

Gender in Arab literature: Between Feminism, Western Prejudices and Repackaging

Du'a Ahmad Nahrawi

Practitioner on Arabic Translation
 Email: Duaa.alkarawan@gmail.com

Abstract

Gender parity has become a controversial issue in Middle Eastern countries where many outsiders give Arab and/or Muslim women a stereotyped collective image. Arab and/or Muslim women are portrayed as either women oppressed by males and/or society and the norms that prevail or more recently influenced by feminism. Therefore, many Arab writers recognize the importance of telling their own stories as a type of narrative intervention, an antidote to the lies and misconceptions about their lives. It is the significance of this research to show those type of narrative intervention. The research applied descriptive qualitative design and the Arab feminist theory proposed by Nawal Saadawi and Raidah Al-Ramadan. The research findings indicate that female protagonist is concerned with fighting patriarchy, colonialism, and middle-class family values. Women are also represented as fugitives who fight for their rights and freedom.

Keywords: *Feminism, Gender, Repackaging, Western Prejudices*

Introduction

Gender parity has become a controversial issue, especially in Middle Eastern countries where many outsiders give Arab and/or Muslim women a stereotyped collective image. Arab and/or Muslim women are portrayed as either women oppressed by males and/or society and the norms that prevail or, more recently influenced by feminism, as women who challenge these norms to forge a female identity, an image "cliché" promoted by orientalists, politicians,

and western media that in one way or another serves their agenda in the Middle East and Africa.

Therefore, many Arab writers recognise the importance of telling their own stories as a type of narrative intervention, an antidote to the lies and misconceptions about their lives. Even so, there are also writers who seek to please western readers by presenting what western readers want to read about Arab and Muslim women.

Since every writer is aware that their writing has "far-reaching

consequences," they play a role in correcting stereotypes through the description of their existence and that of their world that is found in their writing. As a result, literal texts become a tool with which one can understand gender issues and can be compared with an Arab feminist theory that is against the cliché.

Arab Feminist Theory

Before discussing gender in literature, first we need to understand feminist theory in the Arab world, or, to be more specific, feminist theory in Egypt.

The Egypt Feminist Union was founded by Huda Syaarawi, who is considered the pioneer of feminist movements in Egypt. This movement has succeeded in making changes to women's political rights through the Constitution of 1924.

After World War II, the first feminist party was founded in 1942 to claim full political rights for women and to introduce women's participation in the decision-making process. Since then, many different feminist groups have been founded

within Egypt, including the Islamic feminist movement.

The question is, whether Arab feminist theory and Western feminist theory are the same. Do they share the same goal?

Feminism is a socio-political movement and ideologies that aim to define and establish the political, economic, personal and social equality of sexes (Encyclopaedia Britannica). In one word, feminism is a movement that aim to create world where men and women have equal right and opportunities.

Of course it would be wonderful if all genders had equal rights, such as equal access to education; equal wages based on type of work and time rather than gender; equal political rights; and so on. All feminist movements around the world are supposed to be concerned with these rights. Yet we found that in the west, especially after the third and fourth wave of feminism, feminist movements often refers to and emphasizing "sexual liberation." Herein lies the difference

between Arab and Western feminist theories.

The major concern of feminism in the Arab world is not sexual freedom or sexual liberation of women as it is in the western psyche. In the Arab world, veiling is not a result of patriarchy or male dominance, nor is polygamy considered a violation of women's rights. Espousing western feminist ideals as a general remedy is absurd and impossible because what is appropriate for western societies does not necessarily suit other countries.

Importing western gender roles and standards into Arab society instead leads to another movement, the anti-feminist movement. For example, in 1972, one of the most well-known feminist activists, Nawal Saadawi, published her book, "Women and Sex," which caused a strong backlash within Egyptian society. This book is the catalyst for the emergence of anti-feminist movement in Egypt.

Therefore, the theory of feminism in the Arab world is based

on the answer to what makes Arab women feel or find themselves marginalised and not on what emblems are given by others, nor based on western expectation.

Arab feminist theory emphasises the need to eradicate oppressive patriarchal norms and values such as domestic violence against women, recognise and criminalise marital rape and honour killing, expose women's sexual abuse, and penalise sexual abusers. Thus, we find various literary works questioning these gender norms and the patriarchal authority's oppression.

Gender in Arab Literature

In literature, gender refers to how the author and characters define themselves and how society evaluates them based on their gender. In other words, gender in literature refers to the ways in which characters are defined and treated based on their gender.

Literature is a powerful instrument that allows authors to either reinforce or subvert gender roles specific to one time and place.

This can be shown by the roles of each character, where the male character often takes the lead role, establishing their masculinity and physical power, while female characters are stereotyped as either obedient, beautiful and seductive, emotionally trapped, or as an object of love. As a result, when a man is expected to be strong and decisive, women are described as being passive and submissive.

In the past, certain books negatively affected individuals' perceptions of themselves in several ways, for example, by promoting strict gender roles and stereotypes and by disciplining those who didn't fit into the established norms. In popular writing, writers focused on the dual image of women to break the shackles of female characters' traditional positions. The female characters are presented in the search for their identity as individuals rather than as the ones who sacrifice at every step. Thus, by reading and analysing literal texts, we can realise how far we have come since the dawn of feminism.

Representation of Women in Arab Literature

How women are represented in literature cannot be separated from the society and culture that produce it. The patriarchy system has contributed to the concepts of femininity and masculinity in the Arab world. Thus, to study how Arab women are represented, it is important to study the factors that contribute to the construction of their images. Language used to describe the female character, whether by the narrators or by male characters speaking about females, is one of these factors. For example, take the famous Nageeb Mahfouz's novel "New Cairo," which begins with a conversation between four male characters about women and their role in life. This novel reveals the image of women from a man's perspective in the 1930s. "Women are created for pleasure and sex; they are not meant to be educated." This is how one of the male characters explained his point of view concerning women's access to education. While another male

character (Ali Taha) argued that "women are our partners in every step toward freedom, justice and the good."

Raidah Al-Ramadan (2020), who studied how Arab women are represented by Arab writers, mentioned the three patterns of women's representation:

1. Victimized (helpless creature), which confirms Western stereotypes about Arab women.
2. The escapee, a woman who was brave enough to escape from oppressive society and culture.
3. The pawn, who is used by others to achieve their goal

According to Al-Ramadan, Arab women are not only the "other" of men but also the "other" of western women. And as a result of her "otherness," the Arab woman is represented in terms of stereotypical images.

Despite that stereotype, the representation of female characters

has evolved throughout history. In the past, women were treated as second-class citizens, and their needs were largely ignored. In that period, we find common characteristics for females: either the virgin who seeks to get married, the mother who sacrifices everything for her children, or the whore who is deviant and unworthy of having a job. One of the examples of this stereotypical female character is "Ihsan Ifat," who gains her living by giving sexual pleasure to a high-level official, her own husband's boss, despite her status as the wife of "Mahgoub Abd Eldayem," who, for his part, chose to enjoy the privilege given by his boss at work rather than to keep her wife's honour. These two characters can be found in Nageb Mahfouz's novel, "New Cairo."

We can summarise women's representation in the 1960s and 1970s by citing how women were generally represented in the most popular authors' literal works at the time, as follows:

Nageeb Mahfouz

Women are inferior and play traditional roles (mother, wife, daughter, whore).

Abbas Akkad

Women are submissive, passive, ignorant, and simple-minded creatures.

Taha Husein

Women are victims who suffer from society's injustice.

Taufik Hakim

Attractive and sexualized, women are represented only in the physical sense.

Ihsan Abd Qudus

Women are represented as fugitives who fight for their rights and freedom. The truth, which many ignore, is that women are superior and intelligent. They are the ones who know exactly what they want and know how to achieve it.

Latifa Al-Zayat

In her most notable work, which has been translated into numerous languages, *The Open Door*, the female protagonist is concerned with

fighting patriarchy, colonialism, and middle-class family values.

Modern literature has a more liberated approach to the subversion of gender roles. Modern literature often merged femininity and masculinity in its characters; each gender could possess both sets of traits, and sometimes women were represented as being more powerful than men.

In Amr Abd Elhamid's novels, "Zicola Land," "Amarita," "Garatin Law," "Chamo Beats," "Acma Waves," women always have the main role, as the one who has power and a strong personality. Also in a series of novels by Hanan Lasyin (Ikadoly, Kuikol, Opal, Amanus, and Suqutry), Hanan describes all female characters as wise, strong, problem-solvers, and individuals who have self-esteem without denying other emotional feminine characteristics. This style is repeatedly seen in fantasy fiction novels where the strong independent protagonist woman often become a selling point booster.

Though fantasy fiction novels can eventually involve and captivate

the reader, they cannot be claimed to be realistic in one way or another, since they are fiction and fantasy, so they are neither historically accurate nor politically relevant or critical. In order to present an insidious message about femininity to society and to shape or distort the way men view women and also the way females define themselves, we need to focus on historically accurate and more realistic novels and or literal works. For example:

1. *Granada* by Radwa Asyur is a trilogy that evokes cultural loss during the inquisition in Andalusia by presenting the life of Abu Jaffar's family with two main female characters, Maryama and Umm Jaffar, who teach us the meaning of toughness and resistance. It is worth mentioning that all of Radwa Ashour's novels have female protagonists, all of whom are radicalised in some way or another. Her characters are glaringly real; they are activists, artists, and poets, ones who experience prison,

exile, revolution, illness, and other startlingly real things relevant to Radwa's personal life experience, which is ripe with strife.

2. *Daria* by Sahar El-Mogy is another realistic novel that addresses an important gender issue. The author presents the female character as a middle-class working woman who has to deal with oppressive social expectations.

Furthermore, we can create an image of women's struggles in the Arab world by analysing how women are represented in novels that discuss women's issues in particular. For example,

1. *Women at Point Zero*, a novel written by one of the most daring Egyptian female writers, Nawal Sa'dawi. The book begins as a psychiatrist's mission to research inmates at a local women's prison until the psychiatrist stumbles upon one imprisoned woman who doesn't want to talk, even if

it means walking free from execution. After a wild beginning, Sa'dawi weaves in shocking details about the sad truths of society.

2. *The Wives of Men* by Salwa Bake. A novel that is set in an urban contemporary Cairo. It is comprised of thirteen short stories and one mini-novella, all telling the lives and struggles of Egyptian women in the modern age.

Repackaging

Prejudices and stereotypes continue to govern the market for works of Arabic literature in English translation. The works are frequently valued not for their quality but for the information they provide readers who are interested in the mysterious East. The publishers sell not only literature but also the personas of the writers to the anticipated reading public. This is what we call the "repackaging" of the texts to fit the presumed expectations of Anglophone readers.

"The west's interest in Islam always seems to intercede such that the supposed need to "Save Muslim" from "Violant, exotic, inferior Muslim men" (Drumsta :2021).

This interest leads to the repackaging of Arab literary works to meet Western expectations, as well as the implicit provocation of some messages to legalise their Middle Eastern political agenda. Repackaging can be seen in the translation of literal texts. For example, Margot Badran translated Huda Sharaawi memoir, which was originally published in Arabic as *Mudhakaraty* (my memoir), into *Harem Years: The Memoir of an Egyptian Feminist*. *Harem* refers to the wives or the concubines of the polygamous man, a group of women who live together and serve one man. It is clear than, *harem* is the term used to manipulate the reader opinion and to limit the struggle of Huda Sharaawi from anti- colonialist and feminist to woman who seek to liberate herself from the oppression of men.

Another example is Nawal Sa'dawi's book, *Alwajh Al-Ari Lilmar'ah Al-Arabia* (The Naked Face of Arab Women), which has been translated as *The Hidden Face of Eve*. *Eve* is the repackaging of *women*, to give the impression of strict gender roles – man lead and women submit. Historically, many have suggested that Eve creation from a “rib” make her Adam inferior.

Not only are the texts and titles changed, but the authors are given more appealing descriptions as well. For example, from "feminist and anti-colonialist" to "liberal individualist." As a result, rather than speaking within their culture, they are described as lone voices speaking against their culture.

Some will argue that translating the title and the original text by changing the semantic content is permissible in order to seduce the target reader, which is completely correct. What should be emphasised is, translation is more than just a linguistic process of

address gender issues in their works. The feminist movement,

transferring meanings or messages from one language to another. It is influenced by social, ideological, and economic factors. This fact supports the argument in this article that literature is used to provoke certain ideas, such as gender ideals and Western agendas, and therefore literal texts are frequently manipulated to convince the reader that it is their sort of book, and or in this context, to convince the reader that Arab women are oppressed and need to be saved.

Conclusion

Women in the Arab world have been known to bear primary responsibility for the wellbeing of their families, yet they are imprisoned by many norms and cultural bonds. This fact raises questions about the standard portrayal of gender. a topic that becomes a substance in many literal texts. By depicting female characters as inferior, passive, submissive, escapees, emotional and vulnerable human beings, or strong, superior, and leading, the writers western influences, and many other factors have contributed to the

presentation of gender in literature. And reciprocally, literal texts have succeeded in one way or another to counter the stereotypical image of Arab women and reinforce gender constraints in society. Finally, The representation of gender in literature changes as gender in the social order changes.

Reference

Mohamed Younis, (2007).
DAUGHTERS OF THE
NILE: THE EVOLUTION
OF FEMINISM IN
EGYPT, 13 Wash. & Lee J.
Civ. Rts. & Soc. Just. 463

Tawhida Akhter. (2020), GENDER
INEQUALITY IN
LITERATURE : A
CONTEMPORARY
ISSUE, Atlantis Press,
ICOSAPS 2020. 510
Atlantis Press SARL.

Mona Faysal Sahyoun, (2016).
TOWARD AN ARAB
FEMINIST THEORY:
SELECTED ARAB
WOMEN WRITERS AND
THE CONCEPT OF
"ÉCRITURE FÉMINIME"

Khathryn Javobs, GENDER
ISSUES IN YOUNG
ADULT LITERATURE
Indian Library's, Vol.23
Number. 2 Deumsta, Emily,
(2021). Gender Authorship
and Translation in Modern
Arabic: Literature of
Mashriq. Texas: University
of Texas in Austin

Al-Ramadan, Raidah. (2017).
Arab Women
Representation in Arab
Writing and Their
Translation. Kent State
University

Darwish, Ibrahim & Sayheen,
(2019). Bilal. Manipulating
Titles in Translation.
Jordan: Yarmouk
University, 2019.

الطريق
علية ميسر رسن، المستنصرية كلية
التربية الاساسية قسم اللغة العربية.
٢٠١٣