

The Politics of Gender and Gender relations with Reference to Sudanese Girls Songs

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Abstract

Sudanese women's experience in oral tradition remains unrecognised in its own cultural setting. *Agani al-Banat* (literally means the girls' songs) is not regarded as a serious artistry either because in most cases the author is unknown, or sung by those who are considered disrespectable according to the riverine culture i.e. the culture of the northern Sudanese who live along the river Nile.

The Girls songs are worth of studying and investigating due to the terminology, expression and symbols used in these songs, the rites associated with their performance, the continuity and dynamism of the songs themselves make the girls songs a pure women's culture with its distinctive features and symbols that influence or be influenced with social reality.

Through applying Griswold's cultural diamond framework this paper examines selected songs' texts, which carry various symbolism and meanings which, identify gender relations, gender identity, women's aspiration/feelings, and rebellion to the dominant culture. The journey within the girls' songs texts has uncovered both positive (empowerment) and negative (disempowerment) impacts of these songs on Sudanese women's experience. In term of empowerment the Sudanese women, through the Girls' Songs, break the silence towards some practices such as compulsory relatives' marriage and polygamy. While in terms of disempowerment, these songs, supports the dominant culture through participating in presenting and perpetuating the stereotype images of woman's identity as being only defined by her body.

Keywords: The Girls' Songs, Gender identity, Gender relations, Women's culture, Empowerment, Disempowerment

سياسة النوع الاجتماعي والعلاقات بين النوع (قراءة نسوية من خلال عينة من أغاني البنات السودانية)

الملخص باللغة العربية

لاتزال تجارب المرأة السودانية في التراث الغنائي التقليدي غير معترف بها. أغاني البنات لا تعتبر فنًا جادًا إما لأن المؤلف غير معروف في معظم الحالات، أو من يتغن بها لا ينلن قدر من التقدير والاحترام من قبل الثقافة النهرية-أي ثقافة شمال السودان والذين يعيشون على طول نهر النيل.

أغاني الفتيات جديرة بالبحث والدراسة وذلك يرجع للمصطلحات والرموز المستخدمة في هذه الأغاني والطقوس المرتبطة بأدائها واستمرارية وديناميكية الأغاني نفسها تجعل أغاني الفتيات ثقافة نسائية خالصة تؤثر وتتأثر بالواقع الاجتماعي. من خلال تطبيق إطار الماس الثقافي لـ Griswold، تبحث هذه الورقة في نصوص الأغاني المختارة، والتي تحمل العديد من الرموز والمعاني التي تحدد الهوية النوعية لكل من الرجال والنساء، بالإضافة إلى آمال ومشاعر المرأة السودانية، بل تمردها على الثقافة السائدة. ولقد كشفت الرحلة في نصوص أغاني الفتيات عن عدة جوانب للتمكين وعدم التمكين للمرأة السودانية.

حيث نجد أغاني البنات عملت على تمكين المرأة السودانية على سبيل المثال من خلال كسر حاجز الصمت تجاه بعض الممارسات والعادات السيئة مثل زواج الأقارب الإجباري وتعدد الزوجات. بينما من حيث عدم التمكين، فإن هذه الأغاني تدعم الثقافة السائدة في السودان من خلال المشاركة في تقديم وإدامة الصور النمطية لهوية المرأة على أنها محددة فقط من خلال جسدها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أغاني البنات، الهوية النوعية، الثقافة نسائية، الثقافة السائدة، التمكين، عدم التمكين

1. Introduction:

Sudanese women's experience in oral tradition remains unrecognised in its own cultural setting. *Agani al-Banat* (literally means the Girls' Songs) is not regarded as a serious artistry either because in most cases the author is unknown, or sung by those who are not considered respectable according to the revirine culture i.e. the culture of the northern Sudanese who live along the river Nile. It was not always the case with the experience of *al-Hakkama* (bardess) in western Sudan, whose songs are recognised within the oral tradition in western Sudan. *al-Hakkama's* songs have the similar themes of *Agani al-Banat* but with much emphasis on the conventional values of the tribes of western Sudan such as noble decent, courage, chivalry, and generosity. *Al-Hakkama* if she praises or ridicules a man, the whole community accordingly, will either estimate or underestimate him, therefore her song has an influential power on men.

By the girls' songs (*Agani Al-Banat*), I mean the songs which are composed and sung mostly by young, unmarried women (girls) in special occasions such as marriage and circumcision. Wedding ceremonies provide girls a socially acceptable forum for musical expression as well as an environment for expressing their own feelings sometimes their resistance to the dominant culture. The girls' songs fall within the category of "popular culture", and folklore. It is popular because people commonly like these songs, yet many consider them as vulgar and plebeian. "Popular" here:

Seems to be equated with exclusion from the institutions of knowledge production. It signals a form of knowledge supported by tradition and superstition, rather than by reason, and thus one particularly prone to error. 'Accepted by the people' means non-legitimate and crude(Shaiach 1989, p. 30)

However, **the importance of doing research** on the Girls' Songs derives from the following:

1. The Sudanese society, like any other Arab/African societies, derives its culture from oral knowledge.
2. The Girls' Songs have a significant influence on Sudanese culture because they constitute an art of both poem and melody, which gradually normalize the idea and the notion in the sub-consciousness.

Therefore, these Songs could be an important component of the oral traditions, which might affect negatively or positively on gender identity and the gender relationship.

3. The Girls' songs are worthy of studying and investigating due to the terminology, expression and symbols used in these songs, the rites associated with their performance, the continuity and dynamism of the songs themselves make the girls' songs a pure women's culture with its distinctive features and symbols that influence or be influenced with social reality.

For evaluative information about gender ideologies the article suggests to examine if the Girls Songs have impacts "in defining and reflecting established social and sexual orders and in acting as an agent in maintaining or changing such orders" (Kosoff 1987, p.15). The article, therefore, attempts to **investigate certain questions**: How gender identity and female/male relationship are represented in these songs? How these songs symbolise women's aspiration, feelings and/or rebellion to the dominant culture?

Having raised these questions, the article is intended to **investigate the following propositions**:

- The girls' songs as an oral tradition reflect the stereotype image of male and female identity.
- Analysis of girls' songs could identify women's aspiration and/ or rebellion to the dominant culture.

Through selected songs' texts sang during the 1980s and 1990s, this article intends first, to outline the values of the dominant cultural with regard to the traits of the ideal man and woman. Secondly to examine Sudanese women's experience and their perception of male/female relationship, so as to examine the voice of women as a social commentary upon the dominant values and the power structure they represent. Finally, to come to better understanding of the impact of the Girls' Songs -as an oral tradition- on the Sudanese women's life and their gender's identity.

2. Concrete Analytical Framework:

We can identify different themes within the songs texts which are made up of contradictory mix positions. Within the text of Girls' Songs we can construct different reading positions ranged between subordination, negotiation, accommodation and out-spoken attitudes.

In order to examine these positions, I will borrow the framework presented by Griswold. Griswold argues that cultural objects (e.g. songs, radio program and novel) are made by human beings i.e. they have creators. But in order to enter culture and become cultural objects; they must have people who receive them, people who are not passive audience. Culture, objects and the people who create and receive them are acting in a particular context. Griswold called this context the social worlds by which she means the economic, political, social and cultural pattern. From these four element: creators, cultural objects, recipients and social worlds, Griswold shaped her framework which she called a cultural diamond. For her “the cultural diamond is accounting device intended to encourage a fuller understanding of any cultural object’s relationship to the social world” (Griswold 1994, p. 15). Using Griswold’s cultural diamond, the four elements, which are examined in this article, are the creators refer to the singers, the cultural objects refer to the songs, the recipients are the audience and the social worlds refer to social economic and political context within which the songs are sung. Here what links cultural objects (the songs) with the social worlds (the socio-economic and political situations) are the meanings of these songs.

Therefore, the Girls’ Songs are examined as a text, which carries various symbolism and meanings that identify the gender identity of both men and women. Studying the Girls’ Songs on the basis of the texts alone, are nearly impossible and/or misleading without some detailed knowledge of the culture in which these songs are composed or circulated. The text, then, are analysed within the context of socio-economic and political situation and changes in Sudan. In other words, the songs are examined as text within a certain context which constructs for their listeners particular forms of knowledge and pleasure and makes available particular identity and identification.

Understanding the “real” or “inner” roles of the Girls’ Songs, yet, is not an easy task. So in my search for the meanings in the “Girls’ Songs,” I am going to address myself to what I consider important such as symbolism signifying submission, resistance or accommodation.

3. Sudanese women’s social reality and the Girls’ Songs:

The Sudanese society with its different ethnic groups is considered to a large extent a male dominated society where male/female relationship is hierarchically arranged

According to gender. The girl, since childhood, is brought up separately from the boy in an atmosphere which is full of warning and fear. She receives endless warnings about how to behave like a girl; to preserve her virginity and femininity; and to be obedient to her brother regardless of his age. It is an atmosphere full of don'ts that puts much emphasis on women's sexuality.

The main role has been defined for girls, since childhood, as being a wife and a mother. According to Tobia the socialization of the Sudanese child pass through three stages: the stage of alluration, of intimidation, and of adaptation (Tobia in Ferna (ed.), 1985). Tobia explained, further, that the alluration stage begins during early childhood, where the child's personality is shaped by two distinctive elements. The first element is the reward principle, when the child begins to learn the qualitative measurement of his action and behaviour according to the society's traditions and norms. This pedagogic method is carried either within the school and/or the family spheres. The second element is "the peer-group jealousy which drives the child to intimate his peer in order to overcome any possible sense of alienation or isolation among them" (Ibid, p. 105).

The Sudanese society, similar to other conservative ones, gives more attention to the girls' social conduct and attitudes. The fact that they are "girls" means that they are supposed not to play with boys or behave like them, besides they must stay at home and help their mothers in domestic activities. A girl with good morals should be a virgin; hence she must be circumcised to safeguard her chastity and virginity. The rationale behind circumcision is the family fear of insatiable female sexuality and the notion of strong woman's uncontrollable sexual drives which constitute a threat to social order.

Another pedagogic institution, which contributes to perpetuating the stereotype image of a good girl, is the school. Education is supposed to uplift a woman's consciousness and widen her options in life, yet, the school as a socialization agent emphasizes, through the curriculum, the significant roles of housewife and motherhood for the girls.

In fact, education paved the way for Sudanese women to incorporate in public life and achieve some economic and political gains. The first Sudanese women's association- which was founded in Omdurman in 1947- was organized by the educated young women.

This association, called “The Educated Girls’ Association”, was considered to be the nucleus of the organized women’s movement in Sudan. Yet Sudanese women’s associations (such as The General Union of Sudanese Women, The National Women Front and Sudanese Women’s Union) fail to understand the dynamic of patriarchal structure of the Sudanese society that impedes the social transformation of women. Instead, these associations together with the government “carried out an educational policy that differentiated between male and female and relegated women’s role in society to domestic domain” (El Bashir 1996, p. 64).

The initial dichotomy between man/women spheres comes in when the girl passes through puberty; here the intimidation stage comes. In this stage the importance of marriage for girl is highlighted to preserve girl’s chastity and honour (*Sharaf*). Honour in Sudanese culture of northern tribes is largely connected with the good behavior of their females. In interview when a Sudanese man asked whether killing, stealing, breaking promises affect one’s *sharaf* or not; he replied that this may affect family’s *sharaf*, *sharaf* here is synonymous to *Karama* (dignity) he explained further. In Sudanese culture “paradigm cases for loss of *ird* (decency) and *sharaf* are adultery and loss of virginity; the paradigmatically way of affecting somebody’s *karama* is by insulting him“ (Nordenstam 1968, p. 103). Therefore *Karama* is personal matter while *sharaf* is a family matter.

Yet, this stereotype image about woman’s virginity and honour of the family is not dominant among the Muslim nomads of western and eastern Sudan. This is due to more openness and liberal attitude towards sexual behaviour. The Baggara Muslim tribes of western Sudan are nomad cattle-owners. Their intermarriage with the African tribes of the south results in less restriction in their attitudes towards women. Baggara women “have less restraint placed on their personal liberty, except that tradition still requires from them to be circumcised“ (Hall & Ismail 1981, p. 139). In this respect the practice of circumcision is not related with controlling female sexuality, since Baggara woman has liberal premarital sexual relationship. The Baggara tribe has a custom called *al-hidaannah* (embracement). Here the male who is in love with a female goes to her home and lies with her in bed embracing, kissing her but he should not break her virginity. This premarital sexual relationship is practiced and allowed under the supervision of the parents. A male who practices “*Al-hidannah*” with the female is supposed to marry her, yet *al-hidannah* is not a perquisite.

This practice of premarital sexual relationship is, also, approved among Dar Hamid, the Arab Muslim tribes of western Sudan. The Dance *Elkudundaia kul zolun bai Rayah* literally means “everyone has his own idea in dancing partnership”. At the end of the game dances “every male facing a female would continue dancing till they disappear from sight. They disappear for sexual and flattering gestures or intercourse.” (Ahamed & Kheir 1990, p.6)

The traditional social and sexual barriers between the girls and the boys begin to gradually collapse when both of them have a chance to meet at the universities, and public offices in a way that would have been improbable a few years ago. Life in the three Towns (Khartoum, Khartoum Bahri and Omdurman) is changing so fast that you can see young women working everywhere in public restaurants, Hotels and on the street as vendors. Such an opportunity creates an environment for both girls and boys to progress and fosters more understanding of male/female relationships, yet they find that they still bound by the rigorous rules of social conduct in their society. This conduct puts much focus on the way young women are dressed, and how they behave in presence of men. A young woman (girl) should wear Tarah (a short head veil), while an adult woman should wear the tobe (Sudanese national garment) The Islamic state of ousted Al-Bashir passed a code that obliged girls/women to wear the veil which is “worn merely to comply with religious and social prescriptions governing female modesty“ (Hall & Isamil (ed.) 1981, p. 28). The major concern of Islamic fundamentalist is female sexuality; they argue that the freedom of women would degenerate into licentious promiscuity. For them, the Islamic identity is in danger so “the community must return to a fixed tradition, identify lies in the private sphere (women’s behaviour, dress, appearance), Muslim Personal laws are necessary at the level of the state ..., or the community“(Moghadam 1994, p.12).

It is important to mention here that even woman organizations, which are supposed to change the stereotype images of the ideal girl/woman, participate in highlighting these images. For instance both the Sudanese Women’s Union (represents the secularist discourse) and the General Union of Sudanese Women (represents Islamist discourse) are concerned with the ‘authentic’ Sudanese woman who should reflect the image of the ‘ideal’ Muslim woman in dress and attitudes. Hale states that both organizations:

[L]ay claims to evading the position and status of women, the former by placing the “woman question“ and the emancipation of women at the front of the political struggle;

the latter by also placing women and the family at the centre of the culture. Characteristic of both of these perspectives, however, is a politics of “authenticity” (Hale 1990, p. 3).

These organizations together with other social institutions play vital role in providing and presenting the normative value of the ‘ideal woman’. Therefore the identity politics which results from the search for authenticity are proactive so that Sudanese women are ideologically manipulated by male-controlled religio-political and secular political institutions to engage in or disengage from particular cultural practices or economic activities- all in the name of the “ideal woman” (Ibid, p.3).

The “ideal woman,” according to the tradition of Sudanese Northern Muslim tribes, should be protected through marriage. Marriage, therefore, is emphasized as an institution through which the girl’s sexuality is controlled and regulated and the honour of the family is protected. Until recently one of the marriage ceremonies was to confirm virginity of the bride by consummation of marriage in public way by displaying the virginity blood (Ahamed & Kheir 1990, p. 4).

4. The Marriage Rituals:

The rituals associated with marriage vary in certain details among Sudanese tribes. However Omdurman, with its large population from different ethnic groups from Sudan, gives a surprisingly uniform picture of how marriage is celebrated, regardless of the social class to which families might belong. Until recently wedding ceremonies lasted between three to seven days. With the societal restrictions over the gathering entertaining atmosphere between men and women, the wedding ceremonies are virtually the only relief from the routine of life in a segregated society. Also it is an opportunity for a young man and woman to single out a partner from among the guests. The first ritual before wedding ceremonies take place is *Gloat al-Khier* where a present from the groom is given to the bride. If the present is accepted, it means the groom has the family’s approval. In the early stage of the marriage negotiation the bride’s age has some significance. For instance the virgin girl is not expected to have an opinion on her marriage and the decision is left to her parents and the eldest brothers. While the widow or divorcee woman’s opinion is considered.

The second stage in the wedding rituals is *Sed al-Mal* (Bride dowry). In *Sed Al-Mal* the groom gives his bride the dowry, which consists of money, full wardrobe of clothes, shoes,

and cosmetic and food stuff. Socially the dowry is determined by many factors such as the bride age, beauty, social and academic status, virginity, marital status (i.e. whether she is widow or divorce). The economic status of the groom, likewise, plays a vital role in the amount of dowry in kind and money. The Sudanese expatriates in the Gulf countries brought into society extravagant marriage practices. The marriage tends to be a material transaction, where woman is ardent to marry a man who pays more regardless of his social background. The marriage, recently, is swinging towards materialistic considerations away from the old criteria. Previously, the qualification of the groom, among northern Sudanese tribes, was based on if he *is mu'assal* (i.e. of known descent or genealogy; known decent here implies he has an Arabic lineage, which is matter of pride and respectability). Until recently, the common question being ask about non-relative groom *is jinsu shinu* (literally what is his race/tribe?). As marriage in Sudanese culture “is not looked upon as a matter of personal choice but rather as a matter that concerns all members of an individual’s kinship group” (al-Shahi 1986, p. 69).

The inter-family marriage is not supported by the Islamic traditions because it produces weak genealogy; the northern Sudanese preference is given first to marriage within the lineage especially the cousins. In this respect the groom’s or the bride’s freedom of the choice of the partner, is less wide in practice since they have a social and moral obligation to marry within the lineage.

5. The Girls’ Songs (Agani al-Banat) what’s in a Name?

For the preparation of the wedding celebration, a special singer hired to train the bride how to dance. While the singer “sang the traditional bridal songs and rhythmically beat her drum with her hands, the girl expertly performed the sensuous dances which would mark her transition from adolescence to womanhood” (Hall & Ismail 1981, p. 158).

The Girls’ Songs took its particular name “*Agani al- Banat*” in the 1950s when a group of girls in Omdurman began to compose and perform these songs in occasion of the bride dancing lesson (*Talaimat al-Arousa*). Some researchers (alTahir, 1995, Malik, 2003) argued that the girls songs first appeared in the city of Kosti in 1935. At that time, Kosti was a famous trading centre from which the agricultural products were transported to Khartoum.

In that atmosphere, the tum-tum rhythm appeared in the singing of two slave-descendants twin sisters called Um Bashir and Um Jabair who lived in the *Radiefs* (slums).

Another name given to these songs the “girls of mat” (*Banat al- Sabata*), here *Sabata* refers to the mat made of palm leaf over which the bride perform her dancing (Al-Inba, 1997). The marriage ceremony, thus, was the place within which *Agani al-Banat* were composed and sung and afterwards other types of the Girls’ songs such as *Agani al-Gadat* were composed.

According to the Musicology *Agani al-Banat* falls within the rhythm of *al-Tum* .The musical instrument of *al-Tum* rhythm is called *Daluka* (a round instrument made of mud and covered from one side with sheep leather). A Sudanese Musicologist argues that the Girls’ Songs are synonymous to ‘*daluka* songs’, these type of songs reflect the influence of African culture in Sudanese folk songs. Another kind of influence can be felt within the Girls’ Songs comes from the Bob music (Al-Faurq, ND). The Tum and Bob music are used in Girls’ Songs for their quick and dancing rhythm which is necessary in the bride dance.

The language used in the Girls’ Songs is a mixture of Arabic and local slang, certain words used in these songs is considered by the dominant culture as vulgar. Some attribute that to the background of some singers who came from less conservative setting. With influence of the bourgeois class, among which the practice of the bride dance is prevailing, some English words are used in these songs.

Since the Girls’ Songs examine different topics, which are beyond the scope of this article, I will focus on two themes: gender identity and woman and man relationship. These songs could be a powerful tool in propagation of the ideas and certain values as they were sung among audience of men, women and children in marriage and circumcision ceremonies. Audio cassette, technology and website through which girl singers are enabled to inexpensively produce and market their songs has, likewise, enlarged the numbers of the Girls’ Songs listeners.

What distinguishes these songs is the lyrics, which are most short phrases keep growing, shifting and acquiring new flavour as girls singers continue to add to them and adapt to the situation requires.

For the lyrics to succeed, they must gain the approval of the audience which is mainly women (El-Nour,2014). Therefore, if one wants to know how Sudanese girls/women feel about men, about their bodies and their society one would listen carefully to the Girls' Songs.

6. The Sudanese Girls' Songs: Gender Identity:

The gender structure of a society reflects socially constructed and maintained arrangements made between men and women based on culture-specific gender ideologies. The Sudanese culture, similarly, has formal notions of gender identity which operate as “master organizing principles for other domains of life or social activity” Ortner & Whitehead, cited in Koskoff 1987, p. 5).

Several researchers (Keeling 1985, Campbell & Eastman 1984 cited in Koskoff 1987) have noted the links between women's sexuality, their culturally perceived sex role, and music behaviour. Some describe performances which amplify female sexuality such as erotic dance movements and doing hip-rotations to learn the right sexual movement. In the Girls' Songs, this correlation is perceived in the erotic bride's dance when the Tum and Pop music rhythm are heavily played and the tempo quickens for the bride to move quickly her breast, and butt.

6.1. The Norms of the Ideal Woman's Body:

The Girls' Songs, together with social practices, constitute a language which reflects women as a “body”. For any in-depth understanding of femininity, women's body is the first place to start with “it is the surface on which are inscribed the culturally coded and socially sanctioned contexts of the perfect or desirable women” (Thapan 1995, p. 34).

The Girls' Songs, which sang since the 1970s up to now, portrayed woman's body in form of symbolism such as Banana, Pine tree and Pony to indicate body's delicacy and a perfect stature; an example is:

<i>Gawama zya bana</i>	Her stature is like a Pine tree
<i>Wa ayniaha na'sana</i>	Her eyes are drowsy
<i>Ya shatalat al-bana</i>	You look like a Pine tree
<i>Wa bana rawiana</i>	a well-watered Pine tree.

The ideal woman in these songs, also, is the one who is as sexually attractive and her body is exposed to various norms such as not being slim, having big butts, round legs beautiful eyes,...etc.;

<i>Ya Bahiya....Iyiah</i>	Oh Bahiya.....
<i>Al-Shaham Da..Iyiah</i>	All this fatness....
<i>Al-laham Da..Iyiah</i>	All this flesh.....
<i>Al-Sadur Da..Iyiah</i>	Oh this breast.....
<i>Al-Saulub Da..Iyiah</i>	Oh this butt.....

The description of woman body in the above song uses words such as butt, breast, fatness which are not allowed in other social gatherings, yet, they are circulated through the Girls' Songs. By accepting such songs, the girls embrace and internalize the norms of the "ideal woman" as being their own defining characteristics.

The Sudanese society, which is influenced by the traditional and Islamic culture, views premarital sexual relationship as taboo and a sin. Unlike man, the virginity and chastity is prerequisite for the "ideal woman". In fact Sudanese traditions prefer men to have some sexual experiences before marriage. The following song text related women's virginity with pigeons:

<i>Al-Balaum nazal ya Ahalna..</i>	The pigeons had come down aye folks
<i>Al-Balaum nazal jnana..</i>	The pigeons had come down and made us crazy
<i>Al-hamam nazal fi al-saha</i>	The pigeons came down to the yard
<i>Al-hamam nazal braha...</i>	The pigeons had come down slowly...

In the subconscious of the Sudanese, the symbols used in this song have specific connotations. For example the identification of woman with "pigeon" is emphasized because it is known as a domestic bird and is considered as *tahir* (pure). Purity here is related with honour and virginity. Chastity and virginity of the girls, in Sudanese culture, become largely interrelated with the practice of circumcision which was supposed to control women's desire and sexuality.

Boddy (1987) in her “Spirits and Selves in Northern Sudan: The Cultural Therapeutics of Possession and Trance” explained that circumcised females are linked to pigeons because they are pure (*tahir*) and clean (*nazif*). She further elaborated:

To women circumcision has a different significance, for although it restrains their sexuality, this is not, they say, its purpose. The surgery, in that it is “hot” or “painful”(Harr), prepares a girl for womanhood; makes her body clean, smooth, and pure; renders her marriageable; confers on her the right to bear children; and invests her with fertility. (p.6)

Cleanliness, purity and virginity are linked with birds and circumcision to direct the focus to what are culturally appropriate feminine characteristics, therefore “gender images are naturalized: they become part of the taken-for-granted world within which women’s gender identities are reproduced and reaffirmed”(Ibid: 6).

The set norms of the “ideal woman” portrayed on the Girls’ Songs have its impact on women’s experience. Sudanese women, through different times, have exhibited, demonstrated and performed certain values, practices and rituals which reflected their celebration with their body. This celebration is clearly manifested in the preparation of the bride. The bride before the wedding is secluded for one month or more in order to gain weight and attain an ideal body. As she is fed and pampered during her seclusion, she realizes herself as the one who will nourish and cater to others. Another practice related to this body celebration a smoke bath (*Dukhan*) should be taken for the first time in the bride’s life to make her body smooth, light and perfumed. Then she will be massaged with *Dilka* (a mixture of baked durra flour and Indian or French scents). All these practice- *Dukhan* and *Dilka*- are done with purpose to please and satisfy the groom (Hall and Ismail, 1981).

Another celebration with woman’s body is openly displayed in the “bride’s dance”. This dance is accompanied with *Agani al-Banat* (the Girls’ Songs) and Drum beats. The bride dances in her wedding day -almost nude, dressing sexy garment- to present a “body show” for the groom and his relatives who judge her body.

Through the “bride’s dance” performance the bride clearly exhibits sexual energy, performs a provocative dance and dressed in her most seductive finery exposes herself to the public

scrutiny. Experiencing the body as a celebratory in the bride dance supposes a “desire attains fulfillment in women’s perception of their body as well as in the gaze of the other” (Thapan 1995, p. 33). On the other side, some Sudanese women feel their body as an oppressive when they fail to fulfill, among other things, these requirements of the “ideal woman”. These women try to find an outlet to those psychological pressures through practice of *al-Zar*.

Al-Zar is the name given to the ceremony required to pacify spirits known as *Zar*, *Dastur* or *Rih Ahmar* (Cloudsley, 1983). Most of those women feel alienated from their body or feel unappreciated by their husbands or society because either they did not give birth to a child or did not get married or do not match the set norms of the so-called the “ideal woman”. In *al-Zar* practice some possessed women dislike their body to the extent that they impersonate men through imitating their behaviour. They wear men’s clothing, smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol. All these behaviours are considered as a taboo for women, but within *al-Zar* ceremony they are permissible.

6 .2. The Norms of the “Ideal Man”:

The “ideal man” in the Girls’ Songs is not the one who has the “ideal body”. “In fact, the Girls Songs reflect different types of the “ideal man” for instance as the educated man (in particular the Teachers) and the Farmers in the 1960s, as the Soldiers in the 1970s, but after the appearance of the bourgeoisie class and expatriate since the 1980s, the ideal man is the one who is capable to satisfy her materials needs such as gold and *Tobe al-Jakar* and *al-Harir* (Sudanese national garment made from special and expensive materials). The following song suggests that:

<i>Aiza a’aris wa alabas al-Jakar</i>	If I want to get married and
<i>ashan walad al-Tugaar</i>	wear <i>tobe al-Jakar</i> , I should get married to the son of the merchant.
<i>Aiza a’aris wa al-bas al-Harir</i>	If I want to get married
<i>ashan walad al-Amir</i>	and wear <i>tobe al-Harir</i> , I should marry the son of the prince.

Physical strength and intelligence as attributes of the “ideal man”, are traits expressed in the Girls’ Songs. In the following song, the iron is used as metaphor to propose that man must be physically strong and tough as the iron does. An example is:

<i>al-Nasih hadidu..</i>	Al-Nasih is iron..
<i>al-bridu al-Shiekh, ana bridu..al-shiekh</i>	who is being liked by the Sheikh I like him
<i>sayaru</i>	I went in his procession.
<i>al-shiekh ganat leuk al-Sirara</i>	al-Sirara sang for him...
<i>galat al-shiekh warth...</i>	she said he is intelligent
<i>al-shatara</i>	by birth and has self-esteem.
<i>wa kada ma brida al-hagara.</i>	

It is clear that the physical strength symbolizes in this song suggests that masculinity is seen as biological trait, where maleness remains a recessive genetic trait likewise intelligence. Both those traits express in this song as an attribute of the "ideal man". The concept '*ma brida al-hagara*' indicates that Sudanese man who has a contempt and resentment against humiliation is the ideal man who has self-respect and self-esteem along with preservation of honour, courage and generosity.

Since the 80s, the expatriates from middle and lower classes have formed a big strata in Sudanese society, creating their own social and cultural attitudes. They brought with them new attitudes which are concentrated around their economic capabilities especially in marriage ceremonies. They compete with *al-Tugar* (the businessmen) in their social practices through spending a lot of money on their wedding ceremonies. This practices was reflected with admiration in the Girls' Songs :

<i>Al-Balal sabah ainai ya ainai</i>	My sweetheart, the light of my eyes,
<i>Jab al-Shalah min Oman</i>	he brought wedding present from Oman...
<i>Sada malau bil al-Dollar</i>	He paid his dowry in dollars.
<i>Jab al-Shalah mutikafi</i>	He brought enough presents for all,
<i>Sada malau bil al-fi</i>	he paid his dowry in thousands (Sudanese pounds)
<i>Jab al-shalah min Oman,</i>	He brought from Oman
<i>Kursi Jabar ma Kirdan.</i>	<i>Kursi Jabar</i> instead of <i>Kirdan</i> (gold necklace).

Also the "ideal man" in these songs has no choice of being non rich man, he should either be an expatriate in gulf countries or a successful businessman from Western Sudan e.g.:

<i>Al-ma bigtarib ya nas,</i>	Oh people, who does not being an
<i>yabiga Tagir Gareeb..</i>	Expatriate, he must be a merchant from Western Sudan
<i>Kan zalan kalimau...</i>	if he is angry, [if he does not like suggestion of being rich]
<i>yaga al- khzan, ya nas kalimu</i>	let him throw himself in the Dam, oh people !!

Finally the “ideal man” in these songs is defined as a generous person; generosity is commonly associated with having an Arabic origin. The ethnocentric tendency embedded in the following song, albeit, is not always echoed by the singers. In various occasion, they attribute any good quality of the ideal man with reference to the groom tribe. The singer if she praise the groom’s tribe, she will get in turn what is called nigta (a sum of money paid by the groom, his relatives and friends). An example is:

<i>Habibi da al- Arabi min Taba</i>	My sweet heart is an Arab from Taba (city in central Sudan)
<i>al-shagi min tibutu al-fi</i>	My sweet heart is Shaagi (Tribe from North Sudan)
<i>jibu ma biaadu da hibibi</i>	He is jaali (Tribe from North Sudan)
	by origin.
<i>da Jaali min Jaadu</i>	

7. Sudanese Girls’ Song and Gender Relationship:

The girls in these songs express, also, how they feel about men. The singer uses these songs as strategies to tell her community that she is in love, to defend her love and even to encourage or refuse suitors and ridicule unwanted ones. These love songs represent a social criticism since the girls, through these songs, denounce the dominant culture, which presumes that women should have no decision in the marriage negotiation .

Through Girls’ Songs, Sudanese woman breaks this silence and expresses her desire and choice for the future husband. In the following example, the singer declares to her family that she is in love and defends her feeling by arguing that love affair is not something she initiates, it is known since the time of prophet Mohammed’s companions. The singer employed wittingly the same dominant Islamic culture in order to defend her love.

<i>Ya Uma ya Yaba</i>	Oh mother, oh father
<i>al-hub ana ma badatu</i>	why are you worried,
<i>min zaman al-Sahaba</i>	I did not start the love,
<i>Ya dahb al-shiebika</i>	it had been since the time of prophet's
<i>al-nas tahmoni baika</i>	companions,
	Oh my hooked piece of gold, people accused me by falling in
	love with you.

Sudanese men and women, currently, have the freedom to marry from outside their tribe, yet, the marriage between first cousins is still common. The inter-family or tribe marriages are preferred in Sudan for different reasons: first these types of marriages keep the authority within agnostic kinship group and keep the family or tribe wealth because the gifts and the bride wealth paid on such marriage are not taken outside the family/tribe. Moreover, the grooms pay less wealth when they marry inside their tribe. Secondly, it helps to secure the family or tribe as an economically and politically corporate group (Salih, 1987).

In the following songs, the singer declares her resistance to the dominant norms which forced her to get married to one of her cousin. She denounces such kind of marriage and even ridicules her cousin.

<i>Umi galat lia</i>	My mother told me...
<i>ukhdi wad al-a'am</i>	to get married to my cousin..
<i>gulta liha la</i>	I said to her no,
<i>la la ma bradh</i>	I won't accept him.
<i>aritu bil a'am</i>	he is awful,
<i>al-ashtu kulah hum.</i>	Life with him will be miserable.

In fact, we can cite several examples from the Girls' Songs (*Agani al-Banat*), which have as a text underlying didactic-pedagogical intent and conveying their own cultural messages, while permitting or repressing the reproduction of models of social behavior. These songs, also, reveal what is commonly called "culture" in the ways of acting, thinking and perceiving social reality and interact with it.

The emphasis of the songs' texts on female/male relationship and choice of partner entails that girls have created a space through which they reveal their feelings and challenge certain aspects of their patriarchal society. Through these songs Sudanese girl has advantage to address the whole community and used them "not only as social criticism but as strategies to defend herself, attack others, encourage suitors, announce an engagement, remind young men of the tribe that she is in love, shame or ridicule an unwanted swain, or justify her decision to break an engagement" (Joseph 1980, p. 427). When the male Sudanese asked why such songs are allowed to be performed in public, they reply that a wedding will not be a wedding without these songs, besides they do not take these songs seriously, because they consider them as "play" and accordingly socially meaningless and ineffective.

Therefore, the sexually attractive, virgin and obedient woman as images of "ideal woman"; the rich, the strong, and the intelligent man, as images of the "ideal man" which are depicted in these songs, proposed several questions such as: If the girls are passive agents in this culture of the "ideal woman" or do they participate actively and creatively in it? One can conclude that these songs, which are sung by the girls, provide no alternative to the stereotypes prescribed by the dominant culture, but conform and accommodate with the images assigned to them since these songs "usually express moral and cultural values and stress social attitudes" (Muhammad 1996, p. 63).

Despite the fact that these songs represent some resistance to this dominant culture, yet they reflect the collective consciousness of the society as a whole. This collective consciousness represents a discourse of male-dominated society where the social, the religious and the economic parameters interact together and call for the young girl's singers to highlight female sexuality as a norm. Within such a pattern one can delve into assessing the Girls' Songs as an agency for women's empowerment or disempowerment.

8. Assessment of the Girls' Songs in terms of women's (dis)empowerment:

The Girls' Songs as a sites for discursive construction of meaning of gender identity and gender relations can be assessed through two divergent outlooks: The first one of a disempowerment in which these songs define women only by their bodies.

In case of Sudanese women represented in these songs, woman's mind is out of the question because this is an attribute only for man.

Here I do not deny woman's celebration with her body as she experiences and manipulates it for her physical and emotional well-being, but what I deny that woman's identity is being only defined by her body. In patriarchal epistemology, culture is a product of mind and therefore culture is made by man while woman's body is naturally created for procreation and reproduction, hence woman is related not to culture but to the nature. Woman in her relation to her body is dominated by the set norms of the "ideal woman", which are defined by the culture. Woman, in this sense, is involved in a contest with herself and other women to attain those norms and she became more delighted if she has fulfilled them than if she developed intellectual skills. Furthermore, relating women only to body will lead to the polemical binary of man/woman, mind/body, culture/nature and the superiority of mind over body and consequently the superiority of man over woman.

In term of disempowerment, the Girls' Songs may, similarly, perceive as a mechanism, which—while giving women the impression of gaining power—ultimately supports the dominant culture through participating in presenting and perpetuating the stereotype images of the 'ideal woman. Through reiterated exposure to these songs, then, the girls internalized their gender identity as has been prescribed in these songs. The associations of the songs mainly with wedding ceremonies is, likewise, a mode of participation in the 'market marriage', whilst the singers don't attack the institution of marriage itself in their songs.

The second perspective is of an empowerment if we look at the body as a source of bargaining power being used by women. Though this perspective has its immoral implications for many, but also it is worthy to be considered. Woman, who has the beautiful and the ideal body, can use her body to manipulate men in order to get a well-off partner. In the Girls' Songs women express their celebration with this power, for example:

Al-Mahira Agad al-Galad

ya arousna ...,

Arisic galabo al-Thapat.

Oh our bride the beautiful Pony, and the

continuous series of a perfumes.

How warm and how sexy you are...

our bride ...your groom could not resist your beauty.

The Girls' Songs, as well, are used by Sudanese women as a powerful weapon against certain traditions and norms. Through these songs, Sudanese women break the silence towards some practices such as compulsory relatives' marriage and polygamy. In these songs they also became candid about their feelings. The love songs represent a form of social criticism since it implicitly assaults three stereotypes often expressed by men that: first women, especially girls are too foolish or uninformed to hold strong opinions about something important such as the choice of husband; second they are merely tools in the male game of strengthening past affinity relationships or establishing new ones through marriage; third unmarried girls, segregated from contact with non-related males, have no opportunity to develop positive or negative feelings toward any particular man (Joseph, 1980).

Studying the Girls' Songs is central to understand the dynamics of Sudanese women's empowerment because of the different ways in which the girls "appropriate a profound awareness of changes in their environment as a form of empowerment to undermine fixed perceptions of women and their seeming marginality in the social process" (Mugambi and Helen 1994, p.69). Therefore these songs can be employed as social and political weapons and strategic devices which will help women/girls to have voice in their community and gain control over their lives.

Finally I expect by examining these songs as a text, which carries symbolism of resistance and out-spoken stands among the girls, we would enhance new directions in the critique and analysis of Sudanese women's experience in lyric and oral traditions. As well by reflecting the experience of the Girls' Songs as a "pure women's culture" we will enhance women's empowerment.

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