The Portrayal of Women in Masculinist Criticism: A Case Study of Abd al-Ghaffar al-Attawi's "Establishing the Features of Feminism"

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Abstract

This study investigates the structural underpinnings of female representation within male critical discourse, situated within the framework of postmodern theory. The central aim is to elucidate the essence and status of women as perceived through a male lens. Specifically, the research explores the male construction of female identity by examining the treatment of women as both subject and object within male critical writings. A key text in this analysis is Abdul Ghafar Al-Atwi's *Establishing the Features of Feminism*. This work is examined for its nuanced and non-stereotypical portrayal of women, focusing on how the critic reconstructs the female image through his unique, objective, and personal perspective. The study further analyzes the dialectical anthropological dynamic inherent in the relationship between the male critic and the female writer. By considering the psychological, social, and cultural factors at play, this research underscores the significance of addressing this dynamic within critical discourse.

Keywords: *Male criticism, Postmodernism, Feminist writing, Female self.*

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1. Introduction

Feminist writings have become a fertile ground for critical analysis, offering insights into the realities and experiences of women. These studies aim to unravel the dynamics of the power struggle between the male-dominated center and the marginalized female voice. This has led to the emergence of cultural criticism, which seeks to shed light on the historical silencing and neglect of feminist texts. By examining the terminology used in this field, such as "feminist," "feminine," and "female," feminist criticism has evolved as a distinct area of study. This form of criticism endeavors to establish criteria for evaluating women's writing, while challenging the stereotypical representations perpetuated by feminist culture.

The advent of the postmodern era, characterized by its critical interrogation of dominant and often concealed structures, has engendered novel perspectives that challenge established, predominantly male-centric paradigms. This epoch endeavors to destabilize existing political, social, and psychological systems to explore the multifaceted dimensions of these conflicts, deciphering the codes and symbols embedded within feminist literature. These writings posit a series of inquiries concerning the intricate relationships that arise from women's resistance to societal norms and their struggle to assert their identities within an environment marked by ambiguity and disarray, largely imposed by pervasive patriarchal dominance.

Our study, anchored in the strategy of cultural criticism, serves as a conduit to illuminate feminist critical writing by a male author. He perceives women's issues, articulating their

plight with language, society, and culture. This understanding is rooted in his extensive studies in this domain, including: ('The Culture of the Body - A Reading in Arab Feminist Narrative', 'The Hermeneutics of the Qur'an - The Image of Woman in the Qur'an', 'Writings in Feminism', 'The Making of the Reader in Contemporary Arab Feminist Narrative'...). These works are all governed by patriarchal systems. Focusing on "Establishing the Features of Feminism" by Iraqi critic Abdul Ghafar Al-Atwi, this research investigates:

1. The distinctive characteristics of male perspectives on women in critical writings.
2. How Abdul Ghafar Al-Atwi navigated the potential issue of male superiority in his discourse on women.
3. The foundations upon which Abdul Ghafar Al-Atwi based his writings about women.

1. Feminist Writing in Cultural Criticism

Feminist writing is a cultural movement that emerged from women's lived experiences and their desire to express their unique interests and perspectives (Al-Atwi, 2019, p. 7). This movement is inherently political, advocating for women's rights, which have long been suppressed by religious and philosophical traditions that have historically positioned women as "the other" to men, thereby establishing male superiority (Al-Qurashi, 2008, p. 27). In this context, writing becomes an essential tool for women to assert their presence.

The notion of "feminist writing" presents a problematic construct, arguably an artifact of dominant patriarchal culture.

This form of writing shares a complex relationship with the novel as a literary genre, both in terms of its material existence and in the perceived distinction between male and female writing practices. Such differentiation purportedly reflects the contours of women's consciousness as they engage in the act of writing, often employing a distinct linguistic register (Ben Jemaa, 1999, p. 26). Eagleton defines this as "literature that seeks to reveal the subjective and private side of women, away from the image that literature has imposed on them for many long years. In other words, women's literature is literature that honestly expresses the unique nature of the feminine experience, apart from traditional concepts, and is literature that embodies a woman's life experience" (Eagelton, n.d., quoted in Khalil, n.d., p. 119) .

This conceptualization, however, has engendered considerable debate, with critics polarized between proponents and detractors. Some contend that its legitimacy is contingent upon addressing explicitly women's issues, while others perceive it as a term that foregrounds sexual difference, rooted in the dependency and inequality characterizing the relationship between men and women (Al-Khatib, 1975, quoted in Mokhtari, 2013/2014), a consequence of culturally produced social and psychological structures.

This type of writing has gone through several stages:

a) The Stage of Writing the Feminine: This stage is characterized by the imitation and emulation of dominant male writing styles. It marks an attempt to

establish the intellectual and real presence of women in the literary sphere.

b) The Stage of Feminist Writing: In this phase, women sought to define their gender identity, based on a relationship characterized by debate, conflict, and contradiction with the established male norms.

c) The Stage of the Feminine/Feminist: Here, the creative self-succeeded in breaking free, both physically and creatively (Najm, 2005, p. 88).

Cultural criticism is a field within cultural studies that transcends the explicit data of a text to uncover the underlying structures, systems, and expressive patterns that influence its audience. This cognitive endeavor engages with diverse fields and sciences through various methodologies (Asaberger, 2005, p. 30).

Cultural criticism has endeavored to refine cultural concepts by drawing upon sociology, psychology, history, and other relevant disciplines. A key aspect of this endeavor is feminist criticism, which aims to deconstruct the privileging of masculinity and the marginalization of the "other." This critique seeks to expose the fallacy of a purportedly masculine-gendered language (Al-Ghadami, 2006, p. 17). As critic Abdullah Al-Ghuthami suggests, "We need women in whom the genius of men is manifested" (Al-Ghadami, 2006, p. 252) .This statement implies a search for a distinct female linguistic expression, one that parallels male language, representing a novel and differentiated voice within the broader linguistic landscape. This

distinct voice warrants exploration, particularly in its potential to challenge culturally imposed negative portrayals of women. Cultural criticism, therefore, plays a crucial role in identifying deficiencies within intellectual and behavioral frameworks. It establishes parameters for difference and contradiction, striving to center the margins and marginalize the center to instigate change. This process necessitates a departure from traditional academic institutional norms, involving a critical interrogation of accepted values and norms. From this perspective, cultural criticism analyzes the underlying reasons for the rejection and marginalization of others within the cultural institution (Al-Bazie & Al-Ruwaili, 2002, p. 77).

2. Feminist Criticism

Feminist criticism has faced increasing scrutiny since the mid-1970s, particularly following the surge of radical ideas emanating from the American academic community. This intellectual wave was largely propelled by seminal works such as "The Feminist Literary Criticism Handbook", which ignited a fervent discourse on the subject (Baali, 2009, p. 187).

The subsequent waves of feminist movements advocating for the liberation of women across all societal strata have further amplified the need for in-depth scholarly inquiry into the multifaceted dimensions of feminism. This burgeoning field of study gained further momentum with the rise of the socialist movement, culminating in the International Socialist Women's Congress of 1910 (Baali, 2009, p. 214). It was during this pivotal

event that the term "feminism" was officially adopted, and March 8th was designated as International Women's Day.

Feminist literary criticism has evolved from an initial focus on deconstructing misogynistic representations and distortions of women in literature to a subsequent emphasis on celebrating the unique qualities of female creative expression (Showalter, 1992, p. 109). This involved foregrounding women's literary output as a distinct area of scholarly inquiry, including the re-evaluation of works by women writers across diverse nationalities and historical eras (Showalter, 1992, p. 110).

Key texts emblematic of this phase include Patricia Meyer's The Female Imagination and Aline Morris's Women Writers, both of which sought to address the historical neglect and misrepresentation of women's writing within male-dominated critical discourse (Bennett, 2011, p. 156). Within this context, George Tarabishi's work offers a notable perspective. He draws a distinction between male and female writing practices, arguing that men, through their writing, engage in a world-building project, whereas women's literary endeavors serve primarily as a locus for emotional expression. This perspective implies a gendered division of cognitive and affective labor in writing, with men writing "with their minds" and women "with their hearts." Furthermore, Tarabishi suggests a divergent relationship with the external world, positioning the world as the central focus for men and the self as the primary object of interest for women (Al-Eid, 1992, p. 20). His differentiation rests upon an analysis

of thematic content, stylistic approaches, and the presumed influence of gender on writers' engagement with the world.

Between the male perspective on women's writings and the reverse, new fields of criticism emerged, including women's critique of men's works. Notable examples include Nawal El Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero, Fatima Hassan's Symbolism in the Works of Naguib Mahfouz, and Yumna Al-Aid's study of Ezzedine Ismail's Folk Tales in Sudan: A Study of the Artistry and Function of the Story. On the other hand, there is also male criticism of women's writings, such as Abdul Rahman Abu Aouf's Reading Feminine Writings, and Ahmed Jassem Al-Humaydi's Women in Their Writings: Bourgeois Women in a Man's World (Al-Adwan, n.d., p. 77) .What is noticeable in these works is that they are built on a gendered, superior perspective, reflecting a psychological, social, and historical conflict within the illusion of the self and the other.

3.Feminist Criticism Terms

3.1.Patriarchy

The concept of "patriarchy" presents a degree of semantic ambiguity and interpretative complexity. Despite its pivotal role in Western feminist discourse, which has permeated Arab and Muslim societies, proponents of this feminist wave often employ the term to denote what they perceive as absolute male dominance across all societal domains. This implies the subjugation of women throughout their lives, from inception to demise, in all their endeavors, under the control of men. The feminist movement utilizes this concept to underscore what they

identify as the oppression and exploitation experienced by women, as well as the socially imposed values (Benmessouda, 1991, p. 127), rather than biological distinctions between the sexes, that place women entirely under men's authority.

3.2.Feminism (Feministe)

Feminism can be easily defined as a new direction aimed at making women centered on themselves and completely independent of men (Benmessouda, 1991, p. 125).

Feminism (Féminisme): This concept is easily rooted in women's activities on multiple levels legal, political, social, and others. It does not necessarily embody a philosophical or intellectual dimension, regardless of the nature of the entity adopting it. It is simply a description of the nature of women's activities within their specific domains (Benmessouda, 1991, p. 125). However, in the absence of the broader concept of feminism and its dimensions, the distinction between feminism and feminism has become blurred in cultural, legal, and political discourse in general.

3.3.Gender (Gender)

The academic exploration of gender can be traced back to the second wave of the feminist movement. Initially, this field of study was categorized as "Sociology of Women," but it later evolved into "Sociology of Gender." Early research in this area exhibited a male-centric bias until the sociologist Jessie Bernard challenged the field to consider whether sociology could truly be a science encompassing the entire social spectrum, including both men and women, rather than focusing solely on a male-dominated perspective (Husu, 2008, p. 59). This pivotal shift

aimed to underscore the significant role of social structures in shaping our understanding of masculinity and femininity, as well as in guiding the intricate system of relationships between women and men.

3.4.The self and the other

The self (or ego) is defined as the existential, real aspect of an individual that perceives itself and the external world. This perception occurs either directly through sensory experience or indirectly through perception (Rahman, 2011, p. 209). The "other" refers to any entity that is distinct from the self in terms of its sensations, existence, structure, and relationships (Majdulin, 2012, p. 21). The fundamental aim of this concept is to explore the potential for connection or contradiction between these two distinct entities.

3.5.The center and the margin

This term was first used in the early nineteenth century in France when the government exerted pressure on local political organizations. The term was coined to describe the relationship between the core of power and culture in a society and its surrounding regions(Mann, 1999, p. 99). The center represents the controlling element, while the margin refers to the element excluded from power and prominence.

4.Feminist Writing from the Perspective of Abdul Ghafar Al-Atwi:

Abdul Ghafar Al-Atwi, an Iraqi critic born in Basra in 1954, holds a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts and works as an education supervisor. His published works include :Talking to

the Novel, The Reader in Narrative, Hermeneutics of the Qur'an, The Culture of the Body: A Reading in Arab Feminist Narratives, The Cultural Dimension in Islam, The Woman: A Different Image, and Establishing the Features of Feminism (Al-Atwi, 2017, p. 267).

This study is dedicated to an analysis of the book Establishing the Features of Feminism, focusing on the author's references in critiquing feminist writing and differentiating his approach from other critics addressing feminism. The book comprises research and applied readings, primarily published in the Iraqi newspapers Al-Sabah Al-Jadid and Al-Haqiqa, with some contributions appearing on the international cultural website Al-Manar. Its central theme is the terminology of feminist theory, which has gained prominence in the Arab and Islamic world. The expansion of translation and the increased interconnectedness between Western and Eastern cultures, facilitated by the rise of social media in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, created new opportunities for intellectual exchange and cultural communication. This period witnessed a broader exploration of women's issues in both the West and the Arab world, including studies on numerous female writers, such as :Shatha Asad, Amal Jamal, Sara Jamboul, Zahra Az, Khawla Al-Nahi, and Hala Al-Matari, among others. The book commences with a dedication to his wife, interpreted as a symbol of reconciliation and equality, and proceeds directly into the subject matter without a preface or introduction. The author

immediately delves into an examination of models of feminist writings, stating:

"It was produced from the stakes of poetry, politics, ideology (communism), sharp opposition, and permanent exile... In an environment that believes in the margins established by the cultural system, which makes its structural formations the center of attraction"(Al-Atwi, 2019, pp. 6, 8). Through this statement, he asserts the demeaning perspective held by Iraqi society towards women, achieving male dominance through superiority. He makes the poet's biography a testament to his view, emphasizing that power views women as the "Other," a stranger on whom all forms of exploitation are secretly practiced. This is reflected in what he included in his book, stating:

In the Al-Nawawi phenomenon, woman constitutes an imagined otherness. Her image is framed within the self-other dynamic delineated by the phenomenon itself. Al-Nawawi's perspective remains tethered to stereotypes of women derived from Arab heritage, which he subsequently reifies in his poetry (Al-Atwi, 2019, pp. 11). The critic foregrounds the pervasiveness of these stereotypical views, positioning woman as a marginalized other, both linguistically and behaviorally. Interactions with her are veiled, and this extends to linguistic concealment via the cryptic representation of her physical form. Consequently, women become a prime target of cultural discrimination. Further dissecting these gendered, male behaviors, the critic acknowledges the influence of gender

culture, positing that discourse concerning the flesh necessitates a specific referent, even if mediated through a virtualized recollection of the female image within Al-Nawawi's memory. This engenders an inherent conflict, simultaneously generating and constraining adversaries from within. The critic depicts the cultural and dominative violence of the male towards the female, transforming her image from that of servant to that of sin – the most severe judgment levied against her existence.

The critic acknowledges the female's corporeal maneuvers and manipulations, as she embodies her existence within a doll ensnared in barbed wire, enacting a form of self-annihilation by divesting this body of its animating spirit, rendering it susceptible to fragmentation and dispersal: "The absence of the female within the male's linguistic shadow will, to varying degrees, manifest as her absence in reality, implying that the distinction between female and male lies in their respective utilization of language. It is understood that language has evolved to articulate the masculine world, thereby establishing and enforcing male guardianship and structural dominance. This has compelled women to resort to inscribing upon their bodies, to an extent that defies deconstruction and comprehension by the male symbolic order" (Al-Atwi, 2019, pp. 20). In this perspective, the female writer's abandonment of deep, introspective writing and her instrumentalization of the body (as a doll) constitutes a kind of linguistic death and effacement of self, independent of male agency. In this act, she adopts the male's mask, yet fails to wield it effectively.

Abdul Ghafar Al-Attawi's expansive perspective and his capacity for deep engagement with the female experience position him as a legal theorist who articulates judgments and legal principles that resonate with the inner self of women. His assertion, "Because the spectrum of love in the new man's world is disappointing to the patriarchy that wishes to rise again as a second patriarchy"(Al-Atwi, 2019, pp. 31) , illuminates a critical juncture in the legal framework connecting men and women through feminist literature. This framework endeavors to achieve a zero-sum equation within this conflict, marked by the emergence of novel characteristics in the domesticated male—namely, friendliness. The sole unknown variable within this equation is (silence), posited as an objective counterpart to the process of achieving equality. Consequently, an exchange of roles occurs between the center and the periphery, resulting in a disequilibrium within human nature.

Continuing the analysis of feminist writings, the critic proceeds to examine Sarah Jamboul's perspective, who asserts, "Everything I write is feminine, meaning the world leans towards the feminine, and the male comes second. The discourse she deals with must be feminine, and thus language, as the medium that enriches the facets of discourse, must be subjected to her feminine perspective" (Al-Atwi, 2019, pp. 31).

Drawing upon the inherent nature of the Arabic language from its lexicographical resources, defends the language's masculinity by substantiating the theory of succession and hierarchy, thereby prioritizing the masculine as evidenced by Arabic dictionaries

that present the masculine form prior to the feminine. Conversely, he reveals that Arab society utilizes a gendered language rooted in the tenets of its prevailing mentality, specifically through the phenomenon of gender violation. Within this framework, the female writer becomes a victim of the very language she believed to be a weapon ensuring her triumph over the other.

Following the critic's divestment of the writer's linguistic instrument, he proceeds to destabilize her remaining resources and distinguishing attributes, asserting, "A woman, at every stage of her life, realizes that her self is the most important... and when she wishes to express herself, the pronoun 'I' is dominant within her... she directs fiery accusations toward time, considering it the first betrayal of the body"(Al-Atwi, 2019, pp. 32). This signifies the complete denudation of the woman, even of her supplementary tools, which he deems ephemeral due to the dual betrayal perpetrated by both temporality and masculinity. Through the exposition of antithetical binaries (love/hate, filth/sacredness), within this contradictory context, the woman, in his view, must navigate in order to attain her existential objective.

Al-Attawi redirects his linguistic and physical attention towards affect and aesthetics, positing, "Perhaps a further textual image derived from poetry engenders a secondary space, thereby effectuating a state of concordance with absence, consequently severing the signification of poetry from the presence of the world within the writer's consciousness... it

affirms the worldly nexus between absence and presence" (Al-Atwi, 2019, pp. 38) .The absence of beauty and gentleness in the male has resulted in his linguistic oppressiveness and behavioral coarseness within his lived environment. Al-Attawi suggests that the poet Amal Jamal embodies a phase of feminine awareness of the external world. However, her triumph remains incomplete; as he articulates, "Amal Jamal's revolution constitutes a gentle revolution against war" (Al-Atwi, 2019, pp. 44) . She will remain, irrespective of the degree of maturity of her consciousness, unable to attain a state of concord with the other.

From his perspective, she employs the rhetoric of reprisal, articulating: 'The woman, aggrieved by the man's actions and his disregard for the beauty she bestows, implores the collective human conscience to cease aiding the man in his belligerence and the desecration of the rose' (Al-Atwi, 2019, pp. 50).She resorts to an alternative instrument, that of appealing to moral consciousness, subsequent to the realization of her own impotence.

Finally, Al-Attawi acknowledges that women have carved out a distinct space for themselves through their language and style, a trajectory indicative of a certain shrewdness, as he observes: "Although they are writers... they are as passionate about writing about themselves as they are about the other (man) and his patriarchal institution, in order to assert their identities" (Al-Atwi, 2019, pp. 51) .This denotes a proclivity towards dissimulation or recourse to resolving this dilemma by

identifying the mechanisms through which the patriarchal system exerts its dominance. Superficially, it appears triumphant, endeavoring to stimulate women's consciousness to deflect the threat to their identity and to seek a genuine rationale underpinning their writing.

5.Conclusion

Through our examination of Abdul Ghafar Al-Attawi's "Establishing the Features of Feminism," we encountered challenges in definitively ascertaining his position. This difficulty stems from the critic's nuanced perspective, extensive knowledge, and sophisticated approach to feminist criticism. Our analysis yielded the following conclusions:

1. The critic endeavors to maintain neutrality in his consideration of the social and linguistic theme of women.
2. A tension exists between his established convictions and the exigencies of his engagement with feminist texts, which frequently results in a defense of patriarchal authority.
3. The profundity of his study and perspective enables him to address women's experiences from an internal standpoint, differentiating him from critics whose analyses concentrate on the body and observable behaviors.
4. The critic introduces innovative terms in feminist criticism, such as "death of writing," "writing death," and "features of the new man."

5. The critic alludes to the phenomenon of "impossible silence," which effectively dispossesses individuals of their central significance.
6. He alludes to the emergence of a novel literary genre characterized by androgyny, facilitated by the advent of a third gender category. This development follows the subversion of natural biological laws, symbolized by the presence of the androgynous human figure.
7. He recognizes the woman's authority due to her utilization of a narrative style and her acute awareness of the external world, which allows her to effectively manage and contain it.
8. He posits that a woman's utilization of her corporeal form constitutes a direct pronouncement on the demise of her femininity and linguistic expression.

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