters are now more frequently depicted as active agents who navigate social barriers, pursue education and work, and engage in emotional and romantic relationships, despite the constraints imposed by society.

Within this evolving literary landscape, the novels *Asrār Qawqa'a* by Shahira Munir Al-Hasan and *My Beloved Is Mute* by Mohammed Al-Salem provide significant examples of how double marginalization is narratively constructed and problematized. In both novels, female characters with disabilities are positioned within social environments that often evaluate their worth through a combination of bodily ability and gendered expectations.

In *My Beloved Is Mute*, the female character's mutism becomes a focal point through which emotional exclusion and social rejection are intensified. Her inability to participate in verbal communication is not merely a personal limitation, but a socially interpreted condition that shapes perceptions of her suitability for love and marriage. The narrative thus reveals how disability intersects with gendered norms that prioritize communicative ability, emotional expressiveness, and social conformity in evaluating women's roles within romantic relationships. As a result, silence becomes both a lived condition and a symbolic representation of women's restricted agency within patriarchal structures.

In *Asrār Qawqa'a*, the representation of women with hearing disabilities presents a more dynamic and developmental perspective. Female characters such as Hayāh and Nawwār demonstrate that disability does not negate agency, intellectual capacity, or emotional depth. These characters engage in education, professional development, artistic expression, and emotional relationships, thereby challenging dominant stereotypes that associate disability with incapacity. However, despite these empowering representations, the narrative also exposes persistent social barriers, including stigmatizing attitudes toward marriage, conditional acceptance in romantic relationships, and familial anxieties regarding the future of disabled women.

The concept of double marginalization is particularly evident in the treatment of marriage as a social institution. In both novels, marriage becomes a site where gender and disability intersect to produce heightened forms of social scrutiny and control. Women with disabilities are often subjected to assumptions that question their desirability, reproductive suitability, and emotional compatibility. Such assumptions reflect broader cultural anxieties that equate bodily "completeness" with social legitimacy and marital value. Nevertheless, contemporary Arabic narrative also offers counter-discourses that challenge these restrictive frameworks. By portraying women with disabilities as capable of love, professional success, and social participation, the novels contribute to redefining femininity beyond physical ability. They emphasize resilience, emotional complexity, and intellectual capacity, thereby resisting reductive interpretations of disability as absence or deficiency. Ultimately, the representation of women with disabilities in contemporary Arabic fiction reveals the deeply embedded nature of gendered ableism in social and

cultural discourse. It also highlights literature's capacity to question and destabilize these norms by presenting alternative narratives of identity, agency, and inclusion. Through the lens of double marginalization, the selected novels expose how disability and gender intersect to shape lived experience, while simultaneously opening spaces for reimagining more equitable and humane forms of representation.

5. Comparative Textual Analysis

5.1 The Titles as Narrative Thresholds

The title of a literary work functions as a fundamental paratextual threshold that shapes the reader's initial expectations and frames the interpretive horizon of the narrative. It operates as a condensed semiotic structure that signals thematic concerns, narrative direction, and ideological orientation even before the text is read. In contemporary Arabic narrative, titles often carry symbolic, emotional, and cultural weight, particularly when dealing with sensitive issues such as disability, silence, and social exclusion.

In the two novels under study *Asrār Qawqa'a* by Shahira Munir Al-Hasan and *My Beloved Is Mute* by Mohammed Al-Salem the titles play a crucial role in constructing the discourse of disability and in establishing the emotional and symbolic tone of the narratives. Both titles immediately foreground disability-related concepts, but they do so through different semantic and aesthetic strategies that reflect distinct narrative philosophies.

The title *My Beloved Is Mute* presents a direct and emotionally charged statement in which affection ("My Beloved") is immediately juxtaposed with the condition of mutism ("Is Mute"). This linguistic structure produces an inherent tension between love and silence, intimacy and absence, connection and communicative rupture. The title therefore functions not merely as a description of a character's condition but as a declaration of emotional impossibility. It suggests from the outset that the narrative will revolve around a love experience shaped and ultimately constrained—by the inability to speak and respond. In this sense, mutism becomes both a literal disability and a symbolic representation of emotional blockage, social suppression, and unfulfilled desire.

Moreover, the possessive structure "My Beloved" emphasizes subjectivity and emotional ownership, positioning the narrator within a deeply personal and confessional framework. This reinforces the romantic and epistolary dimensions of the narrative, where love is constructed through memory, longing, and absence. The title thus encapsulates the central paradox of the novel: the presence of love alongside the absence of reciprocal communication.

In contrast, the title *Asrār Qawqa'a* (*Secrets of a Cochlea*) adopts a more metaphorical and interpretive approach. The phrase "Secrets" introduces an element of mystery, depth, and hidden meaning, while "Cochlea" directly refers to the anatomical structure associated with hearing. Unlike the direct emotional statement of the first novel, this title operates through

symbolic layering and conceptual ambiguity. It invites the reader to interpret disability not as a fixed condition, but as a site of meaning, transformation, and internal experience.

The cochlea, as a biological and auditory organ, becomes a metaphor for perception, communication, and sensory mediation. By framing disability through the notion of “secrets,” the title suggests that hearing impairment is not merely a limitation but also a complex experiential world that contains unspoken dimensions of identity, emotion, and social interaction. This symbolic structure shifts the reader’s attention from deficiency to interiority, and from medical condition to human experience.

Comparatively, the two titles reveal two distinct narrative orientations toward disability. *My Beloved Is Mute* emphasizes emotional rupture, silence, and relational impossibility, positioning disability within a tragic romantic framework. *Asrār Qawqa‘a*, on the other hand, emphasizes exploration, meaning-making, and the hidden dimensions of sensory experience, positioning disability within a more interpretive and potentially transformative framework.

Despite these differences, both titles share a common function: they foreground disability as central rather than peripheral to the narrative. Neither text treats disability as a secondary characteristic; instead, it becomes the organizing principle of meaning. Both titles also engage the reader in an ethical and interpretive stance, prompting reflection on how society perceives disability and how language constructs the boundaries between normality and difference. The titles operate as narrative thresholds that guide the reader into two different but interconnected representations of disability in contemporary Arabic literature. One foregrounds emotional silence and romantic loss, while the other foregrounds symbolic depth and experiential complexity. Together, they illustrate how contemporary Arabic narrative employs titles not merely as labels, but as interpretive keys to understanding the socio-emotional and cultural dimensions of disability.

5.2 Silence and Communication

Silence functions differently in the two novels.

In *My Beloved Is Mute*, silence becomes tragic and existential. The epistolary structure intensifies emotional absence because communication remains largely one-sided. The beloved is present as an emotional center but absent as an equal speaking subject. Silence thus symbolizes emotional deprivation and social suppression. By contrast, *Asrār Qawqa‘a* reconstructs communication through alternative modes such as sign language, writing, visual interaction, and educational support. Silence here does not necessarily signify absence; rather, it becomes a different communicative system capable of generating connection and self-expression.

5.3 Disability and Social Stigma

Both novels emphasize that social attitudes intensify suffering more than disability itself.

In *My Beloved Is Mute*, the relationship collapses under the pressure of familial authority and cultural assumptions that associate disability with social inadequacy. Mutism becomes a mirror reflecting broader social silence regarding emotional freedom and human difference. Similarly, *Asrār Qawqa‘a* exposes social practices of pity, ridicule, shouting, exclusion, and underestimation. The novel repeatedly demonstrates that supportive environments foster empowerment, while stigmatizing environments produce withdrawal and psychological fragmentation. Thus, both texts shift the source of tragedy from the body to society.

5.4 Women with Disabilities

The representation of women with disabilities occupies a central place in both narratives. In *My Beloved Is Mute*, the mute woman is subjected to emotional exclusion and social rejection because disability is perceived as diminishing her “marital value.” Her silence becomes symbolic of women’s restricted agency within patriarchal structures. In *Asrār Qawqa‘a*, female characters such as Ḥayāh and Nawwār challenge dominant stereotypes through education, creativity, employment, emotional relationships, and motherhood. Nevertheless, the novel still reveals the harsh realities of societal judgment, conditional marriage proposals, and fears surrounding disabled women’s social futures. Both novels therefore highlight the persistence of gendered discrimination while simultaneously affirming female resilience and capability.

5.5 Love and Marriage

Love and marriage function as critical tests of social acceptance. In *My Beloved Is Mute*, love remains impossible because society interprets disability as incompatible with idealized marital norms. The narrative becomes an elegy for emotional loss and deferred affection. Conversely, *Asrār Qawqa‘a* offers more hopeful possibilities. Although the protagonist encounters rejection and conditional acceptance, the novel ultimately affirms the legitimacy of emotional fulfillment and marriage for people with disabilities. The contrast between the two novels reveals two distinct narrative trajectories:

- tragedy and emotional defeat;
- resilience and negotiated empowerment.

6. Findings and Discussion

The comparative analysis of *Asrār Qawqa‘a* by Shahira Munir Al-Hasan and *My Beloved Is Mute* by Mohammed Al-Salem reveals a set of interrelated findings regarding the representation of disability in contemporary Arabic narrative, particularly in relation to emotional structures, social perception, and narrative construction.

6.1 Disability as a Socio-Cultural Construction

One of the central findings of this study is that both novels move beyond the medical understanding of disability and instead construct it as a socio-cultural and emotional experience. Disability is not presented merely as a physical or sensory limitation, but as a condition that acquires meaning through social interaction, cultural expectations, and institutional responses. In both narratives, suffering is shown to intensify not because of the impairment itself, but due to stigma, exclusion, and the lack of social acceptance.

6.2 The Dominant Role of Society in Producing Suffering

The analysis demonstrates that society plays a decisive role in shaping the lived experience of disabled characters. Family pressure, social judgment, and cultural norms significantly influence the trajectories of the characters in both novels. In *My Beloved Is Mute*, social and familial authority contributes directly to the failure of emotional fulfillment, where disability becomes a justification for rejection and emotional silence. In *Asrār Qawqa'a*, although the narrative is more optimistic, social attitudes such as pity, mockery, and underestimation still constitute major obstacles that the characters must overcome.

6.3 Silence as a Central Narrative Mechanism

Silence emerges as one of the most significant narrative and symbolic elements in both texts. In *My Beloved Is Mute*, silence is closely associated with emotional deprivation and communicative breakdown. It is intensified through the epistolary structure, which creates an imbalance of voice and reinforces the absence of reciprocal dialogue. Silence here becomes a marker of emotional loss and social impossibility.

In contrast, *Asrār Qawqa'a* reconfigures silence into a more constructive form. It is not merely absence of speech but a different communicative system that includes sign language, writing, and visual expression. This shift indicates a broader reconceptualization of communication, where meaning is not limited to spoken language.

6.4 Gendered Dimensions and Double Marginalization

A significant finding is the presence of “double marginalization” experienced by women with disabilities in both novels. Female characters are subject to both gender-based restrictions and disability-related stigma. The study shows that marriage, in particular, functions as a key site where these intersecting forms of exclusion become visible. Women with disabilities are often evaluated through socially constructed standards of femininity and bodily “completeness,” which affects their emotional and marital opportunities.

6.5 Emotional Conflict as a Narrative Driver

The findings also indicate that emotional conflict is the primary force driving the narrative development in both novels. Rather than relying on external action or complex plot events, both texts prioritize internal psychological tension, emotional longing, and relational

instability. In *My Beloved Is Mute*, emotional conflict is intensified by communicative absence and social prohibition, resulting in a tragic romantic structure. In *Asrār Qawqa'a*, emotional conflict is present but often resolved or mitigated through support systems, education, and social integration.

6.6 Representation of Disability: From Tragedy to Empowerment

The comparative reading highlights a shift in representation between the two novels. *My Beloved Is Mute* tends toward a tragic romantic model in which disability is associated with emotional loss and unfulfilled desire. In contrast, *Asrār Qawqa'a* presents a more developmental and empowering model, emphasizing agency, education, and the possibility of social participation. This contrast reflects two different narrative orientations within contemporary Arabic literature: one that foregrounds emotional absence and one that emphasizes inclusion and resilience.

6.7 Love and Marriage as Social Tests

Another key finding is that love and marriage function as social arenas through which disability is evaluated and interpreted. Both novels demonstrate that romantic relationships are heavily influenced by social perceptions of disability. While *My Beloved Is Mute* presents love as ultimately constrained by social rejection, *Asrār Qawqa'a* offers more varied outcomes, suggesting that acceptance is possible but still conditioned by societal attitudes and norms.

6.8 Discussion

The findings collectively indicate that contemporary Arabic narrative is undergoing a significant transformation in its representation of disability. Both novels contribute to redefining disability as a multidimensional experience that involves emotional, social, and cultural layers. However, they differ in their narrative strategies and ideological orientations: one emphasizes loss, silence, and emotional impossibility, while the other emphasizes adaptation, empowerment, and social integration.

These differences reflect broader tensions in Arabic literary discourse between traditional romantic tragedy and modern socio-realistic narratives. At the same time, both texts converge in their critique of social attitudes that marginalize disabled individuals and in their emphasis on the importance of recognition, inclusion, and emotional justice.

Ultimately, the analysis confirms that disability in contemporary Arabic narrative is not a marginal theme but a central lens through which issues of identity, communication, gender, and social structure are re-examined and redefined.

7. Conclusion

This study has examined the representation of disability in contemporary Arabic narrative through a comparative socio-emotional analysis of *Asrār Qawqa'a* by Shahira Munir Al-

Hasan and My Beloved Is Mute by Mohammed Al-Salem. The research was guided by the assumption that disability in modern Arabic fiction is not merely a medical condition, but a complex socio-cultural and emotional construct shaped by communication, social attitudes, and institutional frameworks.

The findings of the study confirm that both novels move beyond simplistic or purely medicalized representations of disability. Instead, they present disability as a multidimensional lived experience that intersects with emotional relationships, gender roles, and social expectations. In both narratives, the suffering of disabled characters is shown to be intensified not by impairment itself, but by social responses such as stigma, exclusion, misunderstanding, and restrictive cultural norms.

A key conclusion of this study is that silence operates as a central narrative and symbolic element in both novels. In *My Beloved Is Mute*, silence is associated with emotional deprivation, communicative rupture, and romantic impossibility, while in *Asrār Qawqa'a*, silence is reconfigured as an alternative communicative system that includes sign language, writing, and visual expression. This contrast highlights different narrative orientations toward disability: one rooted in tragic romantic loss, and the other in social integration and communicative diversity. The study also concludes that gender plays a significant role in shaping the experience of disability, particularly through the concept of “double marginalization.” Women with disabilities in both novels face intersecting forms of exclusion based on both gender and disability, especially in relation to marriage, social acceptance, and emotional legitimacy. This reflects broader patriarchal and ableist structures within Arab societies.

Furthermore, the comparative analysis demonstrates that contemporary Arabic narrative is gradually shifting toward more inclusive and empowering representations of disability. While *My Beloved Is Mute* tends to emphasize emotional tragedy and social impossibility, *Asrār Qawqa'a* offers a more optimistic narrative that highlights resilience, education, agency, and the possibility of social participation. Together, these texts reflect the transitional nature of modern Arabic literary discourse on disability. Ultimately, the study concludes that disability in contemporary Arabic narrative functions as a critical lens through which broader issues of identity, communication, love, and social justice are explored. Literature in this context does not merely represent disability; it actively interrogates the cultural and social systems that produce exclusion and shape human experience. The study recommends further comparative research on disability in Arabic fiction, particularly studies that incorporate gender analysis, narrative theory, and interdisciplinary approaches from disability studies. It also encourages expanding the corpus of analyzed texts in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how contemporary Arabic literature constructs and negotiates disability as a lived and symbolic experience

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, which examined the representation of disability in contemporary Arabic narrative through *Asrār Qawqa'a* by Shahira Munir Al-Hasan and *My Beloved Is Mute* by Mohammed Al-Salem, several academic and practical recommendations can be proposed to enhance future research and improve literary and social engagement with disability. It is recommended to expand comparative studies on disability in Arabic narrative by including a wider corpus of novels from different Arab countries in order to identify broader narrative patterns and regional variations. Future research should integrate interdisciplinary approaches, particularly combining literary criticism with disability studies, sociology, psychology, and gender studies, to deepen the analysis of disability as a socio-emotional phenomenon. More focused studies are needed on specific categories of disability in Arabic literature, such as hearing impairment, mutism, visual disability, and cognitive disabilities, in order to understand how each type is narratively constructed. Researchers are encouraged to examine the evolution of disability representation over time, especially the shift from traditional stereotypical portrayals to contemporary narratives of empowerment and inclusion. Arab writers are encouraged to represent people with disabilities in a balanced and realistic manner that avoids both extremes of pity-based portrayal and idealized “superhero” representations.

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