

Feminisation and Cultural Implications: A Study of Women's Position in Cultural Studies, with Abdullah Al-Ghudami as a Model

التأنيث والمضمرة الثقافي. قراءة في موقع المرأة في الدراسات الثقافية. عبد الله الغدامي أنموذجا

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Abstract:

This article explores the relationship between women and the cultural system and its role in shaping their image within cultural studies. This will be achieved by examining the insights of a leading cultural critic, Abdullah Al-Ghudami, who offered a cultural-semiotic interpretation of feminisation or gendering. This analysis revealed that women occupy a subordinate position compared to men within what is termed culture due to cultural classifications. This has enabled men to dominate the means of creativity and innovation, rejecting any linguistic, literary or critical contributions from women.

Keywords: Feminisation; position; culture; gendering.

ملخص:

سنسعى في هذا المقال إلى تمثيل علاقة المرأة بالنسق الثقافي ودوره في تشكيل صورتها ضمن الدراسات الثقافية، وذلك من خلال الوقوف عند الدلالات التي قدّمها أحد أعلام

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النقد الثقافي وهو الناقد عبد الله الغدّامي، الذي قدّم قراءة دلالية ثقافية لما يسمى بالتأنيث أو الجنوسة، والتي كشفت عن موقع المرأة ضمن ما يسمى بالثقافة، حيث احتلت المرأة بسبب تصنيفات الثقافة موقعا دونيا عن الرجل، وجعلت هذه الأخير متحكما في وسائل الإبداع والتجديد ورافضا لأي تدخل لغوي أو أدبي أو نقدي من قبل المرأة.

كلمات مفتاحية: التأنيث، موقع، الثقافة، الجنوسة.

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INTRODUCTION

Feminization or gendering represents one of the critical issues and cultural questions that have been strongly raised in the stage known as post-structuralism, due to its significance, especially in light of the existing conflict between the concepts of masculinity and gendering, which has been fueled by feminist studies.

Al-Ghadhami's perspective on feminisation or gendering is based on key principles that seek to address all aspects of this issue and define the position of women in literary and cultural criticism, particularly in relation to each other. Cultural criticism has addressed the position of women within the propositions of literary criticism, placing it within its framework and subjecting it to its systems. One of the most important aspects of cultural criticism is searching for the systemic implications and meanings hidden beneath the aesthetic surface, the domain of literary criticism. Therefore, the cultural interpretation of issues raised by literary criticism is an aspect that the latter may overlook.

The contributions of women as creative initiators or critical readers are topics that literary criticism has addressed, resulting in numerous critical opinions attempting to position these efforts. Cultural criticism has also studied these efforts and their position within literary criticism; the work of critic Abdullah Al-Ghadhami is pioneering in this field. He re-reads what literary criticism has presented regarding women, attempting to find the underlying meanings related to the implied system. Therefore, the following problem can be posed: How has cultural criticism dealt with the issue of feminisation or gendering, and what is the position of feminisation in cultural studies in light of the concept of the implied system, particularly in relation to Abdullah Al-Ghadhami's work?

1. The concept of gendering:

The term 'gender' has its etymological origins in Latin and French, and encompasses notions of type and sex. Consequently, literary genres such as novels and plays have emerged. Most scholars and practitioners in cultural and feminist fields assert that the term 'gendering' transcends concepts related to natural and biological differences between men and women. Instead, it extends to non-biological differences dictated by culture and imposed on social and cultural structures, independent of human sexual formation. According to this perspective, the distinction between men and women is ideological, cultural and social, and is vigorously defended by society and various cultures through law and force (Al-Ruwaili Al-Bazai, 2002, p 151).

Feminist studies argue that culture, rather than biological nature, defines the differences between men and women. Culture

imposes constraints on modes of thinking and creative processes, placing women in a subordinate position in the hierarchical order due to their natural constitution while granting men authority based on their biological sex.

Thus, feminist studies have sought to dismantle this authority and cultural differentiation between men and women. They focus on women's suffering and strive for equal status with men, while achieving justice for both parties. Joan Scott summarises the goals of gender studies as follows (see Al-Ruwaili Al-Bazai, 2002, p 152):

- The necessity of analysing social systems in contrast to biological determinism;

Engaging in comparisons between men and women within the same field of specialisation.

- Using gendering as a new criterion for analysis and selecting models for disciplines in a novel manner.

2. Feminisation and Literary Creativity:

Numerous literary and critical studies have addressed issues related to women. Creative works have sought to present diverse images of women within literary texts. Creators have endeavoured to depict women as the subjects of their literary works, capturing their details, dreams, ambitions and goals. These texts vary in their attempts to understand women's psychology by delving into their inner lives, mentalities, cultural influences, and the changes that have occurred in their cognitive structures. The most significant aspect is their relationship with men.

Women are not mere literary characters or romantic poetry subjects; they are creative initiators, from pre-Islamic poets to contemporary Arab and Western writers and poets. They have taken the brush from men and excelled in depicting their own image, becoming the articulate voice of their concerns within their societies. They reject all that represses and reduces them to mere artistic or literary subjects. They have found their place among creators, liberating themselves from masculine writing and imposed images that restrict them to themes of love or romance. 'The worst scenario is that women play the roles crafted for them by men without deviation, thereby justifying what men themselves have established as justification' (Al-Ruwaili Al-Bazai, 2002, p 151).

In this context, literary criticism has adopted this perspective, operating within its framework without deviating from it. Through its tools, it has revealed what men have attempted to articulate and depict in texts and discourses produced by masculine voices.

Consequently, cultural criticism has sought to transcend, or at least interpret, this framework. It has particularly benefited from feminist studies that have worked to 'refute the claim of hierarchical relationships between men and women that were constructed and established by culture to assign value to men based solely on their biological constitution' (Al-Ruwaili Al-Bazai, 2002, p 151). In this regard, Abdullah Al-Ghadhami has made significant contributions through several works in which he attempts to provide a cultural and semiotic analysis of the relationship between women and men. In these works, he

identifies ‘the pivotal turning points and essential interconnections in the relationship between women and language, transforming from a linguistic object to an interacting self’ (Al-Ghadhami, 2006, p 11).

Al-Ghadhami addresses the relationship between women and language, examining their transition from subjects within a linguistic structure to creators and practitioners of language. This allows them to innovate and respond to their concerns and aspirations within literary discourse. Women have embarked on the adventure of writing to express their alienation and civilisational tragedies, which are marked by masculine sensibilities — especially in relation to their treatment by men. Through their inherited culture and dominance, men have deprived women of their linguistic rights. This has led women to evolve from mere subjects in masculine texts to self-authors of language and culture. They have become cultural beings, striving to transcend what Al-Ghadhami refers to in his book *Language and Women* as ‘cultural division’, which embodies the positions of both women and men within the writing process, the word belongs to the masculine author as ‘the practical embodiment of language and the foundation upon which its discursive existence is built’ (Al-Ghadhami 2006, p 7), while meaning is attributed to women, who remain under the authority of the word itself. Language is thus depicted and presented by men as they see fit, a notion embraced by various creative texts. Meanwhile, literary criticism has aimed to reveal and present these dynamics through the aesthetics of the word itself, reflecting the choices of male authors. This division renders women as ‘merely symbolic representations or mental constructs written and woven by men

according to their rhetorical and life motivations' (Al-Ghadhami, 2006, p 7).

While women's position has shifted from that of a linguistic object to an active self that writes and expresses itself, transcending the repetitive, inherited images presented in literary texts, they have simultaneously sought to find their own language to articulate their innermost concerns, issues and relationships with men. This allows for a more genuine expression of themselves and greater liberation from the stereotypical image constructed by men, which reduces them to mere meanings within narratives and stories in general.

3. Feminisation and the Issue of Pioneership:

Ancient Arabic poetry is based on the fundamental concept of masculinity, which is related to the characteristics and structure of vertical poetry as it has been understood since the pre-Islamic era. Masculinity has traditionally been associated with men because they are the most productive. Notably, women have been subjected to the demands of masculine poetic writing, as if the rules established by men necessitate women adhering to these vertical rules if they wish to write poetry. Consequently, women have remained bound by the standards of the male poet and the vertical model that critics often reference when evaluating poetic texts. Neither women nor men have attempted to alter this model. How could women renew an entrenched model guarded by masculine figures?

However, in modern times, with the emergence of female poetic voices in countries such as Iraq, Lebanon and Egypt,

women have begun to compete with men for space in magazines, publishing complete poetic works that compel the male poet to read and critique their creations.

Drawing from feminist criticism, cultural studies have sought to document the interactions between the two groups and the cultural discourse emanating from or directed towards women as marginalised entities drawn towards the masculine centre. One of the most significant cultural interactions in Arabic literature was the breaking of the masculine poetic mould by the Iraqi poet and critic Nazik Al-Malaika. She altered the inherited rules of poetic writing by introducing new principles known as free verse or ‘poetry of rhythm’. This transformation is exemplified by her famous 1947 poem “The Cholera”, which earned her the titles of pioneer and innovator.

Nazik Al-Malaika’s break from the rules of vertical poetry faced outright rejection from critics and poets, who denied her claim to have pioneered change and renewal. Voices arose asserting her unworthiness of such recognition, citing that others, both Arab and Western, had preceded her, all of whom had a masculine perspective. Consequently, literary criticism denied the Iraqi poetess the position of pioneer, awarding it to men instead.

The stance of critics and poets towards Nazik Al-Malaika’s pioneering role can be summarised in three ways:

1. Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab’s pioneering status and Nazik Al-Malaika’s shared recognition are attributed to his poem ‘Was It Love?’, published in his collection ‘Withered Flowers’ on 29 November 1946. This predates Nazik’s poem ‘The Cholera’ from 1947. However, as Al-Sayyab’s collection did not reach

Iraq until 1948, many scholars and critics view the pioneering status as belonging to Al-Sayyab rather than Nazik Al-Malaika.

2. In her book *Lectures on the Poetry of Ali Mahmoud Taha: Study and Critique*, Nazik al-Malaika points out that the poet Zaki Abu Shadi was the first to use the term 'free verse', emphasising the difference in their poetic styles. 'The most prominent advocate for this renewal in Egypt was the poet Dr Ahmad Zaki Abu Shadi, owner of the Apollo literary magazine. He called for a new poetic style which he named "free verse" and published examples of it in his magazine. However, we must note that this style does not share the same characteristics as our own, except in name" (Bennis, 2002, p 12). However, some scholars argue that Nazik al-Malaika was unaware of this usage until the new poetic method had already spread throughout the Arab world. They claim that she asserted that she was the first to coin the term 'free verse' for this type of poetry and denied knowledge of any poetic movement with the same name, such as Abu Shadi's, which she only heard about in 1963 after the free verse movement had already spread (Al-Ta'ma, 2002, p 10).

3. The term 'free verse' is not new, nor was it created by Zaki Abu Shadi or Nazik Al-Malaika, despite what they may have suggested. It is a translation of the English term and has been prevalent in Arab culture since the 1920s (Bennis, 2001, p 22). Cultural studies have generally adopted the role of questioning the sciences belonging to the social and human sciences, interrogating traditional literary and aesthetic critical practices (Al-Ruwaili & Al-Bazai, 2002, p139). Consequently, cultural criticism has adopted this approach, scrutinising the issue of

poetic pioneering. This offers a semiotic and cultural interpretation of the rejection of Nazik Al-Malaika's pioneering role in free verse. Abdullah Al-Ghadhami emphasises that the reason for this rejection by poets and critics is the existence of a dominant masculine cultural system that views women merely as followers of the rules set by men. Thus, they cannot dare to change these principles or propose alternatives. While being a poetess is acceptable within masculine logic, daring to break a system of masculinity that has prevailed for centuries and claim the status of a pioneer is utterly unacceptable: "Masculinity can only be broken by a masculine figure; for a woman, there is no place in the arts of men" (Al-Ghadhami, 2005, p13). 'Masculinity can only be broken by a masculine figure; for a woman, there is no place in the arts of men' (Al-Ghadhami, 2005, p13).

Al-Ghadhami believes that the change brought about by Al-Malaika is not merely a metrical or formal alteration to poetic writing; rather, it is a purely feminine project aimed at dismantling the masculinity of poetry and replacing it with a feminine perspective. At the very least, it extends a feminine hand to contribute to the development of male poetic endeavours. Despite her assertion that she is merely a modern poet striving to renew the tradition of poetry, this is what she has achieved. In reality, however, she shattered this column, using a protective tactic and a cultural mask to shield herself from the wrath of masculine figures.

4. Cultural Forgery: Systemic Gendering:

The concept of gendering extends beyond its original meaning relating to physiological and psychological differences

between men and women. It delves into differences that are shaped and defined by culture and cultural systems. In this context, Al-Ghadhami introduces the term 'systemic gendering', which he defines as gendering based on 'cultural and class differences' (Al-Ghadhami, 2017, p5). These differences are entrenched in literary and artistic texts, presenting distinctions that are cultural and class-based rather than natural, placing women in a subordinate position to men.

Examining various literary classifications, particularly poetry in Arabic literature, reveals that culture repeatedly shapes the depiction of women through their names and physical descriptions. This has rendered women as metaphorical beings who are often portrayed in a similar way across many literary texts, particularly in tales of love and romantic narratives.

Over the decades, culture has adhered to a singular pattern in shaping the image of women, attributing a sense of inferiority to them. This image and characteristic are dictated by a prevailing cultural system, which allows men to express themselves while denying women the right to present an image of themselves and their human existence. Consequently, women are depicted as metaphorical entities in various texts, carrying poetic value even in narrative texts.

This metaphorical image is defined by the masculine figure who exerts authority over poetic and narrative texts alike, marginalising women and rendering them repetitive and metaphorical. Thus, although the authors and narrators of these texts may differ, they convey a single discourse. As Al-

Ghadhami (2017, p 11) notes, ‘it is a single system, and its true author is culture’.

5. Metaphorical Representation in Tales of Love and Passion:

The metaphorical aspect of love narratives is not solely concerned with women; it also affects the depiction of men. The stereotypical and recurring image of women in such discourse has created a cultural veil, in which the underlying system dominates the nature of depiction and the traits assigned to women. However, this metaphorical representation also impacts men. They, too, are depicted as effeminate, diverging from their masculine nature and responsibilities, and are portrayed as individuals who may lose their minds — and perhaps their lives — due to love. This theme is prevalent in many Arab love stories, including the tale of Majnun Layla.

The degree of infatuation and passion that culture has attributed to the loving man and beloved woman often culminates in madness or death due to an inability to reunite. This renders men ‘weak and alienated beings, caught in between; they are neither here nor there, neither holding onto their beloved nor being held by them’ (Al-Ghadhami, 2017, p 15).

Moreover, madness, loss of reason and death are all metaphorical concepts that lack realism. This makes the poetic discourse a metaphorical narrative that is not genuine. ‘None of Kuthayr, Jamal or Junadah died or lost their minds; they were realistically connected to real wives’ (Al-Ghadhami, 2017, p. 17). The discourse of love occupies a central focus within various narratives, regardless of differing times and cultural systems. It embodies the idea of the lover being humiliated and degraded in the eyes of the beloved. Thus, the concept of cultural

forgery is reinforced in the presentation of stereotypical and metaphorical images of men and women and their relationship, which are dictated by cultural rules and differences

Conclusion:

After completing this work, we have arrived at the following conclusions:

1. Cultural criticism raises questions within texts and discourses that literary criticism does not. While literary criticism focuses on aesthetic aspects, cultural criticism seeks to uncover the underlying systems and cultural and semiotic layers that conceal meanings, particularly those related to gendering, a key issue in cultural studies.
2. Within the parameters of literary criticism, women are regarded as subjects within literary practices and critical discourses. This position has been scrutinised and subjected to the standards and systems of cultural criticism.
3. The position of women within critical discourse is controlled by a masculine, patriarchal system, which places them in a subordinate position to men. This has been revealed by Abdullah Al-Ghadhami, who has drawn on feminist studies.
4. Within masculine texts, women are either linguistic objects or metaphorical subjects in love and romance narratives.
5. Cultural classifications, as expressed by Al-Ghadhami, have affirmed the subordinate position of women within literary and critical fields, granting men authority over language, writing and pioneering status.

6. Through his cultural exposure of their position within critical discourse, Al-Ghadhami has somewhat vindicated women.

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