

THE PATH TO SELF-DEFINITION: THE CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S EXISTENCE IN MUḤAMMAD JIBRĪL'S *SIKKAT AL-MANĀṢARAH*

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:
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novel; women.

This research focuses on the analysis of women's existence in the Egyptian novel entitled *Sikkat al-Manāṣarah* by Muḥammad Jibril. This study aims to reveal the strategies and driving factors of the main female character in fighting for her existence in the novel. The primary data of this study are derived from *Sikkat al-Manāṣarah*, while the secondary data are obtained from books, previous studies, and relevant online references. This study uses qualitative descriptive methods and library techniques, namely by describing data related to the criteria of strategies and driving factors of the struggle for women's existence using Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism approach. The results of the study show that there are four strategies of the main female character in fighting for her existence, including being an intellectual woman, a hardworking woman, contributing to society, and refusing to be an object. Meanwhile, the driving factors for the emergence of women's struggle for existence are triggered by economic conditions and thoughts towards change. The implication of this research confirm that women's existence within the text functions as a process of becoming a subject through choice, labor, and self-assertion. These findings strengthen gender-sensitive literary through economic independence and critical consciousness.

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تركز هذه الدراسة على تحليل وجود المرأة في الرواية المصرية *سكة المناصرة* لمحمد جبريل. وتهدف إلى الكشف عن الاستراتيجيات والعوامل الدافعة للشخصية النسائية الرئيسية في سعيها لإثبات وجودها في الرواية. وتعتمد البيانات الأولية في هذه الدراسة على رواية *سكة المناصرة*، بينما تم الحصول على البيانات الثانوية من الكتب والدراسات السابقة والمراجع الإلكترونية ذات الصلة. وتستخدم هذه الدراسة المنهج الوصفي النوعي وتقنيات البحث المكتبي من خلال تحليل البيانات المرتبطة بمعايير استراتيجيات النضال والعوامل الدافعة لوجود المرأة وفق مقارنة النسوية الوجودية لسيمون دي بوفوار. وتظهر نتائج الدراسة أن هناك أربع استراتيجيات اعتمدها الشخصية النسائية الرئيسية في نضالها لإثبات وجودها، وهي: أن تكون امرأة مثقفة، وامرأة مجتهدة في العمل، ومساهمة في المجتمع، ورافضة لأن تكون موضوعاً للآخرين. أما العوامل الدافعة لظهور نضال المرأة من أجل وجودها فتنبع من الظروف الاقتصادية والأفكار الساعية إلى التغيير. تؤكد تداعيات هذا البحث أن وجود المرأة داخل النص يعمل كعملية 'صيرورة' للذات من خلال الاختيار، والعمل، وإثبات الذات. وتعزز هذه النتائج القراءات الأدبية الحساسة للنوع الاجتماعي، بينما تدعم خطاب تمكين المرأة من خلال الاستقلال الاقتصادي والوعي النقدي.

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INTRODUCTION

Literary works play an important role in society as a reflection and critique of social reality (Purnma et al., 2025). Through fictional narratives, literary works such as novels open space for readers to explore various complex and profound humanitarian issues. With the ability of writers to weave storylines and develop characters, novels not only record the dynamics of the times, but also become a medium used by readers to question and criticize prevailing norms, values, and power structures (Lestari & Dewi, 2025). Among these various issues, the position and role of women is one of the central themes that continues to be examined. The World Economic Forum, in its report entitled Global Gender Gap Report (2025), states that to date, no country in the world has achieved full gender equality. In this case, it is estimated that it will take another 123 years to achieve full equality globally. Thus, this figure gives urgency to the role of literature as an instrument for reconstructing women's existence amid systematic social pressure.

The struggle of women in literature cannot be separated from the broader context of the feminist movement because literature functions as a social mirror that reflects women's struggles in facing patriarchal power structures (Yunarti et al., 2025). Feminism is a social, political, and intellectual movement that aims to achieve equal rights between men and women (Yuliani, 2025). This movement emerged as a response to various forms of injustice and inequality experienced by women as a result of the patriarchal system (Nurachmah & Wahyuningroem, 2026). Over time, the feminist movement developed into a complex ideology, giving rise to various waves and schools of thought.

Among these schools of thought, existentialist feminism, pioneered by Simone de Beauvoir, became one of the influential approaches in analyzing women's existential issues. In her work entitled *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir (2011) states that one is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman. This statement positions women as individuals who have the freedom to define themselves (Ramli et al., 2024). However, in a patriarchal society, women are often forced to become "objects" or "the other" whose existence is only determined by men, thus triggering a deep struggle in the search for meaning and self-identity (Beauvoir, 1956).

The existence of women within the framework of existential feminism is a fundamental struggle to assert their existence as free and independent subjects (Sultan, 2023). Driven to serve predetermined roles as mothers, wives, or caregivers, women often find themselves trapped in repetitive, stagnant lives devoid of meaning they have created for themselves (Staniyah & Malik, 2023). As a result, women have no opportunity to develop and pursue their own dreams. This struggle places women in an existential crisis because they must face emptiness due to the loss of freedom to choose and take responsibility for their own destiny (Fauziah et al., 2025).

One novel that depicts the existence of women is Muḥammad Jibrīl's novel entitled *Sikkat al-Manāṣarah*. This novel was chosen for its uniqueness in depicting the reconstruction of women's existence, which differs from Jibrīl's other works that generally focus on personal experiences or socio-political criticism, such as in the novel *Maqṣadī al-Bawḥ lā al-Shakwā* (Muḥammad, 2023). In addition, the narrative in this novel offers a different perspective compared to novels with themes of women's existence in general, which tend to emphasize marginalization, stereotypes, violence, double burdens, and representations of objectification and social subordination of female characters as in the novel *Sayyidat al-Qamar* by Jokha al-Harsty (Ramadhani, 2025).

The uniqueness of the narrative cannot be separated from its author, Jibrīl, who is one of Egypt's contemporary novelists with a deep love for the world of literature. Jibrīl has written dozens of short story collections and novels with historical and cultural themes. Some of his works have been translated into English, French, German, and Malay. Jibrīl also

actively participates in various social programs such as seminars, conferences, and cultural festivals both at home and abroad. One of the activities he has participated in is “*Al-Masā’ ma’a Quṣwā*”, a social program broadcast by Ten TV (2019) which presents discussions on issues of literature, science, art, culture and humanity in Egypt. In addition, as a writer, Jibrīl has also received many awards from the state, including the State Award for Literature in 1975, the Star of Science, Arts, and Literature in 1976, and the State Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2020 (Mu’assasat Hindāwī, 2024).

Through her intellectual and literary abilities, the issue of women’s existence is presented in depth as one of the phenomena in the novel *Sikkat al-Manāṣarah*. With a detailed social background, this novel presents a portrait of the struggles of the main female character, Hālah, who is faced with an existential dilemma. Hālah not only grapples with traditional stereotypes that limit her, but also strives to find authentic meaning and identity amid changing times and family pressures. Through the character of Hālah, this novel reflects the struggle of women who try to assert their existence, fight against emptiness, and make choices that can free them from their role as objects, towards a position as subjects who are entitled to their own lives.

Studies on the existence of women in Arabic literature generally highlight female characters who are faced with gender inequality and patriarchal structures. Maida et al. (2025) in their study of Nawal El Saadawi’s novel *Catatan Juang dari Penjara Perempuan*, using a radical feminist approach, map out the forms of systemic oppression that originate from state power, religious doctrine, and patriarchal culture, while also interpreting the symbolic actions and legal awareness of female characters as active efforts to dismantle oppressive power relations. Nuraulia et al. (2025) through an analysis of representation in the novel *Perempuan di Titik Nol* using a combination of Marxist feminist theory and Stuart Hall’s perspective, reveal that gender inequality is rooted in economic-political structures that place women in a cycle of sexual violence, subordination, and marginalization, where women’s bodies are ultimately trapped in a mechanism of exchange for the sake of fulfilling the family’s economic needs.

As far as we can ascertain, the novel *Sikkat al-Manāṣarah* by Jibrīl has not been found as a material object in previous studies. Studies that specifically examine the novels of Muḥammad Jibrīl show the author’s consistency in addressing social and humanitarian issues through a variety of aesthetic devices. Ḥamudah (2021), through a semiotic approach, examines a number of Jibrīl’s works, such as *Zaman al-Waṣl*, *al-Shāṭi’ al-Ākhar*, *Sa’id al-‘Asarī*, *Min Awraq Abī al-Ṭayyib al-Mutanabbī*, and *Qāḍī al-Bahār Yanzil al-Baḥr*, concludes that the themes of suffering, psychological pressure, socio-political problems, and the idea of “homeland” as a space of memory and attachment are strong common threads. Muḥammad (2023) highlights *Maqṣadī al-Bawḥ lā al-Shakwā* with a focus on dialogical discourse and shows how the experience of pain after a failed operation serves as a critique of Egyptian health services after the January 25, 2011 revolution as well as a narrative space to explore identity, memory, and the search for existential meaning through reflection, inner dialogue, and flashbacks.

The application of Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist feminist perspective in literary texts is used to reveal gender injustice and the resistance strategies of female characters. Azzahra (2022) in her study of *Jumhūriyyat Ka’anna*, affirms patterns of injustice such as stereotypes, subordination, and objectification, and shows resistance through work, intellectual roles, and the negation of subjugation. These studies indicate that Beauvoir’s existentialist feminist framework is productive for reading women’s existence in literature, particularly through the dialectic of oppression and choice that shapes their existence. Ramadhani (2025) examines the novel *Sayyidat al-Qamar* and finds stereotypes, subordination, and objectification that limit Omani women, while resistance emerges through work, intellectual agency, rejection of subordination, and influential social roles.

Aulia dan Efendi (2025) analyze the short story *Perempuan yang Menikahi Tubuhnya Sendiri* and reveal the social and family pressures faced by female characters, but resisted through existential awareness and affirmation of the body and choice, amid depictions of violence and abuse against women.

Based on the previous studies, this research affirms its position and novelty through three main aspects. First, this research does not focus on mapping religious doctrines, state power, and sexual violence, but specifically analyzes the strategies and driving factors behind women's quest for self-sovereignty. Second, this study fills a gap in the literature by examining the novel *Sikkat al-Manāṣarah* by Jibrīl, a work that, as far as we can ascertain, has not been touched upon by previous studies. This contrasts with other works that tend to be in the realm of linguistics and socio-political criticism. Third, the use of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism theory in this study offers a more in-depth reading of the process of "becoming" a subject through intellectual and economic independence.

This study is a qualitative study using descriptive methods to describe the phenomena that are the object of research. The data sources in this study are divided into two, namely primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained from Muḥammad Jibrīl's *Sikkat al-Manāṣarah*, published by Hindāwī in 2024. Meanwhile, secondary data was sourced from documents such as books, previous studies, and other references from online media relevant to the object of study. The research data consisted of phrases or sentences from narratives and dialogues of characters relevant to the criteria of strategies and factors driving women's struggle for existence. The data collection technique in this study uses a literature review. The stages begin with reading the novel carefully, deeply, and repeatedly to mark the characters, series of events, and narrative elements that represent women's existence. The parts of the text that are considered relevant are then selected and recorded in the form of quotations as research data. The data analysis stage in this study was carried out by grouping textual data into themes related to Hālah's struggle for existence and its driving factors. Furthermore, each finding was presented in a sequential and systematic manner to show how the existential struggle was constructed through the plot, conflict, and social relations in the novel. Finally, interpretation was carried out using Simone de Beauvoir's concepts of existential feminism to explain how family pressure, patriarchal norms, and traditional stereotypes shaped the main character's position, as well as how choices, self-awareness, and actions became the path to a more authentic subjectivity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of data collection and analysis sourced from Muḥammad Jibrīl's *Sikkat al-Manāṣarah*, various representations of women's existential struggles were found to be manifested through four main strategies and two driving factors. Analysis of the narrative and dialogue of the character Hālah shows that she strives to achieve her existence through strategies as an intellectual woman, a hard worker, a figure who contributes to society, and a woman who refuses to be an object. These four strategies reflect a form of resistance against the patriarchal system that seeks to subjugate women to passive roles. In addition, Hālah's struggle for existence is also driven by two important factors, namely the family's declining economic condition and her awareness of the need for change in her life. Hālah's struggle is not only an individual effort, but also a form of existential awareness to free herself from economic dependence and social pressures that limit women's freedom of movement.

Women's existence strategy in Muḥammad Jibrīl's *Sikkat al-Manāṣarah*

Beauvoir (in Tong, 2009) states that there are several strategies that women can use to achieve their existence, namely strategies as intellectual women, hard-working women,

women who are able to contribute to society, and women who refuse to be objects. Based on an analysis of Muḥammad Jibrīl's *Sikkat al-Manāṣarah*, several pieces of data or quotations relevant to these four points were found, including the following.

Intellectual women

Women can play the role of intellectuals when they want to achieve their existence (Arens, 2025:270). The intellectual activities referred to are activities of thinking, analyzing, and defining, rather than being objects defined by others. A woman can become an intellectual by developing intelligence, knowledge, and broad insight in various fields. Intellectual women demonstrate critical, analytical, and creative thinking skills, as well as a deep interest in science (Ulviani, 2024:17). Intelligence is one of the keys to women's emancipation. Therefore, by engaging in intellectual activities that are beneficial to themselves, their families, and society, women are not only recognized as intellectuals, but can also become part of the group that builds this change.

The portrayal of oneself as an intellectual woman is reflected in Hālah as the main female character in Muḥammad Jibrīl's *Sikkat al-Manāṣarah*. Hālah is a university graduate who is faced with her mother's traditional expectation that she gets married immediately after completing her education. Hālah prefers to look for a job as the start of her journey after graduation. For her, education is the capital for critical thinking and taking active steps in determining her own destiny, so that later she can become a subject who creates her own life, not an object who only follows the will of others. This can be seen in the following excerpt.

"قرأت الإعلان قبل أن يستقر تفكيرها على الجهة التي تتقدم إليها. قبل أن تتخذ قرارها بالسفر، سألت عن سلطنة عمان، ثم أزمعت الرحيل إليها."

"She had read the job advertisement before her mind was set on the institution she would apply to. Before making the decision to travel, she asked about the Sultanate of Oman, then she decided to go there." (Jibrīl, 2024:14).

Based on the above quote, Hālah honed her intellect after graduating from university as her primary strategy for achieving liberation. Hālah had already planned that after graduating from university, she would not remain passive at home, where she felt restricted. Instead of becoming an object that submits to social expectations to immediately marry or accept her fate, Hālah chose to become an active and independent subject. Hālah actively sought job vacancies to escape her unwanted environment. Hālah thought that traveling abroad and working would give her new experiences and a new life. This plan was not made suddenly, but through a rational and structured process. Hālah read job advertisements, inquired about the Sultanate of Oman as her destination, and decided to go there.

This action was a manifestation of Hālah's desire to overcome the limitations of movement that hindered her life. By using her intellect and initiative, Hālah showed that women have the ability to think, see, define their own path in life, and prove themselves as intellectual women who are active in shaping their future. In addition, Hālah is also a woman with high self-confidence, the right to determine her own path, and the refusal to accept roles defined by others. This can be seen in the following quote.

"قال الرجل ذو الجلباب (عرفت — فيما بعد — أن اسمها الدشداشة): أنت خريجة دار العلوم. تستطيعين تدريس العربية والتربية الدينية. أفضل المواد الاجتماعية."

"The man in the robe (whom she later learned was called Dishdasha) said, 'You are a

graduate of Dār al-'Ulūm. You can teach Arabic and religious education'. 'I prefer social studies.' (Jibrīl, 2024:14).

Based on the above quote, Hālah has broad insights as an intellectual woman who rejects the limitations imposed on her. Dār al-'Ulūm generally focuses on Arabic language and religious education, but Hālah does not limit herself to these fields. When given a choice, Hālah firmly expresses her desires, demonstrating her knowledge and abilities beyond expectations. This statement is not merely a response, but an attempt to transcend and reject the passive role defined by the dominant male view. With confidence and broad insight, Hālah proves that women are also capable of being active subjects and have the right to determine their own path in life. Hālah does not become an object that passively accepts destiny. In addition, Hālah also uses her intellect to create choices for herself, which is an important essence in the struggle for women's existence.

Hālah's decision to apply for a job in Oman and leave Egypt proved successful. Hālah was accepted as a teacher and began her new life as a manifestation of her self-designed freedom. However, Hālah's experience as a teacher in Oman so far has only revolved around a monotonous routine. Her life is limited to traveling between school and the teacher's dormitory, a cycle that feels restrictive to her freedom. Eventually, a new offer came along that had the potential to add to her routine. This can be seen in the following quote.

"وافقت على عرض وزارة الشؤون الاجتماعية، لزيادة دخلها، وللتخلص من العيش ما بين المدرسة وبيت المدرسات."

"She accepted the offer from the Ministry of Social Affairs to increase her income and escape the routine of living between school and the teachers' dormitory." (Jibrīl, 2024:91).

The above quote shows Hālah's efforts to apply the strategy of an intellectual woman to free herself from her restrictive routine. Beauvoir (1956) argues that an intellectual woman not only thinks, but also acts to create her own life. Hālah's intelligence is not only reflected in her educational background, but also in her ability to act as an active subject. This is evident when her competence and intelligence as a teacher are recognized, which then leads her to receive a job offer from the Ministry of Social Affairs. This offer is not merely luck, but the fruit of her abilities. With her intellect and free will, Hālah accepts the offer and proves that women can design their own destiny, reject existing limitations, and actively create broader life experiences.

Hardworking women

Hardworking women tend to be able to achieve independence and reduce their dependence on men (Azzahra, 2022:118). Although work can be difficult and tiring, it still opens various possibilities for women. Working provides access to new experiences, expands social networks, and develops skills that cannot be obtained in the domestic environment. Conversely, if they do not work, women risk losing opportunities for growth. By working outside the home and interacting with society, women actively determine the direction of their own destiny, enabling them to transcend the limitations previously defined by others (Iswandi & Adek, 2022:24). Hālah's portrayal of herself as a hard-working woman can be seen in the following quote.

"مبالغ كبيرة من التحويلات إلى أمها، عهدت إليها بشراء ما تحتاجه."

"She also sent a sum of money to her mother, entrusting her to buy what was needed." (Jibril, 2024:18).

The above quote shows that Hālah is a real representation of a hardworking woman who has successfully achieved existential liberation. According to Beauvoir (1956), work is one way for women to achieve independence and escape from restrictive passive roles. Hālah's act of sending a large sum of money to her mother is clear evidence of the economic power she has achieved. This is a step that changes her position from an object burdened by family expectations to a powerful subject. Now, Hālah is no longer the one in need, but the one who provides.

This action gives Hālah autonomy and self-esteem, while effectively changing the dynamics of her relationship with her mother. Through her hard work and income, Hālah proves her ability to be independent and fundamentally reclaims her life from the shackles of a passive role.

"ترفض الفشل، الفشل معناه الموت."

"She rejects failure, because for her, failure means death." (Jibril, 2024:96).

The above quote shows that for Hālah, hard work is not merely a matter of income, but a deep existential struggle. This expression is a manifestation of the understanding that if she fails in her projects, her life will once again be trapped in a passive, static, and meaningless state. For Hālah, this situation is tantamount to existential death. By rejecting failure, Hālah affirms her status as a subject determined to create her own meaning in life through concrete actions. Her persistence and ambition at work are proof of her commitment to reaching her full potential and proving that she is a woman who lives with purpose, not merely an object resigned to fate.

Women who contribute to society

The third strategy is through work that allows women to contribute to social transformation in society. Beauvoir argues that the key to women's liberation lies in economic power (Bekirova, 2025:216). To achieve everything she desires, a woman must play an active role in creating a society that provides material support. In this way, she can transcend existing limitations and achieve her true existence.

After eight years of working in Oman, Hālah returned to Egypt. Hālah's return was not to resume her old life, but as a woman who had undergone social and economic transformation. Armed with her experience and income, Hālah took the bold step of starting her own business. This action is clear evidence of the realization of a strategy as a woman who uses her economic power to create for herself and the community around her. As seen in the following quote.

"حاولت أن تكون سيدة أعمال حقيقية، لا تكتفي بالجلوس وراء مكتبها، لكنها تستقبل الزوار، تناقشهم، تشارك في ملء استثماراتهم، تشير عليهم بالعمل المناسب. طبعت الكثير من الكراسيات والكتيبات وأدلة الخطوات وأوراق الدعاية. ترددت على السفارات والقنصليات والفنادق وشركات الطيران وشركات السياحة."

"She strives to be a true entrepreneur, not just sitting behind her desk, but also receiving visitors, discussing with them, helping fill out forms, and advising them on suitable jobs. She printed many brochures, pamphlets, step-by-step guides, and promotional sheets. She frequently visited embassies, consulates, hotels, airlines, and tourism companies." (Jibril, 2024:88).

Based on the above excerpt, it is evident that Hālah strives to bring about social transformation in the community by establishing a business that facilitates people in finding work abroad. Hālah's strong social spirit and determination to be independent are the foundation for her to realize her existence. Hālah, who initially worked as a teacher, worked hard to learn about the business world so that she could help others find work. Her efforts were not limited to sitting behind a desk, but she actively interacted with the community.

In addition, by interacting directly with embassies, consulates, and other companies, Hālah was able to create a network that supported her social activities. Together with her team, Hālah compiled a database that included information on the types of institutions, types of jobs, specializations, interviews, testing and selection methods, and visas as the main documents for registration.

"عرفت — في وقت قصير — ما لم تكن تعرفه من أصول العمل. تقضي معظم اليوم تستقبل المترددين على المكتب، تملأ الاستمارات، تناقش، تنصح، تدل على العمل المناسب، تشرف على إنهاء إجراءات السفر، تيسر إنهاء التعامل مع التأمينات، استخراج جواز السفر، والشهادة الصحية، نقل الكفالة، تجديد تصريح العمل، استخراج تذكرة الطائرة."

"In a short time, she learned things she had never known before about the basics of this job. Most of his day was spent receiving people who came to the office, filling out forms, discussing, giving advice, showing suitable jobs, supervising the departure process, helping with insurance matters, passport issuance, health certificates, transfer of guarantees, work permit renewals, and even handling airline tickets." (Jibril, 2024:89).

The above quote proves that Hālah is an adaptive, continuously evolving individual, not a static object. Furthermore, the above quote also shows that Hālah's activities have a real social impact. Hālah not only runs a business, but also acts as a facilitator who helps many people find work. Through her efforts, Hālah is able to find solutions to the problems faced by her community in relation to the job search process. This is the essence of social transformation realized by a woman. Hālah realizes that the meaning of her life lies not only in personal achievements, but also in the contributions she makes to help others. Through her role as a social facilitator, Hālah is able to transcend her limitations and find her true meaning in life. Hālah feels that she has found her true self, because her current work is the realization of her dreams.

Women who refuse to be objects

Another strategy that women can use to achieve their existence is to refuse to be objects. In the framework of existential feminism, the position of "object" or "*the other*" refers to a condition in which women are defined and judged based on the standards or views of the dominant group (men) and societies with traditional cultures (Beauvoir, 1956:15). Women's identities are often not considered whole, but only as complements, whether through domestic roles, images, etc (Saifullin et al., 2026:6). Therefore, refusing to be an object is a step towards liberation that women take by freeing themselves from this definition. The goal is to no longer identify oneself through the eyes of others, but to create an authentic identity. Thus, women are no longer passive recipients of a predetermined destiny, but transformed into active subjects who have the right to define themselves and take full control of their lives.

As a hard-working woman, Hālah must face new challenges in interacting with a male coworker. The attention shown by this coworker exceeds professional boundaries, forcing

Hālah to fight to maintain her status as an independent subject and reject herself as the object of this man's attraction. This can be seen in the following excerpt.

"ساورها الشك في موقفه، سر ما ينطوي عليه اهتمامه وتصرفاته. هي تكره نظراته التي تلاحقها، لا تفارق وجهها، تتسلل إلى ساقها."

"Doubts began to arise about Magdi's enigmatic attitude and attention." (Jibril, 2024:89).

Based on this quote, Hālah clearly depicts a woman's struggle to refuse to be an object in her interactions with men. In Beauvoir's existentialist feminist theory, a woman becomes an object when she is reduced to merely a body or a passive entity consumed by the gaze of others (Juliana dkk., 2025:158). In this context, women lose their status as subjects with consciousness and freedom. Hālah firmly rejects this objectivity through her suspicion and critical thinking towards her male colleague's behavior. This is the action of an active subject analyzing, not a passive object accepting. Furthermore, Hālah's rejection is also existential, as seen in her strong emotional response. This can be seen in the following quote.

"هي تكره نظراته التي تلاحقها، لا تفارق وجهها، تتسلل إلى ساقها."

"She hates Magdi's gaze that always follows her, never leaving her face, even tracing her legs." (Jibril, 2024:89).

Hālah hated the man's gaze that pursued her and crept into her body. This gaze was an attempt to reduce Hālah to a body or an object of desire. Hālah's rejection is consciously manifested through the discomfort she feels. This is a manifestation of her assertion that she is a whole individual and refuses to be treated as a separate physical part. Thus, this quote proves that Hālah has fought for her existence as an independent subject.

Driving factors behind women's struggle for existence in Muḥammad Jibril's *Sikkat al-Manāṣarah*

The emergence of women's existence in Muḥammad Jibril's *Sikkat al-Manāṣarah* is driven by a series of internal factors that originate from within the characters. These factors appear as a reflection of the strategies for women's existence outlined by Beauvoir. The struggle for women's existence in this novel can be analyzed through two factors, namely economic conditions and thinking towards change.

Economic conditions

As women, the struggle to achieve existence is often hindered by various factors, including financial limitations. In addition, economic dependence on dominant figures such as fathers or husbands directly places women in a passive position and limits their autonomy (Al-Hasan et al., 2025). This condition creates a stagnant life, as women are trapped in domestic routines without the freedom to make major choices in life. In this context, the driving factor behind women's struggle for existence is economic conditions. Economic power is the key to breaking the chain of dependence. By having her own income, a woman can have the freedom to move, think, help the family economy, and act as an independent subject (Ouedraogo, 2026:).

In the novel *Sikkat al-Manāṣarah*, economic status is depicted as one of the driving factors behind women's struggle for existence. The economic condition of Hālah's family begins to decline when her father stops working due to old age. This is evident in the

following excerpt.

"أبوك منذ ترك العمل ميت حي."

"Your father, since he stopped working, has been living like a living dead." (Jibril, 2024:15).

The above quote sharply illustrates that economic conditions are a determining factor for a person's existence. The condition of Hālah's father, who lost his zest for life after retiring, reflects a passive state that will lead to existential death. This experience became a very strong motivator for Hālah. By seeing firsthand the conditions experienced by her family, Hālah realized that economic independence is the key to avoiding the same fate. Additionally, Hālah also learned that existence must be achieved through action. Seeing her father's condition became the main driving force for Hālah to act.

However, Hālah's motivation did not only come from her family's declining economic condition. Hālah also realized that the income she would earn working in Egypt would be very minimal. This condition forced Hālah to rack her brains to find a solution to improve her and her family's life, because she knew that a salary in Egypt would not be enough to change their situation. The conditions Hālah experienced not only determined her attitude and actions, but also influenced the way Hālah viewed and planned her future. This can be seen in the following quote.

"في اليوم التالي لنجاحها في الليسانس، أعلنت نيتها في السفر: لن أضيع عمري في مرتب لا يطعم دجاجة."

"The day after graduating from college, she announced her intention to leave, "I will not waste my life with a salary that cannot even feed a chicken." (Jibril, 2024:40).

Based on this quote, Hālah strongly refuses to live a life she considers unacceptable. This statement shows that economic demands are the main trigger that drives Hālah to become an ambitious working woman. Hālah realizes that low wages in Egypt will trap her in an ordinary life, so she decides to look for a better job abroad to achieve a more meaningful life. This was not merely a financial complaint, but a declaration to achieve a stronger existence. Hālah took the bold step of seeking better employment abroad. This decision was based on careful calculations to achieve financial independence and avoid the same fate as her father. Through her words, Hālah emphasized that women are subjects who must be aware of their own value and refuse to let their lives be determined solely by inadequate salaries. The decision to travel and work abroad was a major step towards freeing herself from economic shackles.

Thoughts towards change

Women's struggle to achieve their existence often begins with a shift in thinking. Thinking towards change is one of the driving factors that initiates women to break out of passive conditions and reject roles that have been defined by society (Aslam et al., 2025). Through progressive thinking, women began to realize that their lives were not just a repetitive routine, but an opportunity to grow and create meaning for themselves (Rahmatunnur et al., 2023:60). This awareness became the foundation for them to take initiative, make bold choices, and realize their desires through concrete actions.

Hālah realized that she could no longer breathe in the air of that house. The only option left was to leave Egypt and move to a place that was foreign to her. Hālah hoped that she

would not encounter the same pressure she experienced at home, such as questions, orders, comments, criticism, and reprimands related to marriage.

"أدرت — لغياب التفاهم بينها وبين أمها — أنها لن تستطيع أن تبقى في البيت، لن ينشأ بينهما فاهم من أي نوع. شعرت أنها لا تنتمي إلى الدنيا التي تعيش فيها، هي دنيا تحاصرها، وتفرض عليها ما لا تستطيع قبوله. تتمنى لو أنها غادرت المكان، تشعر بانطباقه عليها، لا يتيح لها مجرد التنفس."

"The realization that she could not stay in that house grew stronger due to the lack of understanding between her and her mother. Hālah felt she no longer belonged in the world she lived in, a world that continued to suffocate her and force her to accept things she could not accept. She wished she could leave that place. She felt that the place was suffocating her, not giving her room to breathe" (Jibrīl, 2024:16).

"هل ينقصك شيء كي تسافري؟"

— مجرد التغيير.

— تغييرين أهلك؟!

-حياتي ... لا أهلي. وتصاعد التوتر داخلها: حياتي هنا معناها الزواج ... وأنا لا أريده."

"-Is there anything missing that makes you want to travel?"

- Just a change.

- Do you want to leave your family?"

- My life... not my family. My life here means marriage, and I don't want it." (Jibrīl, 2024:15)

Based on the two quotes above, Hālah has critical thinking to change her life. This mindset is clearly seen when Hālah grows into an adult woman. Hālah has a more progressive and different view from most women in her environment, including her mother. According to her mother, a woman's role is limited to continuing life at home or marrying young. However, for Hālah, marriage was not the only goal in life. Facing social pressure to marry, Hālah decided that not marrying was a smart and courageous choice. This thinking encouraged her to challenge herself by leaving Egypt for Oman to pursue her career. Thus, Hālah firmly rejected the role she considered limiting. Hālah does not want her life to revolve around a passive circle. Hālah wants to transcend her limitations through independent thinking and actions to achieve her freedom in life.

Women as a representation of an existence

The results of this study indicate that the character Hālah in Muḥammad Jibrīl's *Sikkat al-Manāṣarah* represents a modern woman who strives to assert her existence amid the pressures of a patriarchal society and culture. Through education, hard work, social participation, and her courage to reject objectification, Hālah succeeds in constructing herself as a subject who thinks and acts independently. In this context, Hālah not only thinks about freedom, but also strives for it through rational life choices, such as seeking employment, developing a business, and determining the direction of her life without succumbing to social expectations. The character of Hālah embodies the freedom of women who can create their own meaning in life and take responsibility for their choices.

The relationship between theory and research findings is clearly seen in Hālah's

existential journey. Beauvoir (1956) asserts that women are often trapped in a passive state determined by social structures. In this novel, Hālah tries to escape this condition through actions that reflect her awareness as a free individual. Education becomes the starting point for the formation of her rationality, while work becomes a means to achieve independence and self-esteem. When Hālah uses her intelligence to choose a job, dares to make decisions, and rejects the limitations of domestic roles, she indirectly shows that she can manage her freedom through reflective and productive actions. Thus, the concept of freedom proposed by Beauvoir is not only present theoretically, but is manifested through the main character's life journey.

This finding aligns with Ramadhani (2025) and Aulia & Efendi (2025) in affirming women's capacity for autonomy, yet it offers a distinct perspective. While Ramadhani emphasizes social participation and Aulia & Efendi focus on bodily reconciliation, this study highlights Hālah's existence through intellectual awareness and economic independence. Unlike previous characters who find identity through social roles or self-acceptance, Hālah proactively constructs her life through deliberate action and hard work. Thus, this research extends the application of Beauvoir's existentialist feminism by demonstrating how individual intellectual freedom serves as a bridge to meaningful social contribution.

Comparative contexts from Maida et al. (2025) and Nuraulia et al. (2025) further enrich this analysis. While Maida et al. utilize radical feminism to advocate for active resistance against state and cultural patriarchy, this study emphasizes a more reflective dimension where liberation stems from rational awareness and independent choice. Similarly, Nuraulia et al. apply Marxist feminism to highlight women as victims of capitalist-patriarchal exploitation, however, this research shifts the focus from mere suffering to Hālah's practical strategies for restructuring her life. Beyond surviving patriarchal structures, Hālah actively asserts her human value through productive roles and financial-social independence, offering a more constructive agency compared to the focus on oppression in previous studies.

The novelty of this research lies in two things. First, it uses the novel *Sikkat al-Manāṣarah* as material that has not been studied to date, thereby expanding the map of Jibril's novels, which have been dominated by semiotic readings and socio-humanitarian themes. Second, this research not only confirms the existence of patriarchal oppression, but also formulates the mechanism of female characters existence in a structured manner through Beauvoir's four strategies, read in conjunction with two narrative-sociological driving factors, namely economics and awareness of change, resulting in a more operational reading model. Existence is understood as a process of becoming a subject that moves from knowledge (intellectuality), action (work), social impact (contribution), to a clear boundary against the reduction of the body (refusal to become an object).

This research expands existentialist feminism in Arabic literature by mapping rational strategies for women to assert their existence beyond mere oppression. It enriches feminist theory by framing freedom as a constructive process involving education, labor, and social contribution. Practically, these findings serve as a reference for educational institutions and empowerment programs to foster critical independence. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that literature can promote gender equality and strengthen women's roles, contributing to more human-centric and gender-just policies.

The implications of these findings point to the importance of systems that enable women to build their existence through education, decent work, and protection from objectification. Strengthening access to higher education and critical literacy to support women's intellectual strategies, fair and safe employment policies for women (anti-discrimination and prevention of harassment in the workplace), and economic empowerment support, such as skills training, access to capital, and entrepreneurship

development so that women can reduce their financial dependence. In addition, findings on awareness of change emphasize the need for community-based cultural interventions, such as equality campaigns, family dialogues, and gender education to reduce stereotypes that force women to be “defined”, so that policies are not only structural, but also target changes in social norms that have limited women’s choices.

CONCLUSION

The character Hālah in Muḥammad Jibrīl’s *Sikkat al-Manāṣarah* fights for her existence through four interrelated strategies that form a unified process of self-awareness. First, Hālah appears as an intellectual woman who thinks critically and can make rational decisions based on her knowledge and experience. Second, Hālah becomes a hard-working woman who builds economic independence through work and dedication, enabling her to break free from dependence and gain an equal position in her social environment. Third, Hālah also plays a role as a woman who contributes to society by establishing businesses that benefit others and become a vehicle for social empowerment. Fourth, Hālah affirms her existence by refusing to be an object of male gaze or treatment. These four strategies show that women’s existential struggle is not only symbolic, but also manifested in actions that reflect freedom of thought, independence, and social responsibility.

In addition to these strategies, this study also found two main factors that drive Hālah’s struggle for existence. The first factor is economic conditions, namely her family’s financial limitations, which drive her awareness of the importance of economic independence to escape dependence and a passive position. The second factor is the mindset towards change, namely a critical awareness to reject restrictive traditional roles and the courage to make big decisions in her life, such as working abroad and choosing a different path in life from social expectations. These two factors support each other: economic needs trigger concrete actions, while a change in mindset gives direction and meaning to every decision Hālah makes.

Overall, this study confirms that the struggle for women’s existence in the novel *Sikkat al-Manāṣarah* is a rational, reflective, and multi-layered process. These results reinforce previous findings that women can assert their existence through education, work, and social participation, but at the same time present a new, more systematic framework for reading women’s existential strategies in the realm of literature. This study shows a shift in focus from the discourse of resistance against patriarchy to a new meaning of freedom, namely women’s ability to organize their own lives rationally, productively, and with dignity. Thus, this novel not only describes the individual struggle of a woman, but also conveys a universal message about the human right to create meaning in life through awareness and concrete actions.

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