

The Dialogue of the Self and the Other in the Feminist Literature

KANTAOUI Mohammed^{*1}, ATTIA Nesrine²

1 University of adrar (algeria) ; kantmed2301@univ-adrar.edu.dz

2 University of tamanghasset (algeria); atianesrine@univ-tam.dz

Received: 12/10/2024, **Accepted:** 24/09/2025, **Publication:** 30/09/2025

Abstract:

The enduring debate of the self and the other has long captivated the attention of critics in feminist literature. In this vein, feminist writings have sought to address identity in a deeper and more realistic manner, fueled by a profound desire to delve into the depths of the issues of otherness that has marginalized women. Consequently, the depiction of their suffering has been expressed through an artistic language that portrays the other, especially considering that the feminist literary movement is not limited to the writings of women as a gender, as there are male writers who have written about feminism and raised women's issues. While the tension between the masculine and the feminine has long been a subject of exploration in literature, feminist discourse, both in its literary and critical forms, has turned its gaze inward, focusing on the self as a source of knowledge about women's roles and experiences. This literary movement has successfully asserted the female self and challenged the patriarchal authority of the "other." The binary of the self and the other remains one of the most prominent paradigms through which consciousness manifests itself, and has been a subject of philosophical inquiry throughout history. Building on this premise, we pose the following question: Can we consider Arab feminist literature to be a form of academic literature? Furthermore, how has this literature shed light on women's issues and marginalized groups? This research endeavors to illuminate the multifaceted justifications for the feminist uprising, unveiling a portrait of womanhood that transcends the confines of the traditional harem. This reimagined woman is the woman as a human being, an educated and conscious individual whose rebellion against patriarchal and feminine subjugation is grounded in a profound awareness of both genders.

Keywords: Self; Other; Feminism; Literature; Dialogue.

^{*} *Corresponding author*

INTRODUCTION:

Feminist literature is the product of the feminist movement that emerged in Western culture and society at the beginning of the twentieth century. It aimed to advocate for women's freedom and empowerment in various fields, confronting all forms of discrimination they faced. This literature propelled women to reorganize human relationships and to crush the principle of differentiation between individuals based on gender, aspiring to achieve the principle of equality between male and female, advocating for the legitimate right of shared humanity between men and women. The feminist movement insists that this marginalization is not an inevitable law imposed on women, and that women have the power to change systems in all fields, whether social, economic, or political, through the application of collective action. Hence, the desire of feminism and its endeavour is at the heart of reshaping the status of women in societies, where the term "masculinity," associated with power, highlights the injustice against women and the dominance of men.

These relationships take on multiple scenes, starting with discrimination based on gender and extending to the existence of social systems that lead to the internal and external marginalization of women. Male dominance draws its strength from the social interpretations we assign to the distinctions between genders. This birthed the flourishing of feminist literature and criticism, mirroring the cultural awakening of the feminist movement in the late eighties and early nineties. It expanded its scope to intersect with various critical approaches, accumulating a series of insights in literary theory.

The expansion and manifestation of feminist literature in the metaphorical field, whether in Western or Arab countries, have become increasingly conspicuous and pronounced. Its tangible presence is reaffirmed with each passing day, prompting the literary sphere to engage with a plethora of significant peripheral concerns. Indeed, it is undeniable that what might initially appear unassuming—the genesis of female creative expression—has unequivocally asserted a prominent societal standing, particularly within Arab society. The range of its issues has

diversified, proving and continuing to demonstrate its effectiveness in advocating for women's status. Many creative female writers have contributed to this literary domain, forming a substantial collective of voices that emerge with regularity and tenacity, owing to the profound significance attributed to this literary paradigm, which has swiftly and extensively permeated the realm of Arabic literature.

These writings have significantly penetrated the depths of cultural thought. Previously, these spaces were exclusively and carefully reserved for men due to entrenched traditions and customs. The interrogation of feminist discourse, whether through challenging prevailing cultural norms or critiquing creative and critical discourse, is of paramount importance. In an era where the creative outputs of women have poured forth in criticism and literature, the significance of interrogating and presenting a group of propositions has become essential following this feminist creative project. These include:

-  Has the female presence in the creative, critical, and social spheres been able to disrupt male and societal consciousness that marginalizes women?
-  Do women possess sufficient feminist consciousness to lead society, or do they need laws to protect their rights?
-  Do women in our societies have the awareness to establish their own social and cultural path?
-  In terms of creativity, what are the most important issues raised by feminist literature? Is feminist writing considered a violation, rebellion, attack, or disobedience?
-  How has the binary of self and other emerged in this literature? Is it simply a natural literary phenomenon imposed by objective life circumstances?

It is evident that these pressing questions assert themselves upon us, and it must be acknowledged that the answers to them may veer

in various directions and adopt limited trajectories. However, what is clearly evident is that this literature immerses itself in the problematic realm of resistance and struggle, undoubtedly a form of peaceful resistance.

The Feminist Movement, In Terms of Literature and Criticism: The feminist literary theory or movement began to gain prominence in the West in the 1960s and later spread to the East. This theory or movement, divergent in nature, pertains to the realm of feminist writing that rebels against societal norms and male-authored literature which emerged within a framework of male consciousness, paternal dominance, and male authority. Women had no choice but to shed the cloak of authoritarian norms, values, customs, and traditions upon which they had grown throughout their journey and long history. This compelled them to write about the suppressed feminine self and the social and cultural representations imposed upon them.

In recent times, feminist theory of writing has emerged as a counterpoint to the prevailing zeitgeist of modern critical theories. These theories advocate for the "death of the author" (the writer), in favor of "reviving the text" and considering it, with all its contexts, signs, linguistic, formal, and semantic formations, as both the means and the end of the new criticism. This approach has transformed creative writing into texts with their own autonomous self-sufficiency, meaning that they are divorced from their two intimate worlds: the subjective (the writer) and the objective referential (society and history) (**Hussein Manasra, 2008. p.1.**)

The emergence of feminist literary criticism led to significant and profound debates among structuralist critics. However, our focus here is not to delve into these debates, but rather to explore the depth and significance of feminist literature and its critical analysis. As the quote from the source text highlights, the "issue" of feminist literature has taken on different paths within the broader field of literary criticism. Criticism has become increasingly cognizant of the role of the self and its cultural context in the production of creative texts. This recognition has led to the development of reception theories, which are considered more advanced

than structuralism and post-structuralism approaches(Hussein Manasra,(2008. p.1.) By the 1960s, women had gained the ability to write about their own experiences, particularly within the context of society. The specific challenges faced by women in rural communities, where female freedom and the freedom to write are often suppressed, continue to hinder the emergence of significant female writers from these areas. This explains the scarcity of prominent female authors from rural backgrounds to this day.

The feminist movement, as defined by feminist theorists in their pursuit of equality and affirmation of their intellectual identity and specificity, has delineated a set of principles upon which criticism is exercised to uncover the sites of the woman's diminished vision. Through this critique, the stature of this veiled, invisible being is elevated from a human devoid of humanity to a higher being constantly striving to transcend its humanity towards what is better for itself and others. "This critique has engendered essential steps towards establishing a distinct feminist philosophical literary thought that can be embraced across various disciplines, yielding outcomes applicable to the aspirations of women, especially as it unveils the social reality of women and separates it societally from a cultural intent within this world. Thus, women began to critique male or paternal domination."(Raad Rafiq, 2013. p. 169.)

The problematic relationship between women and masculine thought becomes evident through the necessity of highlighting the most significant cultural, religious, social, aesthetic, and literary roots that have shaped biased masculine consciousness against women throughout history. "The feminist movement is not the only one suffering from deep and widespread misunderstanding. Great movements, like great individuals, and those who have led desperate causes, require the gentle touch of time and the glory that comes from success to compel the world to recognize their worth and dignity amidst the heated, bitter, and confrontational struggle." (Ethel Snowden, 1975, p. 7.)

Feminist movements have emerged as one of the most influential intellectual and social movements of our time. They have profoundly

shaken traditional notions of femininity and the position of women within the biological and social fabric. The assumption that the problem of masculinity has always been clear and settled, and that defining the issue of masculinity was consistently a straightforward matter, has now become an ongoing dilemma, even among men who are most convinced of representing masculine virtues and resilience. For example, a man shedding tears always posed a challenge to himself, including the man most confident in his masculinity, despite the societal conviction within male circles that crying is exclusively reserved for women rather than men.

Perhaps, the diverse range of masculinities and the evolving understanding of what it means to be a man have unveiled a multitude of issues related to the construction of male identity. These issues have brought to light the dynamics of power that are embedded in social and cultural representations. The subjugation of women to men should not overshadow the issue of men's subjugation to other men. "In this hierarchical sequence, women occupy the lowest and most fragile position. However, they are not objectively and effectively subjected to the absolute power of men but rather to the authority of men of the dominant class. Every study of men has encompassed the study of social structures, political movements, religious practices, and work relationships in the production cycle, without any consideration for women's history. Thus, women have been marginalized in history, while attention has been focused on areas where masculinity is openly and explicitly constructed."(Abdul Nour Idris, 2013. p. 93)

The terms "male" and "female" evoke the concept of sexual difference, which has been a prominent issue in culture and society, particularly in the West. This difference has been and continues to be one of the most pressing issues of our time. Abdul Nour Idris, in his book "Gender Critique," points out that "the issue of difference permeates the twentieth century and beyond, starting from the cultural revolution of 1968, which sought in all its movements to oppose the image portrayed by Aristotle of women, a portrayal that Arab culture also embraced." Susan Moller Okin delves into the true meaning of woman from Aristotle's

perspective, stating: "The word 'woman' seems not to fit within Aristotle's concept of human as he conceives it: for the word used by the first teacher (Aristotle) is 'Anthropos,' which is a Greek word meaning 'human being.'"(Abdul Nour Idris, 2013. p. 99).

The feminist movement viewed women as a separate entity from society, singularly focused away from the family, which in itself constitutes a flaw and a deficiency in this movement. It is a tangible stance that reverts the human perspective to a limited scope and a specific cognitive structure. These transformations that have impacted Western civilization have been comprehensive and detailed. Here, negative indicators emerged within society, leading to the infiltration of the principle of utility, which contributed to the emergence of numerous and contrasting values that participated in breaking down the real and effective roles of both men and women. As the primary values disappeared, it is certain that new values emerged. These new values marginalized the mother and elevated the status of the working woman. While the working woman is a current or future mother, the sense of motherhood dwindled, and humanity itself became akin to a commodity, where worth replaced value. Thus, humanity lost its true significance. All of this revolved around the feminist movement, which confined itself to the idea of women being independent of society, traditions, and customs that they cannot deny or evade. Hence,

The process of crushing women began, leading to a shift in the feminist movement from its initial concept of defending women's rights to a second idea that focuses on identity exploration. The perspective extended to encompass crucial aspects, including:

The human and socio-cultural aspects which offer avenues for delving into the symbolic dimensions specific to femininity. The feminist movement has relied on reimagining history, culture, language, and even human gender relations within society, transcending the binary of male and female. Here, it has become an analytical approach with specific cognitive tools and a contemporary critical style that seeks to interpret texts addressing women's issues. Megan O'Riley and Saad al-Bazeghi assert:

"Perhaps the main impetus for such studies is the liberation call adopted by feminist movements when focusing on the concept of gender as an analytical factor that exposes preconceived biases in the cultural thought in general and the Western thought in particular."(**Meghan O'Rourke, Saad al-Bazeghi, 2002, p. 149**).

The Dialectic of Self and Other in Feminist Literature:

Throughout history, critics and scholars have harnessed the power of literary criticism to endow women with awareness and freedom, aiming to restore the status of women and alleviate the subsequent oppression they face. This is achieved by acknowledging the creative output of women writers and uncovering the approaches they employ in depicting psychological, emotional, and even physical realms. In attempting to identify the distinctions between women's creativity and that of men, they contemplate the key creative characteristics that may diverge from the stereotypical images prevalent about women in the works of both men and women. Such endeavors aid in establishing a balance that is almost non-existent between male and female perspectives, and in promoting the values of citizenship that align with women, considering them as cultural constituents who participate alongside men in the formation of society.

"The male voice has dominated, monopolizing the expression of the condition of Arab women, whether through its own articulation or in claiming to see what lies beyond the facade or the purported inner workings of femininity—those sealed interiors, which remained closed, resistant, and obscure even to the woman writer herself. Women were unable to voice what they yearned to express about a silenced femininity. For a long time, they could only articulate their condition through men, and even when they did speak out, their voices became mere echoes. Rarely did women come close to the essence of femininity or the specificity of the female experience."(**Hoda Saleh, 2014, p. 8**) There is a deficient culture disseminated through some official cultural writings that promotes a lack of awareness in certain discourses. Some creative works criticize the gendered identity of literature, evident in their adoption of a masculine language, whether consciously or unconsciously, reaffirming

the deficiency of women deeply ingrained in the prevailing culture highlighted by the discourse of the male creator. Women writers often find themselves embracing an oppressive discourse and conforming to male-centric representations.

Women have long sought to delve into the depths of the self, while some have argued that they are distant from this, and that their creative works has come to revolve around the superficial feminine world. It is difficult for them to break the margin that is the beginning of any creative writing, and it subjects them to issuing different laws that are far from the usual and prevailing norms. This discourse allows them to crush the unjust system of values, so they try to demolish it and reconstruct it in a way that affects humanity as a whole. It transforms the condemned world through the power of voice and dominant speech, but the subjectivity of women's creativity remains undeniable, only disputed by those unable to approach the concept of female selfhood, especially integrating its true depth into specific writings. There are female creators who could liberate themselves from the pressure of male centrism, striving to embrace the idea and depict a portrayal of women who reject to be marginalized. Women continue to be the focal point of the world, so they innovate about selfhood, driven by a desire to escape the prevailing stereotypes of women and affirm their ability to act. Nevertheless, some women remain prisoners of the patriarchal culture, unable to escape the crushing grip of the culture that crushes and belittles women, and triumphs over them for the sake of a dominant male authority.

It is also noteworthy that some feminist voices have consciously or unconsciously immersed themselves in the grip of male creativity, even adopting it and halting at its boundaries. The observer of these women's creative works reconstructs those empty spaces, delving into the subconscious in their writings to reveal how the discourse of men is embedded within the discourse that may at first glance seem to be a discourse in a text that supports women and their issues, all without applying deep reading.

We can think of feminism itself as a subject of inquiry, and we can think of the applications of this engagement with a human subject in feminist intellectual and political practices. As we already see, the debates about the transformative nature of the self between collectivity and difference, and the gap between postmodernism and the historical materialist vision of women are important issues for the self and the political, for writing and reading alike.

"The excerpts of Julia Kristeva and Jacqueline Rose can be read somewhat as defenses of psychoanalysis and as testimonies to its relevance for feminism. Within Kristeva's work, we find a reflection on the instability of meaning, language, and selfhood. She sculpts the phrase "subject in process" to elucidate the meaning of self as incomplete, in a state of perpetual flux. This perceived failure cannot simply be attributed to individuals' inability to achieve complete objectivity; rather, it is interpreted as a manifestation of "identity resistance" at the core of psychological existence, thus representing a collective failure. Jacqueline Rose, in turn, sees in this interpretation the potential for linking feminism with psychoanalysis. Both positions posit femininity and psychoanalysis as absolute truths of individual pathology, suggesting that most women do not readily embrace their roles as women."(Mary Eagleton, 2016. p. 510).

The relationship between the self and the other is shrouded in numerous hidden complexities and ambiguous intentions. So, the self is compelled to grapple with the constructs it imagines about the reality of the other. It is unreasonable to assume that this other is the one that is clear-cut in reality. The fact that the self knows the other may arguably be the safest way to dispel the fear stemming from illusions or vague representations. However, even with such understanding, the relationship between them remains one of conflict, as the will to dominate inevitably seeks to keep the other under the control of the self.

The desire for control is inherently linked to the desire for dominance. It necessitates the existence of a dominant and a dominated, a winner and a loser. Everything that seeks to ascend must be built on a hierarchical relationship that emphasizes the idea of the superior and the

inferior, the victor and the vanquished. This is done in order to exclude the marginalized, both in oneself and in others, and to achieve distinction in various manifestations. It is the nature of the victor to cling to his superiority, whether it be material or intellectual.

This leads us to highlight two opposing viewpoints: On one hand, there is the view that conflict is an inevitable and fixed identity between civilizations. This view is often used to justify wars and conflicts for economic, strategic, or political purposes. For example, Samuel Huntington argued that civilizations are locked in a perpetual clash due to their inherent and eternal truths or their hidden essence. On the other hand, there is the view that utopian ideals are possible, such as the reconciliation of religions or the promotion of understanding between nations and tribes treating the issue as if it were merely a magical wand sufficient to transform the world from turmoil to bliss. This belief is also held by proponents of magical transformations or impossible miracles(**Muhammad Shoukry al-Zain, 2012, p. 10**).

Undoubtedly, the generalization of conflict theory or the propagation of harmony theory both obscure the underlying reality of human behavior, which is simultaneously characterized by "attraction and exclusion," or what has often been termed as "non-duality," meaning there is no self without the other, and no East without West. Both are organically and existentially dependent on each other, inseparable from each other. This essential need for a counterpart, a peer, an enemy, or a follower is the foundation on which relationships are built, whether they are conflicts or alliances. Initially, there was a need for the concept of need itself, as, akin to a mirror, it enables the self to see itself in the reflection of the other, and allows the other to see themselves in the reflection of the self. It is not surprising that the idea of the mirror or reflection enables an understanding of objectives, which by nature are narcissistic. Thus, the issue at hand is fundamentally about attraction and exclusion, need and independence, desire for... and abandonment of..., signifying the dual and schizophrenic nature of relationships and realities.(**Muhammad Shoukry al-Zain, 2012, p. 10**).

According to Abdelkader Ben Douma, Emmanuel Levinas was able to establish his own unique philosophical path by focusing on "deepening the analysis of the meaning of the relationship with the other human being (L'autre homme). Levinas saw this as the essential task of all philosophy. He was not interested in constructing philosophical theories of knowledge. Instead, he strove to understand the relationship with the other as the original relationship on which all other relationships with existence are based. It is important to be able to be open to the otherness of the other. We must stop reducing the other to ourselves and simplifying their meaning by emptying their content into the identity of the self. This is in contrast to traditional philosophies, which often saw their main task as constructing concepts and systems of categories. They believed that this would allow them to understand their relationship with the world in a comprehensive way."(**Abdul Qader ben Duma, (2013), pp. 85-86.**)

The sense of inferiority imposed on women by the "other" (i.e., patriarchal society) is one of the most serious problems that female novelists and critics have addressed in their writings as they depict and analyze the plight of women who struggle against the other due to his cruel nature, which makes the patriarchal culture occupy a position of power over the female body that constitutes dependency. A close examination of the narrative discourses reveals that "women occupy a significant space by expressing the reality of femininity carrying the banner of freedom and liberation from the authority of male domination. Thus, a discourse is produced that works on changing the distorted traditional cultural structure in an attempt to assert a new identity; hence, we find them evolving significantly in their objective writings. They are no longer the romantic dreamers whose sentiments were dominated by their pen, but they practiced their writings in the life of society as a whole: in its conflicts and its social, familial, and political problems. Their language became expressive of both themselves and their society."(**Nazik al-Araji, 1997, 1997, p. 15).**)

CONCLUSION

This study aims to go beyond the surface level of analysis. It aims to dismantle the male discourse and read the cultural discourse in women's creative works. This will allow us to uncover and expose the culture through the implied linguistic significations mentioned in the narrative as language is the carrier of culture and its textual framework.

- ❖ Addressing the topic of feminist writing paves the way for convergence because it is never about a feminist struggle or a gendered ideology. On the contrary, this creative activity allows women to possess a sublime authority, that is, a human being who assumes their responsibilities. From this perspective, they can move towards the other. Adopting this perspective leads us to consider difference between the two genders and its natural outcomes as fundamental concepts in defining this type of writing.
- ❖ We can say that the female was able to find a place for herself in the world of writing and creativity. This has been evident in many novels. Women have also been able to somewhat get rid of the condescending view of men in patriarchal society.
- ❖ Arab women have sought to liberate themselves from the authority of men, trying to make their lives somewhat similar to those of European women. However, when we look deeper, we find that it is not possible, as Arab society is completely different from Western society.
- ❖ Women have become females burdened with psychological complexes towards the self and the body as a result of the intellectual siege imposed upon women so tightly that stifled their thinking. They have thus become oppressed in an internal silence that prevents them from exercising their right even to love, which Arab society views with suspicion due to the confusion between love and sex.
- ❖ Many female novelists have raised the issue of fear, the fear of women from expressing their innermost feelings because disclosing them is

considered taboo and prohibited matters in a society that incarcerates and constrains women, leading them to suffer from numerous psychological complexes.

- ❖ Sex is the essence of the relationship between the two parties, woman and man, if it is built on intimate and emotional foundations that form a sensual bodily relationship, because a woman always seeks someone who makes her feel loved and secure.
- ❖ The body, which may not be a symbolic construction, has its identity determined by the other, who gives it a place and an existence. Thus, the image we have of our body is acquired and always constructed by the relationship we establish with the outside world.
- ❖ Gender studies have been able to neutralize male dominance by emphasizing the uniqueness of females and their difference from males. However, some studies have extended to establishing extremist arguments that reiterated the same intellectual hegemony by affirming the supreme importance of females. Gender studies have been afflicted with a post-structuralist malady; they diagnose the ailment but cannot correct it unless they commit the same mechanism of oppression that they seek to oppose. They repeat the path of traditional discourse without transcending it, as clarified by Abdul Nour Idrissi in his book "Gender Critique."
- ❖ Many scholars have conflated the feminist movement with feminist literature. The feminist movement does not only involve women's writing; there are also many men who have advocated for women's rights and rejected their marginalization. On the other hand, feminist literature refers to literature written by women.

Bibliography List :

- 1) Hussein Manasra,(2008). *Feminism in Culture and Creativity*, Modern Book World, Irbid - Jordan, 1st ed., p.1.
- 2) Ibid., same page.
- 3) Raad Rafiq, (2013). *Cultural Criticism: An Attempt to Establish Philosophical Foundations Beyond the Male Framework*, Defaf Publications, Beirut-Lebanon, 1st ed. p. 169.
- 4) Ethel Snowden, (1975). *Feminist Movement*, Collins. Clear-type. Press. London- Glasgow, July 10, p. 7.
- 5) Abdul Nour Idris, (2013). *Gender Critique, Representations of the Female Body in Women's Writing*, Fadaat Publishing, Main Center, Amman-Jordan, 1st ed, p. 93.
- 6) Ibid., p. 99.
- 7) Meghan O'Rourke, Saad al-Bazeghi, (2002). *The Literary Critic's Guide: Illumination of Over Seventy Contemporary Critical Trends and Terms*, Arab Cultural Center, Casablanca, 3rd ed., p. 149.
- 8) Hoda Saleh, (2014). *Critique of Divergent Discourse, Feminist Narration between Theory and Practice*, Dar Ruaiah, Cairo, Egypt, 1st ed, p. 8.
- 9) Mary Eagleton, (2016). *Feminist Literary Theory*, Translated by Adnan Hassan and Rana Bishara, Dar al-Hiwar, Latakia, Syria, 1st edition, p. 510.
- 10) Muhammad Shoukry al-Zain, (2012). *The Self and the Others: Contemporary Reflections on Mind, Politics, and Reality, Intellectual Approaches*, Dar al-Aman, Rabat, 1st edition, p. 10

- 11) Ibid., same page.
- 12) Abdul Qader ben Duma, (2013). *Philosophy and Feminism*, supervised and edited by: Ali Aboud al-Muhammadi, Defaf Publications, Beirut - Lebanon, 1st edition, pp. 85-86.
- 13) Nazik al-Araji, (1997). *The Voice of the Female, Studies in Arabic Feminist Writing*, Dar al-Ahali for Printing, Syria, 1st edition, 1997, p. 15.