



**FROM SURVIVAL TO HOPE: FEMALE MORAL
LEADERSHIP IN ZOULFA KATOUEH'S
*AS LONG AS THE LEMON TREES GROW***

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Abstract

This study explores female moral leadership in Zoulfah Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022) during the Syrian Civil War. It also discusses Katouh's portrayal of female moral leadership through the protagonist's journey from survival to hope within an Islamic feminist framework. By using the perspectives of Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) and Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* (2005), this research investigates moral strength and ethical agency constructed in spaces fractured by violence and displacement. Ahmed's framework situates Salama within the discourse of Islamic feminism by reflecting her ethical conviction and social duty. Meanwhile, Mahmood's notion of pious agency emphasizes Salama's ethical actions, which are rooted in sacrifice and endurance. Both frameworks articulate leadership within a moral and communal paradigm. Through qualitative textual analysis, this paper argues that Katouh's portrayal of Salama reclaims female leadership as an act of hope and moral courage, while challenging Western narratives that equate empowerment solely with resistance. The findings of the study suggest the significance of moral agency in times of crisis and contribute to contemporary discussions on women's voices, ethics, and leadership within Eastern contexts.

Keywords: *Hope, Islamic Feminism, Leila Ahmed, Moral Leadership, Pious Agency, Saba Mahmood, Zoulfah Katouh.*

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1. Introduction

The Syrian Civil War has produced not only political and humanitarian crises but also literary works that present the ethical and emotional dimensions of survival. Within this context, Zoulfa Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022) offers a portrayal of female resilience and moral integrity during war. The novel explores the moral responsibility and faith sustaining human dignity when political structures collapse through the character of Salama. Katouh presents her as a moral leader whose journey transforms from survival to hope. This transformation reflects the examination of female agency in contemporary Islamic feminist discourse. In the global discourse on women and conflict, female agency is framed through Western paradigms of resistance and emancipation. These are important forms of agency, but they can overlook ethical ways in which women act and influence others. Katouh's depiction of Salama challenges such binaries by presenting a form of empowerment rooted in compassion and endurance. Her leadership is moral rather than political. Her courage grows out of the effort to remain ethical when violence and fear become routine.

This study uses the ideas of Leila Ahmed (1992) and Saba Mahmood (2005) to understand Katouh's representation of female moral leadership. This depiction aligns with Ahmed's critique of Western feminist universalism in *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), wherein she reasserts the diversity of Muslim women's experiences in colonial and patriarchal settings. She argues that moral leadership among women is not a mere offshoot of Western feminism but a continuity of historical moral reasoning within Islamic culture. Similarly, Saba Mahmood's (2005) *Politics of Piety* conceptualizes agency as the ability to perform moral and ethical acts rather than explicit political resistance. Within these frameworks, Salama's choices for holding on to hope and confronting her own guilt are not secondary to resistance but are themselves acts of ethical defiance. Therefore, the concept of female moral leadership explored in this study emphasizes ethical strength as a medium for communal survival. Through Salama's resilience and sense of duty, Katouh presents leadership as a moral responsibility rather than a quest for authority. Thus, the leadership is not defined by control, but by the ability to sustain others through moral conviction. Katouh's portrayal reclaims the figure of the Muslim woman from both the rhetoric of victimhood and the narrow expectations of Western feminism. Therefore, the study reflects the novel within the discourse of Islamic feminism and presents moral agency as a transformative force during violence. The analysis aims to demonstrate that hope is not just about survival; rather, it is the ultimate act of resistance.

This study utilizes qualitative textual analysis to investigate Salama's transformation from survival to hope and focuses on her moral choices, which reflect her struggles between despair and responsibility. The aim is to explore Katouh's depiction of moral leadership as an inward and relational process rather than a political one. It pays

attention to the small but decisive moment when Salama's sense of duty guides her actions. Through close reading, the study mirrors moral agency in moments of uncertainty during violence. By examining these moments through Ahmed's (1992) and Mahmood's (2005) perspectives, the study highlights how Katouh redefines agency within a spiritual and communal framework. The analysis further shows that Katouh's portrayal of leadership is grounded in moral endurance and ethical self-awareness rather than resistance. This analysis contributes to the ongoing conversation about women's moral agency in postcolonial and Islamic feminist perspectives. The study argues that the novel reframes female moral leadership as a transformative act of hope for survival. In the context of war and displacement, hope is not a sentiment but an ethical stance to preserve humanity when despair seems inevitable. By centering a Muslim woman's moral vision, Katouh challenges dominant Western paradigms of agency and redefines leadership as an act of ethical courage. Thus, the novel becomes not only a story of survival but also a testament to the enduring power of moral conviction as a form of resistance and renewal.

2. Literature Review

The critical studies on *As Long As the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022) have expanded across multiple interpretive directions due to the novel's emotional depth and thematic range. Scholars approached it through diverse frameworks such as psychological, ecological, and narrative. They examined the text not only as a narrative of war and displacement but also as a work that explores moral endurance and the struggle to preserve humanity during violence. Nopriyanto and Nafisah (2024) provide a psychological reading of trauma representation through the lens of Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996). Their study identifies hallucination and panic attacks as Salama's trauma symptoms and interprets her encounters with Khawf and Layla as textual instances of repression and fear. The analysis reflects that Salama's dialogue with Khawf and her imagined interactions with Layla are more than symptoms of breakdown, and they function as a narrative of how her mind reconstructs order in the aftermath of violence. They argue that Salama's hallucinations are external to meaning but central to it, through which she understands her own existence and navigates her grief after destruction. The novel presents complex psychological processes without simplifying them within the framework of Caruth's theory of unassimilated experience. It concludes that trauma in the narrative functions as a coping mechanism through which Salama learns to continue despite devastation. It also establishes that trauma functions as an adaptive rather than purely destructive force and raises a point that has significant implications for how literature depicts survival as an intellectual and moral act.

The focus on trauma's complexity is also present in El Gebali's (2025) research. She presents Salama's experience within psychological and ethical discourses of post-traumatic stress disorder through the clinical frameworks of Ehlers and Clark (2000),

Horowitz (1986), and Figley (1995). These models explain trauma as a cognitive and emotional disturbance produced by the failure to integrate catastrophic experience into narrative memory. By using these foundations, she analyzes how guilt, fear, and memory distortion structure Salama's perception of herself and her surroundings. The study extends from symptom identification to suggest that trauma in the novel is inseparable from moral reflection. The hallucinated figure of Khawf becomes the psyche's attempt to reconcile the demands of conscience with the survival instinct. By positioning trauma within a field of moral reasoning, she reframes post-traumatic stress as an ethical struggle rather than a purely medical condition. This interpretation shifts the discussion of trauma from pathology toward moral inquiry and provides a connection between psychological and ethical readings of the text.

Shabbir, Fatima, and Hafeez (2024) examine the novel through the framework of Judith Herman's (1992) trauma and recovery model, which conceptualizes recovery as a dynamic process of establishing safety and reconstructing the self. Their study interprets Salama's conflict and hallucinations as a movement between fragmentation and reintegration. They argue that the narrative reflects trauma not as a terminal stage but as a field of moral testing, where Salama learns to reclaim agency through acts of care and responsibility, such as treating patients and protecting Layla. Therefore, the study demonstrates the discussion from the private realm of trauma toward the social sphere of ethical relation and suggests that psychological restoration and moral accountability are parallel processes.

A different perspective is offered by Latumeten and Nofansyah (2024), who explore the novel ecologically. They propose that the Syrian landscape, particularly the recurring image of the lemon trees, functions as an ethical presence that reflects endurance and renewal. Nature mirrors human suffering but also depicts resilience while witnessing destruction. By interpreting nature as a moral companion, the novel presents environmental persistence as an analogue for ethical survival. The argument demonstrates that the moral life of the novel extends beyond human consciousness and presents endurance as a shared condition that connects people and the environment through memory and renewal. This insight suggests that recovery after war is not only psychological or personal but also ecological and communal.

From a narrative perspective, Machmuri, Nurulaen, and Priyawan (2025) approach the novel within Janice A. Radway's ideal romance structure. Her study *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1991) presents thirteen narrative functions that define the structural logic of the romance genre. It begins with the protagonist's loss of social identity and culminates in the restoration of self through emotional reconciliation. By using this model, the researchers discuss the novel's progression from Salama's displacement and trauma to her emotional connection with

Kenan. Their discussion represents the novel's operation within Radway's structure while embedding it within the historical and political conditions of the Syrian Civil War. Their analysis emphasizes that the novel highlights the main romantic conventions of conflict, separation, reunion, and renewal but redirects them through the experiences of war and displacement. The romance between Salama and Kenan provides psychological balance and faith in humanity amid the chaos of war. Therefore, the study shows that emotional connections operate as a counter-narrative to violence and provide a symbolic structure for survival.

Aliyyah (2025) contributes a psychoanalytical perspective by analyzing the text through Freud's structural model of personality. She examines Salama's conflicting desire to flee and to serve at the same time. This conflict shows the tension between moral command and rational control, while situating Salama's decisions within the negotiation of inner derivatives of the Id, Ego, and Superego. The internal conflict between moral obligation and rational control structures her psychological evolution. This insight suggests that her decisions emerge from the negotiation among these forces, making her a complex individual whose psychological conflict becomes the foundation of her socio-ethical development.

Across these studies, the novel emerges as a narrative that connects war to diverse experiences of life. Each study addresses a particular dimension, such as a psychological disorder, recovery, ecology, narrative structure, or psychoanalytic conflict, but all converge on the idea of survival and adaptation. Although these studies examined multiple dimensions of the novel but have not yet examined how Salama's conscience evolves into moral leadership and how her survival becomes an ethical stance rather than a reflex of trauma. The present research addresses this gap by investigating female moral leadership as the central dynamic of Katouh's work within or beyond trauma. It interprets Salama's transformation from fear to hope as a moral process grounded in faith and responsibility. Through this lens, her journey is not only a psychological recovery but also a deliberate act of moral agency that redefines survival as ethical leadership within the context of Islamic feminist thought.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study employs the theoretical perspectives of Leila Ahmed (1992) and Saba Mahmood (2005) to analyze female moral leadership in Zoulfa Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022). Both scholars demonstrate the understanding of women's agency in Islamic contexts by placing it within ethical and historical traditions rather than within Western models of emancipation. Their frameworks provide a foundation for investigating the development of moral authority within conditions of violence and displacement. Ahmed's analysis of Islamic feminism emphasizes women's moral participation in community life and comments on colonial representations that confined

Muslim women to passive or oppressed roles. Mahmood's notion of pious agency extends this by proposing that ethical action may emerge through devotion and self-discipline rather than opposition or resistance. Their ideas interpret Salama's journey as a process of moral leadership that arises within faith rather than outside it. Their insights also help to understand Salama's choices, such as her search for moral meaning and her endurance, which constitute a form of leadership that transforms survival into moral hope.

Female moral leadership, Islamic feminism, moral agency, pious agency, and hope are the key terms used in this study to form the interpretive ground for understanding the text. These terms are not utilized as abstract concepts but as ethical and analytical tools that allow a reading of Salama's journey from survival to hope as a process of moral transformation. For instance, female moral leadership in this study refers to a form of guidance that arises from ethical responsibility rather than institutional authority. It reflects the perspective of Burns (1978) and Ciulla (2004), who distinguish moral leadership from political or strategic leadership by emphasizing integrity and care as its foundations. Within the Islamic feminist context, this leadership builds on ethical reasoning and compassion over control. Leila Ahmed (1992) argues that women in Islamic communities experienced their moral authority through education, caregiving, sacrifice, and spiritual guidance; all of these roles helped to sustain community values and ethical balance. In the novel, Salama's leadership develops through similar moral responsibility, and her choices represent a moral influence that persists when social structures collapse.

Islamic feminism provides the historical and intellectual background for this conception of moral leadership. Leila Ahmed (1992) places Islamic feminism as a reclamation of women's moral and intellectual agency that predates colonial intervention. She argues that the Islamic tradition itself contains resources for gender justice and moral equality, and that Muslim women have historically participated in ethical and intellectual life as interpreters and moral practitioners. Margot Badran (2009) extends this definition by describing Islamic feminism as a discourse of gender equality and social justice within the framework of Quranic ethics. She challenges Western feminist assumptions that equate liberation with secular autonomy. Asma Barlas (2002) and Amina Wadud (1999) strengthen this argument by reading the Quran as a text that recognizes gender equality and moral accountability rather than social concession. Their perspective reflects Islamic feminism as a practice that negotiates between revelation and lived experiences. Thus, these perspectives define Islamic feminism not as an imitation of Western liberal models but as a hermeneutics and ethical project, that restores moral reasoning to women's agency within Islamic thought. For this study, the Islamic feminist framework demonstrates Salama's strength not as resistance to traditions but as a continuity within them.

Saba Mahmood in *Politics of Piety* (2005) presents the concept of pious agency, which redefines the understanding of women's moral action by connecting agency to faith-

based self-discipline. She proposes that agency is not limited to acts of resistance but includes the capacity to inhabit ethical norms with reflection and self-awareness. For her, piety is not passive submission but an active process of shaping oneself in accordance with moral ideas. Later scholars such as Lara Deeb (2006) and Amira Mittermaier (2010) interpret piety as a moral orientation that represents individual engagement with their communities. Deeb (2006) views pious practice as a negotiation between moral conviction and social expectation, while Mittermaier (2010) suggests it is a field where moral subjectivity builds through interaction with divine and communal responsibility. In Salama's story, pious agency is visible in her continuous struggle to act with conscience despite despair. Her endurance, which is sustained by faith, becomes a moral practice that reflects agency even within constraint.

In this research, hope is not represented as emotional optimism but as a moral stance. Bloch (1986) defines hope as an anticipatory consciousness oriented toward ethical renewal, while Mahmood (2005) and Ahmed (1992) frame it as the moral capacity to sustain meaning under conditions of crisis. Within the novel, hope emerges from faith and ethical responsibility. Her hope is neither passive waiting nor political defiance; it is the ethical persistence to act rightly when survival itself becomes uncertain. Hence, all the above discussed definitions outline the analytical framework for this study. The analysis presents Salama's transformation within moral discourse that connects Islamic feminist thought to an ethical stance. Thus, the analysis of the novel through these concepts presents female leadership as the medium to preserve moral life during crisis.

The development of Islamic feminist thought and the theory of pious agency can be understood within a broader historical context that connects postcolonial critiques and Islamic scholarship. In the mid-twentieth century, feminist theory began to question Eurocentric theories that universalized the experience of women through secular and liberal frameworks. This critique opened a space for Muslim scholars to articulate feminism in terms that were grounded in their own religious and ethical traditions. In this context, Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) became a pivotal work. She discusses colonial discourse and nationalist reforms in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and how they constructed Muslim gender relations by imposing Western ideals of emancipation. Her historical analysis demonstrated that Muslim women's participation in moral, ethical, intellectual, and communal life had long been integral to Islamic societies. By revealing the continuity of women's ethical presence in Islamic history, Ahmed provided a foundation for an Islamic feminism that was rooted in moral reasoning and social responsibility rather than secular ideology.

The next phase of theoretical development emerged in the early 2000s, when Saba Mahmood introduced *Politics of Piety* (2005). Her work represents a conceptual shift in feminism from resistance-based models to ethics-based models that consider submission

and moral intentionality as active choices. This approach shifts feminist thought toward the study of moral and spiritual agency as legitimate forms of power. Subsequent scholars have built upon this foundation to explore intersections of ethics and moral responsibility in Muslim societies. This evolution provides the conceptual foundation for understanding Salama's character as one whose moral authority grows from within the structures of faith and responsibility that the war threatens to destroy. Thus, the historical development of these ideas reflects a continuous movement from critique to reconstruction or from exposing the limits of Western feminism to articulating indigenous frameworks of gender and morality within Islam.

Leila Ahmed's (1992) and Saba Mahmood's (2005) frameworks intersect most clearly in their understanding of moral agency as a form of ethical leadership that emerges within the ordinary acts of care and endurance. Their theories converge on the rejection of Western feminist universalism and affirmation of Muslim women's own moral reasoning as historically grounded and spiritually enacted. These concepts provide the theoretical foundation for interpreting Salama's transformation as a movement from survival to moral leadership rooted in faith and ethical endurance during political defiance. In Ahmed's view, the history of Islam includes examples of women's moral influence, whose authority derived from their integrity over institutional power. Her work places Salama within a tradition of ethical responsibility. Salama's struggle to balance survival with duty and her refusal to abandon her moral obligations to care for the wounded represent this historical continuity of female moral reasoning. Ahmed's argument that moral leadership within Islamic societies is not dependent on resistance but on sustaining an ethical stance provides the lens to analyze Salama's actions not as rebellion but as ethical control. Her leadership reflects Ahmed's insight that women's moral presence often preserves communal integrity when social structures collapse.

Leila Ahmed in *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) traces the historical evolution of gender discourse in Islamic societies and its entanglement with colonial modernity. She demonstrates how European colonialism used the rhetoric of women's liberation to legitimate domination over Muslim societies, especially through the figure of the veiled woman. The veil became "the symbol now of both the oppression of women... and the backwardness of Islam" (p. 152), transforming a complex cultural and ethical practice into a sign of backwardness. Ahmed challenges this distortion by recovering women's moral agency within Islamic moral and social systems. She argues that female virtue historically carries ethical authority grounded in justice and compassion. This framework reflects the Muslim woman as a moral practitioner whose choices are constructed by religious consciousness and communal responsibility instead of external models of emancipation. This understanding aligns with Salama's characterization in the novel. Her endurance during war, her care for the wounded, and her insistence on remaining morally steadfast

constitute a form of ethical agency that mirrors Ahmed's reclamation of women's moral reasoning as part of a spiritual tradition. Salama's leadership is not defined by the assertion of autonomy, but by her ability to act responsibly within suffering. Ahmed's analysis of moral authority arising within traditional ethical frameworks presents Salama's compassion as a form of leadership that emerges from the continuity of Islamic moral thought over its disruption.

Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* (2005) extends this discussion of agency by theorizing it through lived practices of devotion. Her ethnographic study of the Egyptian women's mosque movement challenges the assumption that agency is equivalent to resistance or the pursuit of freedom. She argues that we should "conceptualize agency not simply as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable" (p. 18). Her argument suggests piety as a practice through which the self is ethically formed. She emphasizes that the cultivation of virtues such as modesty and patience is part of a pedagogy of the self, through which moral capacities are acquired. Her concept of *pious agency*, therefore, describes an active moral labor or an inward practice of aligning the self with divine and communal values. Through this lens, Salama's moral perseverance is a reflection of pious agency. Her decision to continue working in the hospital, to protect Layla, to care for Kenan and his siblings, and to act compassionately despite despair are not gestures of resistance in the political sense but disciplined acts of moral will. As Mahmood (2005) notes, "agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms (p. 15)." Salama's faith becomes the medium through which she transforms fear into purpose. Her leadership arises not from rebellion but from ethical endurance that is the very capacity Mahmood describes as the spiritual grounding of agency.

Both Ahmed and Mahmood converge on the idea that moral agency is embodied and historically constructed. Ahmed recovers its historical genealogy within Islamic civilization, while Mahmood locates it in contemporary ethical practice. They offer a framework through which Katouh's novel can be analyzed as a narrative of moral formation rather than emancipation. Salama's transformation from survival to hope illustrates what Mahmood (2005) calls "the formation of pious self" (p. 162), while her moral reasoning reflects what Ahmed identifies as "ethical and spiritual dimensions of the religion" that historically allowed women to participate actively in society (1992, p. 67). Through these theoretical perspectives, moral leadership emerges as a form of agency grounded in compassion and responsibility that reflects survival itself as an ethical act.

4. Discussion and Analysis

Zoulfa Katouh opens *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022) with the Syrian city of Homs collapsing into war, where survival becomes a daily negotiation between fear

and obligation. Salama Kassab, who was once a pharmacy student, now finds herself treating the wounded and burying the dead in a hospital that symbolizes both ruin and endurance. Her initial struggle is not only physical, but moral as well. She oscillates between her duty to heal others and her longing to escape the devastation. This tension between obligation and desire marks the beginning of her transformation. Early in the novel, she confesses, “I lost everything last July. All in the span of one week” (Katouh, 2022, p. 11). This recognition of total loss positions survival as an act of moral endurance rather than mere persistence. Her survival depends on continuing to act rightly even when right actions seem impossible. From Leila Ahmed’s (1992) perspective, this phase of the novel reveals the continuing moral and ethical role of women’s experience within conditions of social crisis. She emphasizes that within Islamic moral traditions, women’s moral participation often emerges in spaces of crises, where care and responsibility replace formal authority. Salama’s life in the hospital mirrors this continuity. The hospital, which is barely functioning, becomes a space where faith and conscience hold a fragile world together. Each act of healing is also an act of remembrance that moral life persists within ruin. She performs surgeries with limited equipment and improvises treatment out of compassion rather than expertise. When she sutures a child’s wound under shellfire, “Tomorrow, insh’Allah, she’ll be all right” (Katouh, 2022, p. 53), exemplifies presents Ahmed’s idea that moral action arises from relational care and faith-based reasoning.

Salama’s moral awareness grows not through ideological resistance but through responsibility. Each decision she makes, such as to remain in Homs and to tend to the wounded despite fatigue, reflects what Saba Mahmood (2005) describes as the active moral practice of endurance (*sabr*), which “allows one to bear and live hardship correctly as prescribed by one tradition of Islamic self-cultivation” (p. 172). When she recalls her brother’s death and yet continues to serve, the novel presents the shift from trauma to ethical endurance. The novel depicts this through sensory details such as the smell of disinfectant mixing with smoke and the trembling of her hands as she holds a dying patient. These scenes expose survival as both physical and moral labor. Katouh presents Salama’s care as a form of leadership that sustains the fragile boundary between despair and humanity. In this sense, Katouh’s representation of survival aligns with Ahmed’s view that moral leadership among women arises from the preservation of ethical order when power structures collapse. Salama becomes the guardian of moral life in a disintegrating world.

As Salama’s story unfolds, the conflict between faith and fear defines her ethical evolution. Her hallucinated companion, Khawf, represents the guilt and moral anxiety. He appears when she hesitates to leave Homs and reminds her of past losses. He threatens her by saying, “I will tear your world apart” (Katouh, 2022, p. 13). This dialogue externalizes Salama’s inner moral conflict: between her obligation to stay and her desire to survive.

Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* (2005) interprets such internal negotiations as the site of ethical agency. She argues, "Agency is not simply the synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but the capacity for action within historically specific relations" (p. 15). Salama's action illustrates this principle. For instance, she continues to work after a bombing and murmurs *dhikr* under her breath. Her remembrance of God stabilizes her will and functions as a spiritual practice of self-discipline. Salama's prayers are not ritual escape but ethical orientation as they structure her decisions amid chaos. While Khawf tempts her to abandon her duties and flee Syria, Salama repeatedly worries that leaving Syria would mean abandoning Layla during her pregnancy and childbirth; a fear that continually draws her back toward responsibility and care. In doing so, she reclaims moral action from paralysis. Mahmood's concept of *pious agency* helps to explain this moment. She emphasizes that piety involves the cultivation of moral readiness through embodied practice. She writes that virtues "are acquired through the repeated performance of actions that entail a particular virtue or vice, until all behavior comes to be regulated by the habitus" (p. 137). Salama's endurance arises from this same discipline. Her faith does not shield her from pain but gives her a moral structure through which she continues to act. Even her hallucinations, such as dialogues with Khawf and the imagined Layla, become moral spaces where she disciplines herself toward conscience. When she finally admits, "I know I'm owed so much, so I forged my own *might* life. She let me heal bit by bit" (Katouh, 2022, p. 223), her words echo Mahmood's observation that self-transformation is an intentional moral labor.

The transformation from moral survival to hope represents the moral climax of the novel. By the final chapter, Salama's leadership emerges from her ability to reflect suffering into moral endurance. For instance, "I focus on the hope rather than counting my losses. I have love in my heart because of you" (Katouh, 2022, p. 214). This statement encapsulates the novel's moral philosophy. Here, hope is not emotional optimism but an ethical relation. It is the act of sustaining meaning when meaning is almost lost. Leila Ahmed's (1992) argument regarding the "ethical voice" of Islam, which "insistently stressed the importance of the spiritual and ethical dimensions of being and the equality of all individuals" (p. 66), finds embodiment in Salama. Her leadership is grounded in presence rather than command. When she chooses to leave Syria, not out of fear but to protect Layla's unborn child, her departure becomes an extension of duty rather than escape. This mirrors Ahmed's observation that true Islamic morality for laypeople stems not from authoritarian rules, but from "the ethical, egalitarian voice of Islam that speaks most clearly and insistently" (p. 239). Salama's moral strength is revealed not through defiance but through care. At the same time, Saba Mahmood's (2005) framework reflects this transformation as an inward cultivation. Through repeated acts of moral attention, such as treating the injured and remembering her lost family, Salama engages in "those

strategies of cultivation through which embodied attachments to historically specific forms of truth come to be forged” (p. 35). Her final realization that “It reminds me that as long as the lemon trees grow, hope will never die.” (Katouh, 2022, p. 287) signifies her completion of moral becoming. She no longer defines herself through trauma but through conscience.

This transformation from survival to moral leadership completes the ethical arc that both Ahmed and Mahmood describe in different registers. Ahmed gives it a historical genealogy and shows that women’s moral authority has long existed as a maintaining force in Islamic societies. Mahmood gives it an ethical language by explaining that authority is cultivated through discipline and faith. Salama embodies both. She inherits a moral tradition without naming it, and she practices ethical self-formation without theorizing it. Her journey translates these frameworks into lived experience. Her leadership does not rely on charisma or resistance, yet it emerges from her choice to remain ethical during devastation. Katouh’s portrayal presents Islamic leadership as a lived moral act. Hope becomes a collective form of resistance that does not seek domination but restoration of moral order.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of Zoulfa Katouh’s *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022) demonstrates that survival in times of destruction becomes an act of moral leadership. Through Salama’s journey, Katouh presents agency not as rebellion against power but as the ethical commitment to sustain life. This study investigates female moral leadership within the framework of Islamic feminism, and the analysis of Salama’s choices shows that her endurance and care serve as a form of authority grounded in conscience. Her moral strength lies in remaining responsible to others and transforming fear into action guided by faith. Katouh’s narrative thus presents a model of leadership that grows from service rather than control and from integrity rather than defiance. The journey from survival to hope in the novel is not a process of emotional recovery alone, but also of ethical transformation. Hope emerges as an orientation toward moral renewal and the capacity to act rightly when meaning appears lost. Salama’s decision to continue serving her community, to aid the wounded, and to protect Layla and her unborn child mirrors Ahmed’s idea that moral authority derives from integrity. Her hope becomes a shared act of care, one that preserves humanity through compassion. Katouh, in this sense, challenges Western feminist paradigms that link empowerment to rebellion. The novel instead presents moral endurance as a form of agency that rebuilds life from within the ethical consciousness of faith.

Through this reading, *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (Katouh, 2022) contributes to a broader conversation about women’s agency and ethics in Islamic feminist thought. It extends Ahmed’s historical recovery of women’s moral reasoning and

Mahmood's exploration of pious practice into the literary space, showing how fiction can translate abstract theoretical concepts into lived experience. Katouh's portrayal of Salama demonstrates that ethical endurance, even within devastation, forms a foundation for hope that is neither sentimental nor passive. Therefore, the study concludes that female moral leadership in Katouh's work is a conscious act of preserving meaning and humanity amid violence. It reflects the continuity of an Islamic moral tradition that views leadership as service, faith as ethical labor, and hope as the courage to remain human.

The implications of this study extend beyond the reading of Katouh's novel. By presenting moral leadership within Islamic feminist frameworks, it opens a space for rethinking how literature from war and displacement can articulate ethical subjectivity without relying on Western models of resistance or emancipation. The study shows that moral endurance and faith-based agency are not secondary responses to trauma but integral forms of political and spiritual resilience. Future scholarship in postcolonial and feminist literary studies may draw from this approach to examine how ethical action functions as leadership in other narratives of crisis. Moreover, this research highlights the importance of reading Muslim women's narratives through frameworks that honor their moral vocabulary and interpretive traditions. In doing so, it contributes to a growing field of scholarship that values moral courage and ethical responsibility as central to women's leadership in both literature and lived experience.

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