


Living on the margin: A critical study of Batool Al-Khudairi's absence through the lens of Amartya Sen's economic theory



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ABSTRACT

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This study explores the intersections of gender, economic marginalization, and postcolonial identity in Batool Al-Khudairi's novel *Absent* using Amartya Sen's economic theory as a critical lens. The research adopts a qualitative literary analysis based on feminist and postcolonial frameworks. It applies Sen's capabilities approach to interpret how socio-economic constraints shape women's agency and experiences in post-war Iraq. The analysis reveals that the female characters in *Absent* suffer from structural inequalities, restricted choices, and cultural alienation, which limit their ability to function fully in society. Sen's theory effectively illustrates how economic deprivation intersects with gender oppression, amplifying the marginalization of women in postcolonial settings. *Absent* critiques of both patriarchal and political systems by portraying women not only as victims of war and tradition but also as figures negotiating identity and survival. The study affirms that literary narratives can expose nuanced dimensions of economic and gender-based injustice.

Contribution/ Originality: This study introduces a novel approach by integrating Amartya Sen's economic theory into a feminist reading of *Absent*. It is the first to link economic marginalization and gendered identity within a postcolonial framework in contemporary Arabic literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature reflects the socio-economic transformations that societies experience, particularly during crises, such as wars and economic turmoil. It powerfully illustrates poverty and hardship exemplified by the depiction of marginalised individuals striving for survival among limited opportunities and social injustice. The article "The Role of Literature in Addressing Social Inequality" emphasises that literature is essential for revealing social disparities and their effects on individuals and communities, offering insights into inequality beyond conventional statistical evaluations. (Hiranya, 2004).

Said (1993) in his book opines that literature is deeply embedded within its socio-political context, shaping and being shaped by its time's economic and cultural forces. Similarly, Kabeer (1999) in her book emphasizes the empowerment of marginalized groups to enhance their ability to confront economic and social crises as seen in the daily struggles of fictional characters. From a broader perspective, Piketty (2014) asserts that "economic inequality

is not merely a material issue but a profound social problem that impacts societal stability and the prospects for inclusive development" (Piketty, 2014).

Sen (1999) considers a lack of resources and poverty as a restriction on essential capabilities. In his influential work, Sen (1999) presents a new perspective on poverty and development that emphasizes "capability" instead of merely focusing on financial resources. According to Sen (1999), poverty encompasses more than simply insufficient funds. It involves being deprived of the freedom to pursue a meaningful life. He illustrates that genuine poverty transcends material difficulties, reflecting a deprivation of vital opportunities and the ability to lead a life of dignity and purpose (ibid).

Sen's (1999) theory shows us that poverty is not merely about lacking money or material things. It encompasses being excluded from opportunities others take for granted. He raises an important point, i.e., "Social inequality is not only about who earns more but also about who has the opportunity to participate in society." This implies missing out on education, decent jobs, and community involvement. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2020) underscores that genuine development must respect human dignity. This study analyzes the novel *Absent* to illustrate how literature reflects the effects of poverty and inequality on people's lives. We gain a deeper insight into how social injustice appears in the lives of both real and fictional characters by merging story analysis with Sen's concepts. Nonetheless, we should ask difficult questions: does the novel challenge gender stereotypes or unintentionally reinforce them? Ultimately, narratives do more than portray inequality. They shape our perceptions.

Amartya Sen's capabilities approach provides a meaningful way to rethink the concept of poverty. Sen encourages us to consider what individuals can achieve rather than measuring poverty solely by income or resources. Can they attend school, access healthcare, engage in society, and live with dignity? For Sen, true development happens when people can make difficult choices, such as living a life they value (Sen, 1999). His focus on these "capabilities" shifts our attention from material wealth to genuine opportunities, making his work especially relevant to human rights and social justice issues.

In *Absent*, this viewpoint reveals that Dalal and Saad face financial hardships and a struggle for autonomy. Their narratives illustrate what Sen refers to as "unfreedoms", the social and economic obstacles that prevent individuals from achieving their full potential. Robeyns (2005) and Alkire (2002) noted that this perspective effectively reveals the human aspect of inequality, including its emotional impact and personal implications. We gain deeper insights into *Absent* and show how literature can highlight real-world injustices while prompting us to consider what a fair society might entail by utilizing Sen's theory in this analysis.

2. LITERATURE AND SOCIAL REALITIES

Literature has historically been a potent medium for articulating the challenges faced by marginalized communities, particularly in times of conflict, patriarchy, and economic strife. Fiction reflects social realities but also amplifies the voices of individuals silenced by oppression and poverty. Feminist literary critics reveal that novels expose the gendered aspects of struggles, challenging patriarchal norms and highlighting women's experiences, which are often *Absent* from official histories. Similarly, postcolonial theorists argue that literature from formerly colonized or war-torn societies counters hegemonic discourses, allowing subaltern voices to "speak" against imperial and authoritarian narratives. (Said, 1993; Spivak, 1988). This study highlights the intersection of feminist criticism and postcolonial theory, framing *Absent* as a postcolonial feminist text that critiques gender and colonial power structures through the portrayal of Iraqi women's lives under sanctions and war. Mohanty (2003) notes that Third-World women's writings resist both Western stereotypes and local patriarchy, emphasizing women's agency and situating their oppression within global power dynamics. Thus, *Absent* can be read in line with a broader tradition of Arab women's literature that uses storytelling of survival, resistance, and truth-telling (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Nussbaum, 2010; Sen, 1999).

Feminist literary criticism examines how *Absent* portrays women's agency amid socioeconomic constraints. It advocates for women's rights and highlights gender injustices, impacting societies by defending women's freedom and questioning traditional roles. Feminist writers confront a patriarchal social order and state censorship while crafting narratives that elevate women's voices in the Arab world, especially Iraq. Scholars note that Iraqi women novelists have embraced fiction to document the lived experiences of repression. Their works often center on domestic struggles, bodily autonomy, and the psychological effects of violence, thereby exposing the intersection of private pain and public turmoil. (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009). Such narratives function as implicit social criticism by depicting the female perspective on war, sanctions, and patriarchy, they question dominant male-centered or state-sanctioned accounts of history. For instance, it foregrounds the inner life of an unmarried young woman in 1990s Baghdad revealing how patriarchal restrictions and socio-political chaos constrain her capabilities and dreams in her journals. Critics have observed that Khedairi's novel "tackles crucial issues, such as women's psyche, fragmentation and deals with Iraqi women's limitations under conquering, totalitarian and patriarchal restrictions," ultimately deconstructing official narratives by showing reality through female eyes, journals, etc. This aligns with postcolonial feminist approaches which assert that women in postcolonial contexts endure dual marginalization (by imperialism and patriarchy) and articulate unique forms of resistance through storytelling.

Postcolonial theory enhances the understanding of *Absent's* social critique. Said (1993) showed that the novel genre is entangled with imperial history, often reinforcing or resisting colonialism. In Iraq's context of colonialism, authoritarian nationalism, and foreign intervention, literary texts often carry political weight. Al-Hassan (2020) argues that Iraqi fiction of the late 20th century occupied "a distinctly political space" used both for hegemonic and counter-hegemonic purposes within Ba'thist Iraq's discourses. Some state-sanctioned literature projected utopian national narratives, but in parallel, women's writing emerged as a counter-discourse that challenged the regime's propaganda and highlighted the brutality of war and sanctions under Saddam's regime. This counter-hegemonic literature often authored by women does not exist in a vacuum. It engages in what Al-Hassan calls an "ongoing struggle for symbolic power" in Iraqi society. The rise of Iraqi women novelists like Betoool Khedairi, Haifa Zangana, Iqbal al-Qazwini, Hadiya Hussein, and others from the 1980s onwards represents a new generation "writing an important page in the history of the Iraqi woman". These writers draw upon a rich heritage of Arab women's storytelling, often invoking the figure of Scheherazade, who "deceived death with narrative" to confront contemporary "barbaric realities" of war and oppression through art. Their novels frequently blur the line between fiction and testimony using personal narratives to document historical trauma. Masmoudi (2010) notes that Iraqi women's fiction over the past decades intertwines testimony and imagination. Female characters bear witness to wars, sanctions, and displacement effectively giving voice to "missing voices," those true witnesses who have been killed or silenced by violence. These novels transform individual stories into collective memory and political critique by placing real events (the Iran-Iraq War, the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 invasion) and their gendered effects at the center of their stories. In *Absent*, the devastations of economic sanctions and bombardment are depicted not abstractly but through their impact on everyday life and especially on women's roles, echoing observations that Middle Eastern wars have "upset traditional gender roles," forcing women to become breadwinners, caretakers, and even community leaders in the absence of men. Postcolonial feminist literature like *Absent* serves as social documentation and resistance narrative, illuminating how global politics and local patriarchy converge to shape women's destinies. (Al-Hassan, 2020; Gamal El-Din, 2018; Masmoudi, 2010).

Amartya Sen's capability approach provides a complementary theoretical lens focusing on economic and human development dimensions while feminist and postcolonial frameworks set the socio-cultural stage. Sen (1999) reconceptualized poverty as not merely low income but as the deprivation of fundamental freedoms and capabilities. The real opportunity is for people to lead the lives they value. This idea, elaborated on in development as freedom has profoundly influenced contemporary discussions of justice and inequality. Crucially, Sen (1999) emphasizes that expanding human freedoms (through education, health, political voice, etc.) is both the means and the end of

development. In the context of literature, the capability approach offers a vocabulary to discuss how fictional characters' choices and life paths are constrained by socio-economic conditions. It aligns with feminist concerns by highlighting forms of "unfreedom" that disproportionately affect women, such as lack of education, forced dependency or restricted mobility (Nussbaum, 2010). Scholars like Robeyns (2005) and Alkire (2002) have surveyed and advanced Sen's framework noting that it reveals the human and emotional aspects of inequality often overlooked by purely economic analyses. This approach highlights human agency and dignity by concentrating on what people can accomplish and be, which correlates strongly with literary analyses of individual lives. Nussbaum (2010) contends that literature can nurture the empathy and imagination needed to understand the full importance of such deprivations. Through rich narratives, novels can make readers feel the lack of freedom that statistics alone cannot convey. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has adopted a capability-oriented view, stressing in its 2020 report that true development must expand people's choices and capabilities for a dignified life, "investing in education and healthcare forms the cornerstone for reducing social inequality and enhancing human capabilities". This perspective is directly pertinent to *Absent*, which vividly depicts how war and sanctions curtail characters' basic capabilities; health is endangered, education and careers are derailed, and daily survival concerns stifle the simple freedom to aspire. The novel's portrayal of Dalal and other women "trapped by economic and social constraints" exemplifies Sen's point that poverty creates "prisoners of their circumstances," denying individuals the ability to pursue life paths of their choosing. We see how economic deprivation intersects with gender oppression, amplifying the marginalization of women in postcolonial settings by applying the capability approach to such a literary narrative. This interdisciplinary angle, bridging development economics and literary analysis is a relatively novel approach in scholarship. It extends feminist literary criticism by incorporating insights from human development theory, thereby offering a richer understanding of how material and social "unfreedoms" shape characters' lives in fiction (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009; Alkire, 2002; Koban & Abdulsahib, 2024; Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 1999; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2020).

The literature suggests that a combined feminist, postcolonial, and capability approach provides a robust framework for analyzing *Absent* and works like it. Feminist and postcolonial critiques illuminate how contemporary Iraqi women's literature engages with themes of gender, power, and identity in the aftermath of colonialism and conflict. *Absent* can be seen as part of a broader feminist canon that uses personal narrative to challenge both patriarchy and political violence. Concurrently, Sen's capability theory allows us to evaluate the novel's depiction of poverty and marginalization in terms of freedom and agency, linking literary insights with concepts of human development and justice. Prior studies and reports underscore that real social progress for women requires addressing both the structural inequalities and the capability deprivations they face (Koban & Abdulsahib, 2024; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2020). This review establishes the groundwork for our analysis by situating *Absent* at the relationship of these scholarly conversations. It affirms that Batool Al-Khudairi's narrative resonates with key issues identified by feminist literary criticism (women's agency and patriarchal critique), postcolonial theory (resistance to imperial and authoritarian oppression), and Sen's capability approach (the importance of freedom and opportunity for human well-being). These perspectives help illuminate how *Absent* "critiques both patriarchal and political systems by portraying women not only as victims of war and tradition but also as figures negotiating identity and survival". Ultimately, the convergence of literature and social realities in this novel exemplifies how fiction can expose nuanced dimensions of economic and gender-based injustice while also imagining the possibilities of empowerment at society's margins (Alkire, 2002; Mohanty, 2003; Nussbaum, 2010; Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 1999; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2020).

Sen (1999) provides a valuable perspective. His view of poverty as not just the lack of money but as a denial of essential capabilities and freedoms has shaped many contemporary discussions on social justice.

Batool Al-Khudairi's novel *Absent* is a compelling example of how literature can document the effects of political conflict and economic collapse. In post-war Iraq, the novel portrays the daily struggles of those living on the fringes

of society. Al-Khudairi's characters, particularly those from impoverished backgrounds are portrayed with deep empathy and realism. Their experiences illustrate the enduring effects of sanctions, war, and structural inequality. This study draws on Sen's theory to examine how *Absent* explores these issues, arguing that the novel brings to life the theories Sen describes in his work.

This research highlights the significance of fiction in addressing global issues like poverty and marginalization by combining narrative analysis with economic theory. Literature does not merely describe social problems. It enables us to feel them. In *Absent*, storytelling, vivid detail, and character development illustrate how inequality influences life from within. Internal monologues and emotional imagery uncover the quiet, personal costs of economic and social exclusion, which Sen might call "unfreedom," limiting people's ability to live with dignity.

The novel also reminds us that these struggles are not limited to a single location. Al-Khudairi's portrayal of Iraqi society reflects broader global concerns. She emphasizes the urgent need for social justice and sustainable development. The characters' pain and resilience speak to a shared human experience is that uniquely equipped to capture and communicate.

The following two key questions guide this study: How does literature reflect the realities of poverty and social inequality? How does it represent those conditions' emotional and psychological effects? To answer these, the analysis focuses on the narrative strategies in *Absent* from character conflict and class-based tension to the harsh economic setting that forms the story's backdrop. The research also draws on the 2020 Human Development Report by the United Nations Development Program using it to connect the novel's events to broader global patterns and to show how development, justice, and literature are deeply intertwined.

This study sees fiction as a reflection of social issues and a meaningful contribution to understanding them. *Absent* helps readers grasp poverty's deep emotional and societal impact and the urgent need for more compassionate, human-centered approaches to development through its characters and storytelling.

2.1. Social and Economic Inequality in Absence

Great literature reveals truths that statistics cannot capture. It illustrates the genuine human toll of poverty and inequality. Novels, such as Al-Khudairi's *Absent* personalize these issues, enabling us to grasp the emotional and personal impact of development challenges on individuals. Nussbaum (2010) asserts that literature nurtures empathy and moral imagination, facilitating connections to experiences that are distant from our own. *Absent* deepens our understanding rather than merely conveying information about suffering illustrating how hardship shapes our identities, choices, and relationships. The novel reveals the deep scars that war and economic sanctions have left on Iraqi society through its characters. These crises shattered the economy and strained social structures, significantly increasing the divide between the wealthy and the impoverished. Al-Khudairi's narrative clarifies that lasting solutions to inequality must address this full range of interconnected problems, not just the financial ones but also the emotional, social, and ethical dimensions of human life. In his study "*Economic Sanctions and Their Social Impact on Iraq*," Abbas Alnasrawi explains how economic sanctions significantly affected Iraqi society, exacerbating social inequality. (Alnasrawi, 2001). The socio-historical backdrop of *Absent* is deeply entwined with Iraq's political and economic turmoil. This context offers a foundation for grasping the characters' challenges, connecting literary portrayals with actual socio-economic realities to raise awareness among society as a whole, specifically women, of shared issues that require public and political solutions (Koban & Abdulsahib, 2024).

In *Absent*, Al-Khudairi describes the characters' daily struggle to survive in a harsh economic environment as they "gazed at the shuttered markets and pale faces... everyone searching for something lost, uncertain if they could ever find it, or even afford it if they did" (Al-Khudairi, 2006). This vividly illustrates how poverty creates feelings of helplessness and despair as Sen points out, "Poverty deprives individuals of the ability to make choices, rendering them prisoners of their circumstances" (Sen, 1999). Al-Khudairi provides a poignant reflection of economic deprivation by portraying characters like Dalal and Saad, who find themselves trapped in cycles of poverty and

social constraints. She presents other portraits of poverty. "Every face holds a story, every eye bears sorrow that cannot be concealed as if everyone carries invisible burdens on their shoulders" (ibid., 52). These narrative details illuminate poverty's psychological and social impacts, deepening the reader's comprehension of human suffering beyond what statistics can portray.

The United Nations Development Program's Human Development Report argues that development transcends economic growth. It highlights poverty's psychological and social effects on individuals and their communities. Furthermore, it focuses on broadening individual choices and improving capabilities for a dignified life. The report underscores the importance of education, health, and social equality in achieving sustainable development: "Investing in education and healthcare forms the cornerstone for reducing social inequality and enhancing human capabilities" (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2020).

This vision is also fundamental to Sen's theory of poverty as a deprivation of capabilities. Sen points out that "Freedom is not only the ultimate goal but also the principal means of achieving sustainable development" (Sen, 1999). He notes that the psychological effects of poverty are essential for understanding the wider implications of socioeconomic inequality. This concept links freedom to the ability to improve the quality of life, a theme evident in *Absent* through characters trapped by economic and social constraints that "restrict their ability to express their opinions openly" (Koban & Abdulsahib, 2024). However, in the twentieth century, especially the latter half, significant strides were made in granting women more sociopolitical rights.

They are deprived of these fundamental rights, increasing social and economic vulnerability. Al-Khudairi (2006) highlights the significance of attaining social and economic sustainability by offering individuals opportunities for education and employment which helps create a more equitable society.

In *Absent*, the effects of human development's absence are evident in the struggles of characters who lack education and economic opportunities. Poverty is depicted not just as a material shortcoming but as a denial of essential choices and opportunities for sustainable development. Al-Khudairi (2006) highlights the importance of addressing poverty as a deprivation of fundamental capabilities. The novel's main character, "Dalal, is a young woman living in a crowded Baghdad apartment with the childless aunt and uncle who raised her since her parents' death (Al-Khudairi, 2006). For instance, Dalal's lack of economic and educational opportunities exacerbates her psychological and social struggles. She feels trapped in a constant cycle of daily survival. She represents the struggle against social inequality in a deeply human way. The social and economic environment around her poses overwhelming obstacles despite her ongoing efforts to better her situation. The events revolve around Dalal's struggle to find work and create a better life for herself but her attempts are thwarted by poverty and the lack of opportunities.

It has now been too late for twenty years. One war followed another punctuated by a watertight blockade of twenty-two million people that included everyone who lived in our block of flats. The north and the south are no-fly zones, and no one can travel abroad. The hyperinflation is terrifying, the poverty is degrading, and the economy has collapsed. Social structures have crumbled, and unemployment exceeds all logical limits. Is this all happening because we have the world's second-largest oil reserves after Saudi Arabia? That is what the media tells us" (Al-Khudairi, 2006).

As Sen stated, "development is not just economic improvement. It is the capacity to enjoy real opportunities for change" (Sen, 1999). This concept mirrors Dalal's reality where class disparities render her attempts to escape the futile cycle of poverty.

The novel poignantly expresses this through the line, "How can our lives continue when they are forced to adapt to a reality that offers so little hope?" (Al-Khudairi, 2006). This quotation reflects the characters' sense of helplessness in the face of economic and social conditions that prevent them from improving their lives. Sen asserts that "Poverty deprives individuals to make choices, rendering them prisoners of their circumstances" (Sen, 1999).

In *Absent*, social and economic inequality emerges as one of the central themes of the narrative. The novel vividly highlights how such inequality leads to the marginalization of impoverished groups with characters living in the shadow of a stark class divide between the wealthy and the poor. Piketty (2014) asserts that “economic inequality is not just a matter of income distribution. It is a social issue that affects the stability of societies”. Inequality is not merely a disparity in income but a deprivation of opportunities available to others, forcing people with low incomes to the fringes of society. Thus, the novel delineates the stark disparity between social classes during wartime wherein wealthier classes live in relative security.

“The families of the mansions live safely behind high walls while the alley dwellers struggle to survive” (Al-Khudairi, 2006).

This social gap resonates with Sen’s view that “development is not merely about economic improvement, but about the capacity to enjoy real opportunities for change” (Sen, 1999).

Al-Khudairi’s characters in *Absent*, particularly Dalal and Saad navigate emotional landscapes shaped by despair and restricted agency. The characters’ experiences underscore the universality of class disparity. For example, Saad faces class and economic discrimination. He feels trapped in an environment deprived of resources and opportunities which deepens his helplessness and despair. Social and economic obstacles hinder him from rising above challenging circumstances despite his mental and physical capabilities. In development as freedom, Sen observes that

“Social inequality is not merely a difference in income but a deprivation of opportunities available to others” (Sen, 1999).

This statement captures Saad’s plight as he becomes a victim of a social reality that limits his capabilities and intensifies his helplessness.

A small child crosses the road behind me. He resembles the teacher in his thinness. He wears a torn pair of trousers and carries a bundle of newspapers under his arm. The teacher takes one of his papers, gives him some change from his pocket, and says, “Give my best regards to your mother, Hamada.”

I ask, “Do you know him?”

He shakes his head. “I used to know his father. He was the chief editor of a cultural magazine. For one of his assignments, he visited the village of Halabja, the site where our brothers, the Kurds, suffered from chemical bombardment. Now, his son sells newspapers to support his mother.” Hamada stares at my mouth. He kisses the coin from the teacher and takes it away with him, heading back in the direction he came from. Saad looks at me. He asks, “Did you know that deaths of children under the age of five have increased fivefold since the Gulf War?” (Al-Khudairi, 2006).

This situation resonates with Sen’s analysis of poverty as a deprivation of basic capabilities that enable individuals to realize their potential.

The novel adds a human dimension to theoretical discussions on social and economic disparity that deepens the reader’s understanding and empathy for marginalized communities through its compelling depiction of the impact of inequality on individuals’ lives. It emphasizes the urgent need for systemic solutions that address the roots of poverty and its consequences to empower individuals and promote social justice. The novel illustrates how social inequality creates psychological and social barriers that impede human development.

Ghayeb always reminisces about the prosperous days, constantly repeating stories about Iraqi society. She sighs and says, “Ah, the siege and political turmoil! Tell me, where is justice? Just look at our building. Each of us carries our burden. Compare the past to the present! Look at Hamada, that poor child who lost his father in the Halabja bombing and was forced to sell newspapers to support his mother. Alternatively, we see economic injustice at its worst with that unfortunate man who calls himself a butcher here. Once engaged in major projects, a civil engineer is now reduced to selling meat after the suspension of engineering projects due to the lack of services and maintenance. This truly reflects the unequal distribution of wealth. Moreover, suppose I was to tell you about

marginalized women. In that case, there is Ilham, who escapes into dreams to flee from her harsh reality, and Umm Mazin, who resorts to fortune-telling as a means of survival, showing just how limited women's choices have become in a time that suppresses their independence (Al-Khudairi, 2006).

Dalal describes political oppression in Iraq as deeply intertwined with social barriers that exacerbate suffering and injustice. The control mechanisms, such as turning neighbors into informants, create a climate of fear and distrust, weakening the social fabric and making collective resistance nearly impossible. This systemic oppression is not limited to political surveillance but extends to the deterioration of infrastructure, disproportionately affecting the poor and marginalized. The lack of necessities, such as electricity in Duhok and stable housing in Basra reflects a broader neglect that serves to maintain the status quo, ensuring that power remains concentrated among the elite. Social justice is just a dream. The individuals enduring the most hardship are consistently the poorest, while those in power remain secure and comfortable. When you mix political crackdowns with economic collapse, it creates a wall too high to climb - generation after generation gets stuck in poverty with no way out. This came through clearly in Dalal's talk with her aunt. Their conversation kept recurring to the same painful truths, oppression, empty pockets, and broken trust between people. As they spoke, you could see how these forces had driven entire communities to the margins of society, struggling to survive, much less rebuild their lives. It became painfully clear that inequality and hardship harm individuals and tear societies apart. The gaps between people grow wider, and chances to move forward get fewer and farther between.

Neighbors are turned into informants, increasing the fragility of society. Moreover, the collapse of the infrastructure has caused people in Duhok to live in complete darkness due to power outages. At the same time, thousands in Basra have lost their homes and are now forced to live in unfinished buildings without water or basic services. During these harsh conditions, my dear aunt, social justice has completely diminished and disappeared. The poor and marginalized people suffer the most while those in power continue to thrive unscathed (Al-Khudairi, 2006).

In *Development as Freedom*, Sen asserts that "social inequality affects not only an individual's economic life but also deeply infiltrates their psychological and social existence." (Sen, 1999). This idea is evident in *Absent* as the impact of poverty and social inequality extends beyond material dimensions to encompass the psychological and social aspects of individuals' lives. Saad's experience of poverty and his inability to find work and meet basic human needs cause profound psychological pressure as he grapples with feelings of helplessness, bitterness, and social isolation that become ingrained in his identity, placing him in constant conflict with himself.

The infrastructure and industry have been damaged. Electricity generators, water purification plants, and petrochemical refineries have been blown up. Communication networks have been blown away, and bridges have fallen into the rivers. The roads and highways are full of craters. The rail tracks along with the carriages loaded with foodstuffs have been destroyed. Aluminum and textile factories as well as the centers for manufacturing electrical cables and drugs have been wiped off the map (Al-Khudairi, 2006).

2.2. Economic Hardship and Environmental Neglect in *Absence*

The large-scale disappearance of the green belt surrounding Iraqi cities as illustrated in Al-Khudairi's *Absent* is a direct consequence of economic hardship and environmental neglect. The novel illustrates how individuals confronted with resource scarcity turn to cutting down trees for fuel gradually destroying green spaces (Al-Khudairi, 2006). This phenomenon underscores a broader environmental crisis where economic instability compels communities to exploit natural resources unsustainably, accelerating desertification and ecological degradation (Sen, 1999).

Between 16 January and 27 February [1991], some 88,000 tons of bombs were dropped on Iraq, an explosive tonnage judged equivalent to seven Hiroshima-size atomic bombs. Thus, in war, Iraq was subjected to the

equivalent of one atomic bomb a week, a scale of destruction that has no parallels in the history of warfare (Al-Khudairi, 2006).

The green belt was originally designed as a protective barrier against dust storms, excessive heat, and urban pollution which is crucial for maintaining ecological balance (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2020). However, preserving these green spaces has become secondary to immediate survival needs due to prolonged warfare, economic sanctions, and infrastructural collapse (Alnasrawi, 2001). People increasingly rely on cutting down trees for firewood, further depleting these vital environmental barriers and disrupting local ecosystems as public services decline, especially in energy supply and natural resource management. This practice leads to long-term consequences, such as soil erosion, decreased agricultural productivity, and heightened vulnerability to climate change (Said, 1993).

Al-Khudairi's *Absent* reflects the intersection of economic deprivation and environmental destruction, showing how the degradation of green belts is an ecological concern and a socio-economic crisis. The most impoverished communities suffer disproportionately while the wealthy, who can afford alternative energy sources remain largely unaffected (Kabeer, 1999). This disparity aligns with Amartya Sen's argument in *Development as Freedom*, where he asserts that poverty is a lack of income and a deprivation of essential capabilities, including access to sustainable resources (Sen, 1999).

Furthermore, the loss of green belts worsens declining urban living conditions leading to a rise in respiratory illnesses due to increased air pollution. The ongoing political instability and economic hardship in Iraq have relegated environmental issues to the sidelines as governments tend to prioritize short-term survival over long-term sustainability. Hiranya (2004) notes that this trade-off is common in conflict-affected regions where immediate economic needs take precedence.

In *Absent*, the slow disappearance of green spaces around Baghdad reflects environmental neglect and the breakdown of infrastructure and public services. Al-Khudairi illustrates that environmental degradation is not an isolated issue but is deeply connected to poverty, inequality, and weakened state capacity through her narrative. Tackling this crisis calls for more than isolated fixes. Coordinated investment in renewable energy, urban reforestation, and policies providing low-income communities with alternatives to deforestation, like access to clean fuel are required (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2020). The loss of Iraq's green belt will only deepen existing inequalities and delay the country's recovery for future generations without such long-term efforts. Al-Khudairi's portrayal makes this vividly clear.

The barber, once a civil engineer who contributed to major infrastructure projects is now reduced to trimming hair in a struggling neighborhood, symbolizing the loss of potential and the collapse of professional and ecological stability. Like many others in the novel, his story reminds him that rebuilding Iraq must include caring for people and the environment. However, as he explained, the circumstances following the 2003 war caused a significant decline in his engineering career. Many engineering projects failed because of inadequate services and a lack of resources due to the economic challenges after the war. As a result, he had to change his profession and now works as a barber in the neighborhood.

Dalal said, "He told me that most of the major engineering projects have been put on hold because there are no maintenance services. He also mentioned that large areas of the green belt around the cities have started to disappear. This is because people have been cutting down the trees to use wood as fuel" (Al-Khudairi, 2006).

These challenges embody Sen's observation that "Poverty deprives individuals of the ability to make free choices" (Sen, 1999). The building's residents feel deprived of necessities and do not participate meaningfully in society, further exacerbating their marginalization. These details highlight the psychological toll of social inequality, as Sen discussed, linking poverty to the inability to make decisive choices about one's future.

Solitude is such a difficult thing, Dalal. The wars have snatched away so many of the men. My customers keep telling me that one of the women told me that sometimes, when she feels lonely, she likes to listen to her bedroom

curtain billowing in a gentle breeze as it makes a soft rustling sound. She closes her eyes and imagines it is the sound of her husband's dishdasha as he approaches her bed in the darkened room, yet her husband died a few years ago" (Al-Khudairi, 2006). On the other hand, the novel highlights the emotional effects of inequality through the character of Dalal, who experiences a constant state of anxiety and instability. In one passage, Dalal reflects, "How can I continue in a life that offers so little hope?" (ibid. 120). This quote illustrates how a lack of economic and social opportunities leads to feelings of helplessness and despair. It emphasizes the psychological pressure faced by impoverished individuals. These challenges demand comprehensive and sustainable solutions with literature as a bridge to foster understanding and empathy and urge action towards systemic change.

In *Absent*, social and economic inequality is portrayed as an individual struggle and part of a larger societal system that limits people's choices, dignity, and potential. The novel amplifies the voices of those on the margins, illustrating how inequality transforms into a structural force that influences everyday life. This idea strongly echoes Amartya Sen's argument that true development must go beyond economic growth. It must remove the barriers that prevent individuals from living lives they have reason to value. Al-Khudairi brings this idea to life by illustrating how characters, particularly Dalal, navigate a world where freedom is perpetually compromised. At one point, Dalal reflects that

"We live waiting for electricity, clean water, a visa, someone to come back and someone to leave (Al-Khudairi, 2006).

Absent illustrates that literature can transcend simple reflections of reality by integrating narrative with economic theory. This approach enhances our comprehension of intricate issues and motivates readers to foster empathy and act. Such stories highlight that inequality is not just a number but a tangible experience. When literature brings these experiences to light, it becomes a potent instrument for raising awareness, driving change, and imagining fairer, sustainable futures.

3. CONCLUSION

Integrating literature with economic theory creates a more nuanced, human-centered perspective on development and inequality. Literature deepens our understanding of how these figures impact individual lives. This research emphasizes that fiction offers a personal viewpoint, showcasing the individual experiences of broader economic systems while numerical data can illustrate the extent of poverty or unemployment. Such narratives allow readers to emotionally engage with social issues that might seem remote or theoretical.

In *Absent*, Batool Al-Khudairi goes beyond depicting the consequences of war and economic sanctions in Iraq. She illustrates how these forces infiltrate the daily experiences of ordinary individuals. We witness the gradual erosion of dignity, the fading of aspirations, and the pressure on relationships and communities. The novel highlights that inequality is not just a statistical gap. It affects people's ability to eat, sleep, move, and dream. Thus, fiction transcends mere reflection of social reality. It offers profound insights and encourages us to envision potential changes.

Absent illustrates how poverty and social exclusion rob individuals of their fundamental freedoms, reflecting a central concept in Amartya Sen's exploration of human development. The novel provides a visceral, close-up portrayal of how inequality impacts lives through the experiences of characters like Saad and Dalal, who navigate personal challenges and societal obstacles. This underscores the significance of literature. It goes beyond merely presenting poverty by allowing us to grasp its human toll. Narratives like this do more than articulate injustice; they awaken us and provoke a call to action.

This research goes beyond storytelling. It demonstrates how books like *Absent* can ignite meaningful discussions about equity and achieving a better society. The novel highlights the devastating impact of economic crises on communities, portraying characters ensnared by their situations with aspirations shattered merely because they were born on the disadvantaged side of the opportunity divide. Literature holds immense power as it brings a

human perspective to these issues. By experiencing the struggles of its characters, we also feel the emotional burden of lost opportunities and we move beyond merely understanding poverty on an intellectual level. This deep, visceral insight pushes us past mere statistics, allowing us to recognize what is necessary for building a more equitable and sustainable world.

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