

# Dimensions and Features of Feminist Literature: Novelistic Trends in Contemporary Arab Feminist Literature

Falih Mahdi Jabur Al-Zamili\*

## **Abstract:**

This paper focuses on the concept of feminism with a stress on the novelistic trends of feminist fiction in the Middle East. We will discuss representative feminist literary works during the contemporary feminist movement. Feminist literature is considered to be creative work because it advocates for women's causes and because they defend their freedom and rights. We will focus on the idea that critical feminist works impacted societies throughout history and helped women get their freedom and independence, even though feminist literature is considered to be focused on the different shapes of sexuality. We analyze the Feminist Movement of the Middle East through Muslim culture influenced by the West. They consider that the Arab world is experiencing a global crisis with a series of underlying structural problems extending to cultural conflict. The condition and position of women in the Islamic world are one of the most controversial and studied issues in the last decades.

**Keywords:** Arab literature, gender, feminism, identity, Islamic feminism, Middle East, novelistic trends

## **Introduction: The Modernity of the West in the Middle East**

The legitimacy of the supremacy of the West is seen in the depths of the consciousness of individuals and groups. It is so rooted in collective identity that one can well speak of an authentic culture of supremacy. It is the identity foundation of what we now call the West, on which it builds its relations with the other and in which the nations that comprise it, without a doubt, have been the only ones that have generated a theoretical apparatus – philosophical, moral and scientific – of legitimacy. The demands formulated based on identity imply exclusivity and rigidity. Therefore, they delimit the borders between the person(s) and those who are defined by the other, increasingly seen as evil beings. According to Lila Abu-Lughod, “being modern has been the dominant self-image of Europeans for almost two centuries” (Abu-Lughod, 1988: 7). In itself, “what the colonists sought was to undermine the local

---

\* Lecturer PhD, Education College, English Department, Al-Kufa University, Al-Kufa, Iraq, falih.m.alzamily@gmail.com

culture” (Ahmed, 1992: 21). Most identity politics are related to the ethnic. In certain circumstances, the distinctive lines of the ethnic are defined following the line of religion, in such a way that the ethnic and the religious mix. Modernity is a moment of the global overcoming of the conceptions and experiences that have stopped responding to the demands of reason. It is all the activity that consists, at a given time, of analyzing and criticizing the theoretical and practical elements, still efficient, of the conception of the world. These elements have been inherited in such a way as to give new foundations to inherited concepts or to create new concepts based on the most current data of scientific reason and ethical reason.

In the East, European culture and experience elements are combined and reconciled with those of the Arab world. They are confusing the different and incompatible historical elements that characterize the same culture, reflected in their daily reality, at the political, social, or individual level, and more specifically in their behaviour. European modernity is presented as modernity on a “universal” scale, alien to Arab culture and its history, which prevents a genuine dialogue with it, challenging it.

In the Western conception, the position of women in the culture of Islam is one of the cornerstones of all Western criticism of the Muslim world. Women are the prototype of marginalization in a male-dominated society. hidden behind her veil, she lives an invisible existence, lacks prominence; a victim of limitless oppression that suffers from ancient fatalism. “Of course, the West has discovered another of its historical missions: to free Muslim women from their sad reality.”

From this western vision, Muslim women beat all records of discrimination, alienation, and backwardness. They are the personified image of the woman and victim. They are subjected to men, tribal customs, and the intransigent laws of religion to totalitarian, macho, and tyrannical Islam. While Islam, throughout its history, has revolutionized the living conditions of men in all areas, calling them spiritual, economic, and political, in which machismo has been the only human structure that has resisted the values of their belief. A vision that is often also perceived in a romantic way, in which Arab women are seen as the “Sheherazades” in *The Thousand and One Nights*, ignoring their participation in the productive sphere.

### **Feminism in Literature**

If culture is an expression of collective identity and if all societies have to deal with the problem of gender, therefore, the new definitions require a reordering of culture, regardless of whether the society in

question is dynamic or inactive, ancient or contemporary, atheist or religious, Muslim or non-Muslim.

Although women's lives vary significantly from one Muslim context to another, it does not imply that they are not influenced by Islamic or Muslim laws and customs to a greater or lesser extent. Customs are as powerful as the law itself; they are a weapon of control; such laws, which subdue personal and family matters, outline the limits within which a Muslim woman can hope to define her own identity.

Feminism in literature is a reflection on the role of women in society. It also reflects the uneasiness experienced by the woman writer, the difficulties of finding her voice within a world, that of literature, traditionally reserved for the male sex, in which the woman is the object but never the subject of her enunciation.

There are many literary works in which feminism emerges directly or indirectly. Of course, almost none of the feminist ideology occupies the central theme of the plot, but it is up to the seasoned, active reader to delineate what underlies the plot; that is, many readings are needed to capture the essence of the text in its entirety. Literature thus becomes another weapon for feminism to implement strategies of resistance to patriarchy to subvert the line of male domination that exists in the texts of the literary tradition.

Regarding the other position, that of considering their gender as an obstacle to carrying out the task of writing and being taken into account by critics, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979: 199) face the phenomenon of the dual voice that characterizes the writing of women affirming that the literary strategy of women consists of assaulting and revising, destroying and reconstructing the images of women that we have inherited from male literature in which they are represented according to binary logic as the saint and the whore, the angel, and the monster, the sweet heroine and the mad madwoman.

Women have the most significant contribution to the various activities in social life. Whereas western feminist studies have always referred to western womanhood studies from their perspective in the European society, they deal with women from an intellectual, philosophical perspective and literary works. There was a massive argument between the women's thoughts and great intellectual philosophers' opinions regarding their attitudes; they realized the prominent role of the woman, which has a significant impact on the philosophical issues as well as a fundamental role in the construction of modern society. The patriarchal society has subjugated women throughout history. They have faced some serious problems regarding their education and franchised. Women have the capability, intelligence, and strong personality to protect their families from disintegration and

disruption. Despite the suffering, women initiated some prominent movements, and the writers defeated their rights. Feminist literature is fiction or nonfiction that adopts women's goals and defines, establishes, and defends their equal civil, political, economic, and social rights. Writing about Virginia Woolf's novel from a feminist perspective, Isam M. Shihada contributed to a definition of feminism that summarizes previous research in the field:

Feminism can be roughly defined as a movement that seeks to enhance the quality of women's lives by defying the norms of society based on male dominance and subsequent female which implies the emancipation of women from the shackles, restrictions, norms, and customs of society. It demands that women should be treated as autonomous subjects, and not as passive objects. It seeks to achieve equality between men and women in moral, social, economic, and political fields (Shihada, 2005: 121).

In the last few decades, the feminist concept has been used increasingly in literature by both male and female authors. This trend became significant in Arabic literature when the Arabic female authors started to have their works translated into international languages and focus on identity formation in contemporary African American and Arab American women's novels. So, the feminist theory is based on the equality between males and females. According to Pope, feminism is a "politically motivated movement dedicated to personal and social change, challenge the traditional power of man and revalue and celebrate the role of women" (Pope, 2012: 114). Women are considered today as an essentially active role of the structural society in all aspects of whole life.

### **Novelistic trends in the Arab World**

Despite the leveling tendencies of globalization, specific standards of Western civilization do not and cannot be applied to the Arab world. It is also the case with feminism as it is perceived and applied by Western scholarship. The Arab supporters of this variety of feminism are primarily members of academia, writers, and artists, with a more significant impact in the West than in their own countries. The general opinion towards them is not always favorable:

Western-style feminists are seen by most other Muslims as irreligious representatives of an alien culture. In reality, few such feminists are devout Muslims, which immediately undermines their arguments. These arguments are generally grounded in conceptions borrowed from contemporary Western discourse, conceptions that are incomprehensible to most Muslims. Western-style feminists are normally non-observant members of Westernized elites and are listened to only by other non-observant members of Westernized elites (Sedgwick, 2006: 114).

There are significant differences between these Western-style feminists and their Islamic counterparts, whose arguments – far from being abstract concepts – are based on Islam and the Islamic law, the Sharia. Sedgwick enumerates several traits that define Arab/Islamic feminism: far from stressing the differences between men and women, they advocate the women’s right “to be granted in practice those rights that Islam gives them in theory” (Sedgwick *idem*). Fair treatment and protection of women is a prerequisite, and they demand “speedier divorce proceedings, for childcare facilities, and other such practical improvements in women’s lives” (*ibidem*). Most of these supporters of Islamic feminism are practicing Muslims. Their theories have had a far more significant impact on their followers than the Western feminists. Their religion-based arguments are “much more comprehensible to the average Muslim, and their basis in Islam makes it harder to contradict or ignore what they say” (*Ibidem*: 114).

Writing about gender relations in modern Iran, Iranian-American historian and gender theorist Afsaneh Najmabadi confirms the feminists’ success in writing women into male-cantered histories, but she thinks that,

feminist history has inadvertently contributed to this historical amnesia by doing gender analysis without regard for the historical transformations of sexuality. Feminist historiography that screens away sexuality mirrors the disavowal of male homoeroticism that became a contingent birthmark of the Iranian women’s movement for parity at the end of the nineteenth century (Najmabadi, 2005: 235).

When discussing the condition of Muslim women, Western scholarship can hardly go beyond stereotypes. They start from the general assumption that all Muslim women are ignored and miserable—which holds more in the metropolis than in the countryside, where conservatism is stronger and traditions are dutifully observed. Education brings a certain degree of liberation, and educated women are more likely to disagree with their husbands’ views on family matters, for example. Even if they look submissive and subdued to the Western observer, Muslim women are not always so helpless. As Sedgwick explains:

Some Muslim feminists regard the position of women in Islam much as most Westerners do, though they cannot always admit this in front of Westerners. Such feminists have no significant following outside Westernized elites. Feminists who call for women to receive such rights as they are given by Islam gain more of a hearing, but even so have had little impact on social and legal practice in the Muslim world. Although Westerners might expect Muslim women to be uniformly miserable, this is plainly not the case (2006: 116).

Attempting to outline the most recent developments of literary production, starting from a gender perspective, involves the inevitable

risk of enclosing female writing within a separate literary universe that is not osmotic communicating with its male counterpart. Moreover, if the one analyzed in the production of countries of Islamic area or influence, we come across an even more complex category. Although the point of observation is restricted, as in this case, to the Muslim countries of the Middle East alone, the Islamic world is crossed by profound linguistic, historical, political, cultural, and religious differences. However, in the West, they are too often ignored in favor of simplistic and reductive approaches. It is widely believed, for example, that Islamic societies are refractory to modernity and that they relegate their women to a subordinate and marginal world, where little space remains even for writing, except when it is expressed in terms of denunciation against female oppression. While these approaches continue to give way to exoticism or feed fears and prejudices, on the one hand, they mistakenly assume Islam as the only possible interpretation, returning to a monolithic and distorted image.

#### **Understanding Arab feminism from its writers**

Talking about women's writing in areas where Islam represents the prevailing religious and cultural tradition certainly means referring to societies in which women still experience various dimensions of exclusion, oppression, and marginality. However, this condition must be framed within solidly patriarchal contexts, but also socially and ethnically hierarchical, and whose behavioural norms, rather than deriving solely from religion, find an authoritative justification and an effective instrument of diffusion. Starting from this perspective, therefore, it is possible to disregard analyzes conducted through the lens of Islam alone or from literary categorizations based purely on religious affiliation. Instead, we can draw a line of continuity between the much-abused "condition of the Muslim woman" and similar dynamics of female marginalization that characterize other patriarchal societies or communities belonging to a lower social class, or an ethnic or religious minority constitutes a discriminating factor. In the same way, the fundamental role literature has played and continues to have in giving a voice to women in marginal situations can be understood as analogous.

Since their establishment on the literary scene, the writers of the Islamic Middle East have exploited the room for maneuver offered by literature, redefining their position in the public and private sphere. They have undermined from within, and with various levels of awareness and political activism, the monolithism of the patriarchal system. The questions that the first women writers were asking – "Why were women debarred from education and professional opportunities? Was gender a sufficient reason? What effect did their invisibility have on society?"

(Cooke, 1992: 446) – entered the mainstream and defied the general patriarchal views on the women's public voice. The pioneers of female literature resorted to writing using the new literary genres imported from the West. First of all, the novel and short story began to emerge right from the start as a means of evading the fixity of a role determined by one's belonging to gender and, at the same time, to claim the word by reiterating in the first place such specificity.

In recent times, female writing has gradually begun to represent much more than a literary echo of gender issues. It reveals the multiple expressive potentials women's literature can assume on an elevated level and regarding the expansion of themes and narrative perspectives. From this point of view, it is significant that many authors of the last generations share a firm refusal to be relegated to an exclusively female or feminist literary sphere. Their visible conduct is claimed as a natural literary transposition of an observation point linked to essential gender identity. They use first-person narration; they write their own biographical experience and investigate issues intrinsically connected to “being a woman”. They deal with motherhood, the relationship with one's body and sexuality, male presence/absence, and the weight of social norms and expectations). Their work is claimed as a natural literary transposition of an observation point linked to essential gender identity.

One of the most interesting traits that inform the writings of many contemporary authors is the constant attempt to unhinge and redefine the concept of belonging. Such belonging underlies an adhesion univocal and uncritical, be it gender, a role, a group, a nation, a cause, or a language. In doing so, various writers experiment with a plurality of narrative contents and forms that reflect the extreme diversity of their life paths and many different ways of using the written word and understanding it. Some writers redraw the uncertain boundaries of their own belonging to a country by exploring the minimal dimension of exile. For others, finally, the language becomes a means by which to claim the need for a plurality of expression or to reveal the inadequacy of identity constructions based on a nationalistic or religious basis. The eccentricity of the observation point remains constant for all of them.

Despite this apparent social immobility, considered completely anomalous by other Arab countries, the traditional role of women is nevertheless continually called into question through lively debates in clubs and the local press and, recently, on the web. In recent years, however, there has been a bold burst onto the literary scene of a large group of female writers, whose works reinforce the shaping of a literary flowering that timidly emerged in the Arabian peninsula only from the

1960s onwards. Moreover, therefore, relatively young compared to the more established literary traditions of the rest of the Arab world.

Literature, from this point of view, fully exploits the possibility of being a spokesperson for needs and demands not only emotional but also of a political and social nature. In countries where women still have no form of political participation, literature is immediately transformed into a forum. Their requests, albeit limited and disguised as literary expedients, provide the interested parties with the hope or the illusion of active participation in the country's life, with the intimate conviction of achieving rights that are still denied. At the same time, writing represents for many women the possibility of projecting and restoring, even outside their own country, a different, sometimes disorienting, image of themselves. The first feminist publication in the Arab world overthrows the dominant patriarchal power simply by publishing recollections of a woman asserting her life in the Arabic language. Huda Shaarawi insists, in *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*, on the political and intellectual awakening of bourgeois women and traces her movements from the inside (in the harem) to the outside (affiliation with national women's networks and international).

Nawal El Saadawi was the first Arab feminist to dissect the sexual oppression of Arab women. In the 1960s, other feminists, such as Huda Sharawi, Doria Shafiq, or Latifa al-Zayyat, had already dealt with their political, social, and economic discrimination. Nevertheless, Saadawi stuck his finger in what the Syrian Marxist Bu Ali Yasin called “the taboo triangle” of the Arabs: the sex-religion-class struggle. Moreover, she did it by combining psychiatry, feminism, and literature. She thus had tools not only to dissect violence as a social disease that explicitly targets women but to report it to the general public.

In the Arab cultural and political space, for Nawal El Saadawi – the Egyptian feminist writer and political activist known as “the Simone de Beauvoir of the Arab world” – society is permeated by a dichotomy of moral standards for females and others for males: “At the root of this anomalous situation lies the fact that sexual experience in the life of a man is a source of pride and a symbol of virility, whereas sexual experience in the life of women is a source of shame and a symbol of degradation” (Saadawi, 1980: 31).

As tradition has it, in a male-dominated, patriarchal society where women are ruled over and requested total submission to men, it all turns to the men's advantage, as they allow for themselves everything that women are forbidden to do. The whole discussion acquires a political dimension:



We cannot look at the cultural gap without looking at the economic gap or the inequality between countries, the inequality between classes in each country, and the inequalities between the sexes in the family and the state. All these inequalities are linked together. They feed each other in the pyramid of hierarchy and are inseparable. At the top of this pyramid are the leaders of the New World Order. (El Saadawi, 1997: 135).

Another relevant example is the tremendous international success of *banāt al-riyāḍ* (2005), the first work novel by the young Saudi writer Rajaa al-Sanea, which quickly became an international literary case. The novel was published in English as *Girls of Riyadh* in 2007. Entrusted by the author for the press to a Lebanese publishing house, the novel was initially banned by the Saudi authorities. However, copies of it immediately began circulating in the underground economy. The story is that of four young university students belonging to privileged families in the Saudi capital. They struggle between the need to give voice to their desire for love, their sexual impulses, the need for social affirmation, and the need not to exceed limits imposed on them by the rules of the cultural and religious tradition of the society in which they live. In the novel, moreover, even on a formal level, the audacity of the contents is stemmed from the use of a narrator whose identity is never revealed. At the same time, the events and reflections of the protagonists are told in a form that recreates a private writing space within an alternative and transversal reality like that of the web. Labeled as a Saudi example of chick-lit and undoubtedly “light” in its approach, the novel nevertheless had the merit of sparking interest in the growing Saudi literary production for women.

Other voices have emerged in recent years and are distinguished above all by the determination in wanting to offer women a downright eccentric representation compared to the stereotype by which they are usually represented. In doing so, they seem to want to emphasize the female body first, speaking about it openly, beyond any self-censorship, and, above all, removing it from the exclusive male use. The narratives of the generation of writers that preceded them focused on the problems linked to segregation and the passive role of women, investigating, in varying degrees, the dimensions, including emotional ones, of male oppression and female victimization. The new Saudi authors are distinguished by indulging in more gory issues such as premarital relationships and abortion. One example is the novel *Firdaus al-yabāb* (1998) by Laila al-Juhani or sexuality and homosexuality described without reticence in the novel entitled *al-āḥarūn* (trans. as *The Others*, 2007) by an author who writes under the pseudonym of Siba al-Huaraz.

Although the unscrupulous tones of young Saudi authors still attract a lot of interest and sensation, the body and sexuality have long been investigated in several ways by female writing. Many writers have been

confronted with these themes and attempted to remove them from the hegemonic treatment of men and develop expressive forms that would allow them to give the word to the female body, publicly claiming its erotic dimension. The deliberate choice of some writers to freely represent themselves in a sphere in which women were conceived as a silent objects of desire, representation and control immediately assumed the value of a violated taboo, unleashing immediate and intense reactions of indignation and censorship.

The attempts of female writing to redefine the traditional boundaries of public discourse on sexuality, bypassing, through the use of an implicit language, male authority, or borrowing and expanding their languages and expressive forms, indeed represent one of the most disruptive tendencies that emerged in recent years.

### **Conclusions**

In 2017, Americans responded to the election of President Donald Trump with a historic demonstration against the President in several cities. The largest, in the capital Washington, had almost 500,000 people. They took a stand against the president-elect's misogynistic conduct and the setbacks his government could bring to women's rights, for example, by suspending the right to legal abortion. At the end of the same year, the explosion of a scandal involving allegations of sexual abuse committed systematically over the years against women by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein sparked the #MeToo movement. Accusations against powerful men have multiplied in different areas and countries.

Building a feminist theory in the approach of existing artistic objects in a specific context will ultimately be seen as a political effort of genesis in an ultimate understanding of gender as a social and ideological construction, as a reflection of the weight assumed by gender systems, and respective ideological character, about the subject's existence and identifications. Looking at ideology as representations that a society builds of itself and a set of directives on the reproduction of such representations, these are vital in the constitution of social structures, among them, the socially dominant representations of women. Taking culture – images, representations, meanings, and ideologies – as a core area of feminist research and intervention will imply thinking about it, along with other factors – economic, class, sexual division of labor – while socially and historically determining the position that the female subject occupies in the world.

Assuming an evident ideological character, the factors of culture are part of the ideological complex that organizes social dynamics, thus unveiling the potential for transforming gender systems through cultural intervention. This social and cultural climate determines the dimensions

and features of the novelistic trends of contemporary feminist literature that we have followed in our contribution.

The feminist movement believed that the issue of female emancipation was not a religious issue but a social phenomenon. It should be noted that one of the differences from Western feminism is precisely the political-religion relationship. It raises the need to recognize that its theological dynamism is just as relevant as feminist activity. Women's proposals to change their position and condition in Muslim societies are a significant threat because they are interpreted as expressions of individualistic psychology; they fear individualism; for this reason, they also reject feminist currents, in addition to estimating Western imports. Feminist projects have been rooted in ideas about politics, law, rights, the person, and the community that are part of a modernity that is simultaneously related to Europe and mainly developed in the Middle East.

Summing up, when they promote the literary productions of women writers, the supporters of feminist criticism get involved in an intensive program of reconsidering the canon. They reconsidered the women's public presence and personal existence thoroughly examined the women characters in the literary productions of both men and female writers, and challenged the existing stereotypes that underline their alleged otherness in a male-dominated, patriarchal society. A critical component of the feminist theory is the critics' approach to the matter of language, and they question the nature of the differences between men and women as either socially or biologically motivated. The debate acquires a different dimension when the critics consider the existence of a feminine (not feminist) writing in a specific female language (if any), which leads to a psychoanalytical analysis of male and female identity.

#### REFERENCES:

- Abu-Lughod, L. (ed.), *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1988.
- Ahmed, L., *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, New Haven, Yale University Press, in Abu-Lughod, 1992.
- Badawi, M. M., *Modern Arabic Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Cooke, M., "Arab Women Writers", in *Modern Arabic Literature*, ed. M.M Badawi, 1992, p. 443-62.
- Gilbert, S. M., Gubar, S., *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1979.
- Najmabadi, A., *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, University of California Press, 2005.

Pope, R., *The English Studies Book: an Introduction to Language, Literature, and Culture* [1998], Second Edition, London and New York, Routledge, 2014.

Sedgwick, M., *Islam & Muslims: A Guide to Diverse Experience in a Modern World*, Boston and London, Intercultural Press, 2006.

Shaarawi, H., *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (1879-1924)*, Translated, edited and introduced by Margot Badran. New York, The Feminist Press, 1987.

Shihada, I. M., "A Feminist Perspective of Virginia Woolf's Selected Novels: 'Mrs. Dalloway' and 'To the Lighthouse'." *International Journal of Arabic – English Studies (IJAES)*, Vol. 6, 2005.

<http://www.ijaes.net/article/viewarticle?volume=6&issue=1&articleId=2>

Woolf, V., *A Room of One's Own* [1929], London, Grafton, 1977.