

Intersectionality and Cultural Hegemony: Unravelling Gender, Class, and Religious Oppression in The Kurdish Bike

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ABSTRACT

Alesa Lightbourne's *The Kurdish Bike: A Novel* is a narrative of Kurdish culture through the eyes of an American woman, especially the image of women in Kurdish society. This study focuses on Kurdish people, with a particular focus on Kurdish women, by examining gender dynamics, class distinction, and religious and cultural norms that shape the identity of individuals. The study scrutinizes women's identity and oppression through employing Kimberlé Crenshaw's theoretical framework of intersectionality. The study explores how women are conditioned by the patriarchal system. In addition, the study will apply Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony to examine the impact of cultural norms and religion on prevailing dominant ideologies in society. Overall, through this multidisciplinary approach, the study will provide a comprehensive analysis of the image of women as depicted by the writer. Another aim of the study is to examine to what extent the text represents Kurdish culture. This study argues that Kurdish women suffer from different sources of oppression such as, gender inequality, socioeconomic status, cultural norms, and traditions justified under the guise of religious customs within Kurdish society. It also contends that the novel inaccurately represents Kurdish culture due to the writer's limited regional experience, reliance on stereotypes about Kurdish women, and incorrect claims about female genital mutilation, which academic research shows occurs at a much lower rate than depicted.

KEY WORDS: Identity, Intersectionality, Kurdish Culture, Religion, Women, Alesia Lightbourne

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Kurdish Bike: A Novel* is a narrative of the cultural oppression of women in Kurdish society through the eyes of an outsider. Alesa Lightbourne is an American writer who has been an English professor and teacher in six countries, mostly third-world countries. She has also run her writing incorporated for more than twenty years. The novel is a self-published work that was published in 2016. She started writing it as a memoir, then changed it to a novel. It is based on her teaching experience in a school in the suburb of Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2010.

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of Lightbourne's portrayal of Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan, with a particular focus on Kurdish women, who are frequently

subjected to stereotypes portraying them as lacking authority, incapable of rational thinking, and allowing men to subordinate them. The objective of this study is to scrutinize women's identity by employing Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theoretical framework. The study argues that the intersection of gender, class, and religion plays a vital role in shaping women's identities. Identity, inequality, and power dynamics in society are shaped not only by a single social factor, such as race, gender, or class, but by a complex web of interconnected and interrelated significant elements. Hence, employing intersectionality as a foundational framework for analysis allows for gaining a deeper comprehension of inequality and oppression in society and how these factors collectively shape the identity of Kurdish individuals. After giving an analysis of how intersectionality impacts and shapes the identity of Kurds and Kurdish women, in particular, each factor; gender, class, and religion is explained thoroughly.

This study is divided into five sections. The first section gives a brief introduction. The second part is dedicated to methodology and theoretical frameworks in

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which intersectionality and Cultural Hegemony are briefly explained. The third one provides a deep analysis of the novel based on intersectionality and cultural hegemony. The fourth part answers the last question of the study; it provides a critical overview of the novel and examines to what extent the writer is successful in representing Kurdish culture. Finally, the last section provides the conclusion of the study.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a blended theoretical framework comprising Kimberlé Crenshaw's theoretical framework of intersectionality and Antonio Gramsci's cultural hegemony to investigate how Kurdish women's identity is shaped in Alesa Lightbourne's *The Kurdish Bike: A Novel*. Intersectionality is used to gain a deep understanding of how different factors such as gender, class, and religion impact the identity of Kurdish people in general and Kurdish women in particular, and how these factors collectively oppress women. Moreover, cultural hegemony gives detailed analyses of how cultural norms and values impact identity.

2.1 Intersectionality

Klages defines intersectionality as "a theory that examines not just one form of cultural or social oppression at a time, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, etc., but it explores how social oppression is often multidimensional and works as a system" (2017, p. 241). Intersectionality is a field of study that examines how different types of prejudice against race, sex, and class are often experienced together rather than separately. Furthermore, Collins & Bilge also state that "the events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways" (2020, p. 2). Similarly, Tyson argues "No one has a simple, uncomplicated identity based on race alone. Race intersects with class, sex, sexual orientation, political orientation, and personal history in forming each person's complex identity" (2015, p. 359). This theory provides a rich analysis by uncovering how overlapping identities and interconnected systems of oppression shape individuals' experiences.

The term intersectionality was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to show that gender and race overlap in the oppression and discrimination against women of colour. She criticizes mainstream feminism as it disregards how race operates to reduce specific facets of sexism and the frequent privileges whiteness provides; in doing so, they contribute to the subjugation of other women (Crenshaw, 2013). Crenshaw also (1991, p. 1242) argues that "violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such

as race and class". Intersectionality is a concept that aids us in understanding how different forms of inequality overlap and converge. It challenges traditional thinking that categorizes inequality within a single framework, such as racism or feminism. She contends that personal encounters with prejudice vary among individuals; however, the existing definition of discrimination is insufficient in encompassing the experiences of people who fall beyond its restricted confines, hence leading to their marginalization (Crenshaw, 1991).

To sum up, gender is not the only cause for inequality, oppression, and discrimination against an individual, it is rather accompanied by other dimensions of one's identity such as, race and class. Various factors such as gender, race, class, religion, and sexual orientation intersect in oppressing and discriminating against women. Identity is not a stable concept; it is affected by external factors such as culture, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, and examples of internal factors are political or religious beliefs, morals, and experiences.

2.2 Cultural Hegemony

Gramsci's theory posits that the dominant group maintains its power not just via economics and politics, but also through cultural and ideological hegemony. Societal control is maintained through the dominant cultural norms, shared values, and beliefs that shape public narratives, leading individuals to embrace their status quo, which includes oppression and social inequality. The classic Marxist concept that power is entirely based on economic factors was also criticized by Gramsci who maintained that to keep its hold on power, the ruling class employs both economic and cultural strategies. Examples of cultural hegemony techniques include the dissemination of ideas through religious institutions, education, and the media (Bates, 1975). The dominant group in society maintains cultural and ideological hegemony. Societal control is maintained through the dominant cultural norms, shared values, and beliefs that shape public narratives, leading individuals to embrace their status quo, which includes oppression and social inequality. Furthermore, religion is a powerful factor in upholding cultural hegemony. Thus, Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony is employed to shed light on the impact of religious beliefs and cultural norms on the inequality and oppression of women in society.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE KURDISH BIKE

3.1 A Brief plot Summary of the Novel

The Kurdish Bike is comprised of ten titled chapters and tells the story of an American teacher, Theresa Turner, seeking new experiences after her recent divorce. She comes to Erbil to teach English in a for-profit international school organized for the children of diplomats and

businessmen. The school also offers free education to a small portion of children of martyrs. Unlike other expat teachers, Theresa wants to explore the countryside, hoping to be invited for a cup of tea by one of the villagers to learn more about Kurdish culture. Buying a bike and befriending a widow, Ara, and her daughter, Bezma, she sets out in a nearby village. The novel simultaneously focuses on her challenges in school and frequent visits to her new friends. The school follows a rigid syllabus and does not allow teachers to use contemporary pedagogical techniques. As an experienced teacher, Theresa is unhappy and offended to be monitored by the school administration; therefore, she calls the school a fortress. The other focus of the novel is Kurdish women's lives and cultural restrictions on women. Bezma, Ara's daughter, studies English at university. Her English fluency is limited, which results in her extracts containing numerous grammatical mistakes (we will not correct her sentences in quotations unless they cause confusion). Bezma has an affair with a boy named Hevar, but her mother does not like him; she tries to convince her mother to bless their marriage. Theresa becomes a part of their family and attends their wedding. By the end of the novel, it is unclear whether Theresa stays in Erbil for the following year or not. It ends with her colleagues advising her not to think about helping her village friends for the rest of her life.

3.2 Navigating the Intersections

Discrimination is implied based on various reasons; mostly the social and cultural backgrounds contribute to forming the element of the conflict. Gender is not the only reason for inequality and oppression against an individual; it is rather accompanied by other dimensions of one's identity, such as race and class, religion, age, and sexual orientation. In the case of Kurds, Kurdish women suffer oppression from more than one source; they might be treated unfairly due to their sex, class, religion, ethnicity, or personal history. This section focuses on how gender, socioeconomic status, and religion intersect in causing inequality, oppressing women, and shaping the identity of Kurds in the novel.

Kurdish women encounter inequality from various sources. Not necessarily all factors intersect simultaneously in the inequality and oppression against all the women characters; in some instances, only two of the factors might overlap. The inequality and oppression Bezma and Seema experience are not only due to their gender, but other factors also play big roles. Seema, a student in Theresa's class and from Bezma's village, experiences inequality and oppression at multiple levels: at school by her class and at home due to her sex and religious practices. Female genital mutilation is widely practiced in the village and all girls and women are its victims. Seema suffers from both the fact that she has not

been mutilated yet and from the fear of the inevitability of getting cut in the future; as a result, she acts abnormally and gets detention for the first time at school for hitting her classmate. "Miss, what it was like when you had khatana. Nobody will tell me. I asked Helin, and she just laughed and said, I'm filthy" (Lightbourne, 2016, p. 202). The practitioners of FGM believe it is a part of their religion. Another source of inequality Seema experiences is the fact she comes from a lower class and, consequently, feels inferior to her classmates. This has an impact on her identity since this economic disparity affects her personality, making her shy and quiet during all classes. Her physical appearance reflects these conflicts, as well as Theresa describes her, "The overall image is of a little gypsy who's traipsed in from the forest" (Lightbourne, p. 79). Seema's identity is affected by her gender, class, and religious practices.

On the contrary, the boys in Seema's class are confident and behaving very authoritatively. Jaber, a son of a businessman, wants to convert her Christian teacher to Islam: "Miss, I want to make a deal with you . . . Simple, you become a Muslim" (Lightbourne, 2016, pp. 129-130). Karwan does something disgusting in class, but he will not be punished because he is the son of a very powerful man; "he can pretty much do as he damned well pleases in this school and nobody's going to say boo" (Lightbourne, p. 138).

Men and women do not have the same rights and responsibilities in Kurdish culture. Inequality affects women more than men as they are double or even triple oppressed in most cases. Economic status affects men, while women are affected by patriarchal systems, cultural norms and religion, and their economic dependency. Soz and Bezma are both dominated by Hevar's cultural norms. Hevar as an elder brother deprives Soz of the right to choose her future partner due to her prearranged commitment to an elderly man from infancy, and society including women themselves justifies Hevar's action. Similarly, Bezma is subjugated by Hevar as she acts according to his preferences and quit her study only because her education did not please Hevar. Besides their gender roles, female characters are oppressed by religious beliefs as well. Female genital mutilation, a human rights violation that is rooted in religion, is widely practiced in the village.

3.3 Intersections of Patriarchy: Analysing Inequality based on Sexes

Iraqi Kurdistan, where the novel takes place, is a male-dominated society, and the novel sheds light on Kurdish patriarchy and gender dynamics in Kurdish society. The patriarchal system has a profound impact on the lives and identities of women; it restricts the responsibilities and expectations of women in both the private and public domains. Kurdish women are portrayed, especially in

rural areas, as dominated and submissive to patriarchy, and Kurdish men are depicted as dominating. Bezma, a young villager who studies English at university, has a secret lover. She states that after their wedding, her husband grants her permission to attend college until they have a child. She agrees to quit from university because she considers domestic duties to be her primary responsibility. Her decision to drop out of college after giving birth demonstrates the conventional gender roles in Kurdish society. The relationship between Bezma and her husband also exemplifies a conventional marital framework, in which the husband greatly influences the decisions his wife makes in life, especially in rural areas. Bezma is expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities over her professional goals. The dominant patriarchal ideology has made her embrace her condition as her only fundamental role. Thus, women are not independent and there is not a healthy balance of authority within the institution of marriage in Kurdish culture.

One aspect of the patriarchal system in rural areas is family control over women's choices. Typically, the father takes on the role of the household leader who directs and controls the family. However, in the father's absence, this authority is transferred to brothers or the mother. Theresa says, "if mothers and brothers have always prevented daughters from getting married and leaving home, then so be it" (Lightbourne, 2016, p. 179). This reference to mothers and brothers restricting girls from getting married and moving away denotes a family structure that is dominated by men, with men having a considerable influence over women's life. In the situation involving Bezma, since her father has passed away, her mother takes on the position of the primary authority figure in the family, and this role represents a departure from conventional gender roles.

Bezma's submission to Hevar before their engagement manifests men's domination over women. Theresa suggests teaching Bezma to try riding her bike, as it is great exercise and keeps her in shape, but Bezma instantly refuses this and her reaction shocks Theresa, "No, not possible [...] Hevar not like [sic]. Someone said to him Bezma on bicycle; he not want me." End of discussion" (Lightbourne, 2016, p. 83). Kurdish women act according to their culture and their identity is the product of their society, as "Butler argues that identities are products of the discourse . . . [they] are cultural constructions rather than pre-set" (as cited in Longhurst et al., 2008, p. 142), and they succumb to male dominance and cultural norms. Cultural norms have shaped the identity of Bezma. Theresa shows astonishment at how willingly women are controlled by cultural norms and male dominance, saying, "I keep imagining how much freedom Bezma would have on a bike of her own. It gripes me, the way she gave up so easily. She's not even engaged, and already she's letting a man control her?"

Muslim man!" (Lightbourne, 2016, p. 83). Therefore, Bezma's identity is constrained because she does not resist the norms that her culture imposed on her; she surrenders to them.

3.4 Class Inequality and Social Stratification

The novel portrays a wide gap between social classes: People of the village represent the lower-class, teachers at the Academy represent the middle class, and most of the families of the students in the Academy represent the high class. Among these classes are the offspring of martyrs, who are originally from the lower class and are poor, but they enjoy the privileges of the high class, such as free education at a prestigious private school. The government has mandated the school to provide free education to a percentage of children of martyrs. The school must represent one class but there are divisions in the supposedly same class. However, having one privilege of the high class does not make the characters belong to the high class. Seema is one of these privileged poor children who is lucky to study at the school for free, but she still belongs to her lower class. Her attire makes her instantly identifiable in the classroom, and her behaviour demonstrates her class. Seema is not confident; she is quiet and stays silent throughout the class. She feels inferior to other rich kids. Class disparity has a significant impact on the identity of Kurdish individuals, as well as the responsibilities and limitations that society places on them.

Disparate treatment exists even among the students who belong to the high class; some of the students who come from powerful families in the government are addressed as "Kaka" before their names, and they do not eat with the rest of the students lest they be poisoned. They do what they please, and even the administration of the school shows a higher level of respect for them which leads to preferential treatment, "Karwan happens to be the son of some big honcho in the government, which means that he can pretty much do as he damned well pleases in this school and nobody's going to say boo" (Lightbourne, 2016, p. 138). This class division has an impact on the identity of the students, on both the way they see themselves and the way they are seen and treated by their surroundings.

Women in rural areas are socially and economically oppressed. This economic oppression does not apply to all women in Kurdish society as Kurdish teachers in the Academy are economically independent. This disparity is apparent between rural and urban areas. Job opportunities are very limited in the village. Women depend on their husbands or male relatives for financial support. After Ara's husband dies, her husband's father neglects them and only supports Ara's husband's younger wife. Ara lives on a widow's pension, which is not much considering she having a daughter studying at university.

Ara and Bezma are unable to promote their economic status due to their age, lack of job opportunities, and restricted societal norms. This restriction of financial resources and economic reliance results in a diminished feeling of agency and consequently leads to a low sense of self-efficacy. This is reflected in Bezma's personality; she surrenders to Hevar and his family's oppression and does not confront them. Moreover, the writer does not support this class division and inequality in the novel; on the contrary, she undermines it.

3.5 Cultural Norms and Religion

In Kurdish society, the public narrative is that the honour of a family takes precedence over the rights and liberties of individuals, especially of women. Soz, the younger sister of Hevar, falls in love with a guy. However, her family prohibits this relationship due to her prearranged commitment to an elderly man from infancy. Consequently, she burns herself during Hevar's wedding ceremony to shame Hevar. Afterwards, Hevar murders Soz's lover. Nevertheless, society, including women, rationalizes and accepts Hevar's action, believing that he, as a brother, is justified in doing so to save the family's reputation. Huda accepts and rationalizes honour killing; she states that "Hevar was within his rights to forbid Soz to get married. Most likely he was within his rights for shooting the young man, too" (Lightbourne, 2016, p. 310). Honour killing exemplifies the normalization and even promotion of violent actions within the context of cultural hegemony. Another example is the killing of Jennifer's sister-in-law by the husband, "You mean a man can kill someone and get away with it if she's, his wife? Jake whistles in amazement" (Lightbourne, p. 184). What is shocking is that even the police stay out of honour killing. The prevailing cultural dominance in this context reinforces patriarchal standards because male power and control are considered essential.

Shortly after Hevar kills her sister's boyfriend, Bezma is sent home by her mother-in-law, who accusing her of bringing shame to the family and tainting their honour for losing her hymen and being impregnated before her wedding. Preserving girls' hymens is vital in Kurdish culture as it represents their honour and purity, and the decision of Bezma's mother-in-law to send her home due to losing her hymen before being married reflects these deeply embedded societal and cultural norms around female honour and purity. Furthermore, in Kurdish society, women, rather than men, are held responsible for committing the same sin. While engaging in a sexual relationship outside of marriage or before marriage, in many cases, only the woman is held accountable and expected to feel shame. Bezma's mother-in-law does not blame his son for sinning; she only holds Bezma responsible. The whole society has been affected by this ideology. Houda says that even in the case of rape, the

woman can be blamed, "As for Bezma, even if a woman is raped, she can be blamed. It's all about honour" (Lightbourne, 2016, p. 310). These societal views contribute to the cultural dominance that supports patriarchal beliefs. This dominance maintains the power imbalances that benefit men and subjugates women. These norms stand for hegemonic beliefs in which women's bodies and sexuality are controlled to preserve family honour.

In addition, religion is used as a powerful factor in upholding cultural hegemony. Religion for people in the village is unquestionable, and it shapes their identity in general and Kurdish women in particular. It has made them believe in certain ways: they believe in destiny, accept their situation, and relate everything that happens to them to God's plan, and in the face of religion, they are unable to change and develop, "Doesn't this make you angry?" She [Houda] sighs. "There is no sense in being angry with God or doubting His plan." (Lightbourne, 2016, p. 311). The Kurdish characters are submissive to religious beliefs and prevailing cultural norms. Unlike the Kurdish characters, the writer does not support these cultural norms and religious beliefs, and the novel overall does not promote stereotypical issues and cultural norms; the writer undermines them through Theresa, and she wants to change their ideologies and way of life. One example is that she strongly goes against female genital mutilation: "I will let Hevar stay here on one condition . . . No more Khatana. Not Seema. Not Shirin. Not Bezma's baby, if it's a girl. No more blood on Houda's hands. Finished" (Lightbourne, p. 322).

Female genital mutilation is widely practiced in many parts of Iraqi Kurdistan as they believe it brings purity to women. The characters' justification for the practice is its religious requirement. Bezma tells Theresa that Seema is unclean and can never get married, but Theresa at the beginning is unaware of Kurdish culture and the concept of purity, "The 'unclean' part bugs me. 'Maybe it's hard for her [Seema] to bathe.' Come to think of it. I haven't noticed tubs or shower stalls in the village" (Lightbourne, 2016, p. 79), she does not understand what unclean is referred to. Houda explains the concept of purity to her, "The idea of cleanliness is very complicated. It goes beyond soap and physical hygiene. Lust can make a woman's heart dirty. It can cause her to go astray and do unwise things. If this happens, she might make bad decisions. Then God is unhappy". (Lightbourne, p. 217)

Lightbourn shows that female genital mutilation (FGM) is practiced by almost all people, including both educated and uneducated people in Iraqi Kurdistan, "It's [FGM] about 90 percent of this part of Kurdistan, and almost 100 percent out in the villages" (Lightbourne, 2016, p. 110). Kizilhan (2011) conducted a study on the effect of FGM on Kurdish women, and her result shows that it has a strong psychological impact on Kurdish girls who have

undergone the procedure. FGM practice is ingrained in Kurdish society and directly affects women's lives; they all accept it, including the women, without resistance. Furthermore, Jennifer, a British teacher at the Academy, has converted to Islam, yet her Kurdish mother-in-law does not allow her to cook, claiming she is unclean, and she pushes her to get mutilated. Thus, Kurdish women are portrayed as passive as no one resists these practices and ideologies which directly affect their lives. Only Theresa challenges and resists it, "I will let Hevar stay here on one condition . . . No more Khatana. Not Seema. Not Shirin. Not Bezma's baby, if it's a girl. No more blood on Houda's hands. Finished" (Lightbourne, 2016, p. 322).

4. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT'S REFLECTIOM ON KURDISH CULTURE

The novel is written from the point of view of an American woman. The writer does not have a deep knowledge of Kurdish Culture since she only stayed in Iraqi Kurdistan for six months, which might not be enough to have a profound understanding of a new culture. However, she tries to be objective and understanding of the norms and beliefs of Kurdish people. She does not merely critique Kurdish society; she states that male domination over women is not unique to this society but rather a prevalent phenomenon in Western society as well. She also criticizes American women for being subjugated and losing their identity after getting married. Theresa has also suffered domestic violence, of course, not to the same degree as the Kurdish women; her husband hurt her, "not with a stick or a belt, but with shaking, threats, pinning me to a wall . . . The worst was him battering my son. Ara shows no surprise. She merely nods, as if it's all inevitable" (Lightbourne, 2016, p. 135).

Moreover, she tried to write the book as a memoir at first, then she changed it to a novel. She has changed the names of the true people the story is based on to protect them. She claims to be cautious of Kurdish culture and does not want to expose the characters' true identities, as her main Kurdish female character has a sexual relationship before marriage (Lightbourne, 2021). The writer understands that having sex before marriage is a taboo in Kurdish culture; therefore, changing the characters' names and hiding the name of the village is an indication of her cultural awareness. However, she shows her characters' true photographs in her 17-minute presentation, which she demonstrates in the online book clubs accessible on YouTube. This calls her cultural awareness into doubt.

Despite her attempts to provide an unbiased portrayal of Kurdish society; she has an orientalist view, she is considering her culture and lifestyle as superior, "I'll help the architect for a new Western style of marriage here in

Kurdistan, starting with Bezma and Hevar" (Lightbourne, 2016, p. 83). She also sees herself as a white saviour as she states in an interview with Dr. Alan Ali Saeed, a lecturer in Modern English Literature at Sulaimani University, that the purpose of accepting the job in Iraqi Kurdistan was to "help rebuild a war-torn country" (Lightbourne, 2021). Moreover, the novel only focuses on certain characters with stereotypical social issues. It is claimed that female genital mutilation is practiced about 90 percent in Erbil, "and almost 100 percent out in the villages" (Lightbourne, 2016, p 110). Numerous studies have been conducted on the practice of FGM in Iraqi Kurdistan that prove the novel's claim of the existence of the practice, but their result varies according to cities and age. To examine the accuracy of the novel's manifestation of FGM, only those studies have been considered on the matter that were conducted during the same time the novel takes place. Saleem et al. (2013), conducted a study for FGM in girls aged 6 months to 20 years across various urban areas, districts, and sub-districts in three cities. The findings revealed an overall FGM prevalence rate of 23%. Specifically, the prevalence rates in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok were 37%, 29%, and 4% respectively. Yasin et al. (2013) carried out a similar study on Kurdish women and expanded the age ranges between 15 and 49 years in Erbil; their result showed FGM prevalence as 70%. Education has a big impact on the rate of FGM in both studies. According to Saleem et al., children of uneducated mothers were eight times as likely to have had FGM compared to children of educated mothers (2013), but Lightbourne has failed to illustrate this difference as she portrays Jennifer, a British teacher struggling with her Kurdish mother-in-law due to not having been mutilated. Moreover, both studies were published three years after the novel takes place, but their data are around the same time the novel takes place: The survey of the first research was conducted in 2011, and the data of the second research was from 2007 to 2009. The writer's claim on the practice of FGM is exaggerated.

To sum up, the novel does not accurately represent Kurdish culture. The writer does not have deep experience and knowledge of Kurdish society since she only lived in the region for six months; the novel is written from an Orientalist point of view and mostly includes stereotypical Kurdish characters and issues, portraying all Kurdish women as passive and submissive; although the writer tackles a significant issue in Kurdish culture, her narration contains exaggeration and misinformation about GFM practice.

5. CONCLUSION

Alesa Lightbourne's *The Kurdish Bike: A Novel* is an account of how women are oppressed from various sources in Kurdish society. Intersectionality theory posits

that no one has a simple, uncomplicated identity. Bezma experiences oppression and inequality due to her sex, her social and economic status, and her culture and religion. She experiences gender inequality, as men and women do not have the same rights in Kurdish Culture; her economic status makes her rely on Hevar, and she is unable to elevate her economic status; she is deeply affected by cultural norms that mostly blame women for the mistakes men involved as well, and she, like all other girls in her village, is a victim of female genital mutilation, which is practiced claiming that it is required by religion. The relationship between Bezma and Hevar is a conventional marital relationship in which Hevar greatly influences the decisions Bezma makes in life. Bezma prioritizes domestic responsibilities over her professional goals. Boys can choose whoever they want to get married to while girls are deprived of the same rights, controlled, dominated, and confined in limited areas. Hevar's sister, Soz, is also deprived of her simple rights; she is prohibited from having a relationship and getting married to her lover. As a result, she sets herself on fire during Hevar's wedding.

Class differences and socioeconomic status also have impacts on the characters' identity. People of the lower class usually feel inferior to those of the upper class. This does not merely affect adults; it affects younger people as well. Seema, as a daughter of martyrs, cannot afford to buy the same fancy clothes as her classmates. She is not confident and is always quiet and silent during her classes. She also suffers from the fear of mutilation. In contrast, her rich classmates are confident and want to be the centre of attention. Furthermore, women are oppressed by cultural norms and religious beliefs. Seema suffers from the fear of being mutilated, as it is widely practiced in the village. This has an impact on her identity and behaviour at school.

The novel is not an accurate representation of Kurdish culture due to the writer's limited experience in the region; only having stereotypical issues related to Kurdish women, her claim on the accuracy of female genital mutilation practice has been proved wrong by providing evidence of academic research conducted around the same time the novel takes place. FGM indeed is broadly practiced but the rate is much less than the writer claims.

The analysis of Bezma's life uncovers the widespread gender discrimination, economic reliance, and cultural constraints that limit women's choices and identities. It highlights the significant influence of class discrepancies on adults and children, exemplified by Seema's lack of confidence and fear of mutilation contrasted with the

privilege and assertiveness of her wealthy classmates. The novel presents a fascinating narrative on women's problems; nevertheless, research disputes its truthfulness in depicting Kurdish culture, particularly the exaggerated representation of female genital mutilation, which is disputed by academic studies. This research enhances comprehension of the issues encountered by Kurdish women while warning against the acceptance of literary portrayals as conclusive representations of cultural realities, highlighting the necessity for multifaceted and evidence-based perspectives in cultural critique.

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