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Feminist Discourse in Contemporary Arab Women's Literature
(Ahlam Mosteghanemi and Ahdaf Soueif)

الخطاب النسوي في أدب المرأة العربية المعاصرة

أحلام مستغانمي وأهداف سوير

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Abstract:

In their respective novels *Chaos of the Senses* (2015) and *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992), Ahlam Mosteghanemi and Ahdaf Soueif create female protagonists who might experience themselves as victims of cultural androcentric institutions upheld in the Arab society, but they revolt against them and establish self-fulfilling identities. Drawing upon the feminist theories of Germaine Greer and Betty Friedan, I would like to argue that both novelists air their interests by unleashing their heroines' womanhood and intellectual agency within their phallogocentric oppressive societies which cast them as subservient silent creatures.

Keywords:

Arab feminist discourse, women's liberation, female identity, intellectual agency, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, Ahdaf Soueif.

الملخص:

في روايتي كلٍّ منهما فوضى الحواس (2015) و في عين الشمس (1992)، خلقت أحلام مستغانمي وأهداف سويف بطلتان اللاتي قد يختبرن أنفسهما كضحيّتان للمؤسسات المجتمعية الذكورية التي يتميز بها العالم العربي، لكنهما تمردتا ضدهم وخلقتا لأنفسهما هويات جديدة لتحقيق ذاتهن. بالاعتماد على النظريات النسوية لجيرمين بيتي فريدان، أود أن أناقش في هذا المقال أن كلا الروائيتين يبشّن أفكارهما عن طريق وصف أنوثتهما وإنتاجيتهما الفكرية داخل مجتمعاتهم القمعية الذكورية التي تصورهم كمخلوقات صامتة و خاضعة.

Introduction

The Algerian Ahlam Mosteghanemi and the Egyptian Ahdaf Soueif are two contemporary Arab women novelists. In their respective novels *Chaos of the Senses* (2015) and *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992), they create Arab heroines who prove themselves victims of societal patriarchal organisations maintained in the Arab world but they rebel against them and construct self-fulfilling identities. In their novels, the writers are mainly concerned with tracing their heroines' quest to reclaim and assert their female and intellectual selves.

In her theoretical volume *The Female Eunuch* (1970), Germaine Greer asserts that the only way to exert an effective change comes through revolution not evolution: "The first exercise of the free woman is to devise her own mode of revolt, a mode which will reflect her own independence and originality. The more clearly the forms of oppression emerge in her understanding, the more clearly she can see the shape of future action."¹ According to Greer, only when women grasp well the repressive cultural forces which constantly silence them, will they be able to invent her own mode of revolt which can disentangle them and mould their future action. Drawing upon the feminist theoretical volumes of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, I would like to argue in this paper that both Ahlam Mosteghanemi and Ahdaf Soueif voice their feminist concerns by accentuating their heroines' female identities and intellectual agency within their Arab patriarchal domineering societies which image them as passive silent creatures. The novelists stress their heroines' own modes of rebellion by delineating their struggles for liberation, maturity and self-actualisation. Both heroines suffer a continuing loss of their identities, becoming more and more self-alienated in their married lives. Nevertheless, both Hayat and Asya succeed in inventing their own modes of revolt, consciously or unconsciously, embodied in their extramarital affairs, writing fiction, achieving a PhD degree and divorce, and which contribute in getting them out of their hapless situations.

The Quest for Female Identity via Extramarital Affairs

Both Mosteghanemi's heroine Hayat and Soueif's Asya experience unhappy and unfulfilled marriages; yet they embark on a struggle to revive their buried womanhood through affairs. Both Hayat's military spouse and Asya's intellectual husband Saif Madi are quintessence of the Arab traditional man with his inconsiderate thinking, focusing on their careers with total ignorance of their wives. Both heroines tend to be silenced by their husbands who prevent them of emerging as individuals in complete control of their identities.

Mosteghanemi traces the constructive journey of her heroine moving from submission and conformism into rebellion against all cultural constraints and conventions which stand in front of her personal achievement as a free intellectual woman. In the opening of the story, Mosteghanemi presents Hayat as a conformist and submitted woman to her husband. However, the heroine gradually develops her own mode of revolt through her new romantic relationship with her hero Khaled, where she unleashes and consummates her feminine desires. After five years of marriage and a two-year break of

writing, Hayat recognises the conformism which has plagued her life and bankrupted both her female-self and creative spirit. She comes to see the extent to which she has been sustaining the social traditional role of a succumbed second wife. Hayat leads a loveless marriage with a disintegrated husband, whose primary worry is to find a solution to the national political and economic ills. Hayat's lack of agency thwarts her from expressing herself and her desires, allowing her spouse to control her identity. She says: "It's true also that I entered into slavery of my own free will, though probably without noticing. I was content in my meek surrender to him, leaving to him the more enjoyable role: the role of manliness that commands, decides, demands, protects, pushes, and goes to extremes."² Involuntarily, Hayat gets involved in the conventionally legitimate status of a married woman. She depicts her miserable conjugal relationship in military expressions by assimilating her sexual relationship with her husband to a military assault where her husband is thrown on her to ensure a quick triumph: "my husband take off his military uniform and put on my body for a few moments before falling fast asleep. He'd always been an officer with a predilection for quick victories, even in bed."³

In the same way, Soueif traces the revolutionary trajectory of Asya moving from a fraught matrimonial bond towards a passionate affair with the British Gerald Stone to an eventual self-reinvention and personal autonomy. Though being with her beloved husband, Asya has to endure Saif's unawareness of her emotional and sexual needs. A husband who keeps on whining about his wife's natural rights: "Your demands on my time and my emotions have become intolerable."⁴ In addition to his unresponsiveness, Saif's sexual coldness and repulsive behaviours in bed do nothing than aggravate Asya's psychological crisis and wedded disaffection:

Could you? Please? Turn round and hold me?' 'Oh, sweetie, sweetie. Go to sleep.' 'Please ? Just for a minute?' And he would turn round, and big and solid and sweet-smelling, would hold her close for maybe five minutes, then he'd ask lightly, 'Is that enough? Can I go to sleep now?' And patting her hip or arm or whatever was nearest he would murmur, ' Good night, Princess,' and he would turn over, and in minutes he would be a sleep. And she would lie awake and hold down the loneliness that threatened to turn into a full –blown panic.⁵

The desperate heroine begins to think seriously of the unworthiness of her marriage. She comes to be aware that she needs to experience all that she lacks in her married life, "to feel hot breath on her face and on her neck . . . to feel a man's hands on her breasts, on her waist, on her tummy."⁶

Greer incites women experiencing joyless marriages not to surrender but to get engaged in affairs, accentuating the importance of not becoming dependent:

[W]omen ought not to enter into socially sanctioned relationships, like marriage, and that once unhappily in they ought not to scruple to run away. It might even be thought to suggest that women should be deliberately promiscuous. It certainly maintains that they should be self-sufficient and consciously refrain from establishing exclusive dependencies and other kinds of neurotic symbioses.⁷

Greer asserts that, because of their female gender, girls are taught rules that prepare them to a life of submissiveness. Once adults, society exhorts women to internalise a sense of shame about their own bodies and to lose their natural and political rights. They eventually turn to be helpless, secluded, leading a repressed sexual life and an unhappy existence. Greer claims that men have subjugated women by distancing them from their libido. As a result, the only solution for women to gain emancipation is by celebrating the differences they have from the other sex, and through sexual agency. Rather than upholding the socially prescribed image of womanhood, women must be in charge of their sexual life. Greer further explains: "What happens is that the female is considered as a sexual object for the use and appreciation of the other sexual beings, men. Her sexuality is both denied and misrepresented by being identified as passivity."⁸ Therefore, instead of being passive, women should be sexually active: "[m]en are tired of having all the responsibility for sex, it is time they were relieved of it."⁹

Hayat's disappointing conjugal relationship incites her to seek her desire out of her married life, first through her fiction and then by experiencing it in her reality, "just because [her husband] was a man with no imagination or, rather, a man who exhausted all his imagination and intelligence somewhere other than in [their] bed."¹⁰ Her quest symbolises a cry of a married woman eager to reclaim her womanhood, though in a sinful manner. By leaving the illusionary world of her fiction for the real, Hayat opens a new chapter in her life and which she closes by repossessing her female-self and intellectual writing aspirations: "Now that life had brought me this much enjoyment, I was afraid of the realization that before it, I'd been among the living dead."¹¹

Hayat's eventual revelation that she is also in love with Khaled's intimate colleague Abdelhaq forms a key moment in the narrative since the narrator finds herself entangled in a love-triangle. The heroine, who finds herself trapped in a "sinful" love affair with two men while being married to a third one, comments on this complex love situation as follows: "I like love triangles. I find love duos too simple and naïve for a novel, so I needed a man who would live alongside the story before becoming part of it."¹² Hayat's confession constitutes an outright subversion to the moral code of her community. In this respect, Clara Srouji-Shajrawi maintains: "This [complex love affair] is the 'sin' with which Khālid bin Ṭūbāl (in 'Memory in the Flesh') and after that the 'man' (in 'Chaos of the Senses') accuses Ḥayāt. Yet Ḥayāt, as a writer, justifies her love to Ziyād (the Palestinian poet from 'Memory in the Flesh') as a form of writing, because she prefers love stories that involve three people."¹³

Like Hayat, the married Asya gets involved in extramarital affairs with strangers. Asya's sexual frustration with her husband urges her to seek her feminine desires out of marriage. She desires her husband's friend Mario and wants to commit adultery with him: "Look at her: in Italy she is friend with Umberto but desires some unknown man with a broken nose who is handling a blonde in a corner – even while she is in love, in *love*, with Saif ; and tonight, to want to press up against Mario, to want his hand to slide down from her waist-oh."¹⁴ Eventually, Asya indulges in a sexually pleasing relationship with the Englishman, Gerald Stone, when she resolves that she is in need of "[s]omeone who

actually wanted—*needed* to make love to [her].”¹⁵ Asya decides to fulfill her female-self with Gerald, to experience all that she lacks in her married life.

Asya's promiscuity comes to defeat her patriarchal society's traditional expectations and its oppressive culture, symbolised by her mother and relatives, dictating to her how a married woman should desire, feel, and think: “All your life they tell you – that a woman's sexuality is responsive, a woman's sexuality is tied up with her emotions. Her mother says she has never thought of any man that way except her father. Dada Zeina claims she had never desired any man but her husband – and then only because he had taught her.”¹⁶ When her mother enquires about her feelings after having committed adultery with the British man, insisting that she should feel blameworthy, Asya shows coldness by saying that it is her own affair and that no one else is allowed to intervene in it. Asya's reply constitutes a clear challenge to the hypocritical and pretentious foundations of her patriarchal culture represented here by her mother's instructions.

The heroines' committing of adultery: Hayat's extramarital affair with Khaled and Asya's liaison with the Englishman constitutes a direct transgression of the Arab patriarchal moral law. Mosteghanemi and Soueif contest the prescribed social and religious conventions in describing the lives of Arab women who attempt to take control over their own lives and discover their personal desires by breaking the mores and ethics which incessantly strip them of their agency.

The Quest for Female Intellectual Identity via Writing Fiction and PhD Degree

Both novelists empower their female protagonists through their intellectual agency. Their concern does not merely revolve on their heroines' accomplishment of their female identities but also intellectual and professional ambitions which give them access to the male public realm. In this vein, they are concerned with stressing the key role of the heroines' educational and academic careers in their ultimate personal growth and agency in the course of building their communities.

Betty Friedan devotes the first chapter of her volume *The Feminine Mystique* to the problem that has no name, namely the fact that married women of the 1950s and 1960s American society endured an incomprehensible unhappiness in their lives. Although these women did have husbands, children, and homes with the latest products, they did lack financial independence, careers, and a sense of self-fulfillment. Women felt this sense of despair because they were financially, mentally, physically, and intellectually under their husbands' dominance: “there is no other way for a woman to dream of creation or of the future. There is no other way she can even dream about herself, except as her children's mother, her husband's wife.”¹⁷ The feminine “mystique” was the idealised image to which women endeavoured to do the accepted thing despite their lack of fulfillment. Friedan explains that in post Second World War American society, women were enticed to be wives, mothers and housewives, performing only the roles of wives, mothers and housewives. The theorist views such a phenomenon as a disastrous social experiment. Assigning women the sole roles of the happy housewife or ideal homemaker prevented much success and bliss, both among the women themselves and their families. At the end of the day, Friedan states, housewives were asking themselves: “Is that all?” As such,

Friedan asserts that women should develop themselves and their intellectual and professional capabilities. Rather than making a "choice" to be mere housewives, women should invest in their intellectual potential. In this way, true happiness according to Friedan lies in education and career: "The only way for a woman . . . to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own. There is no other way."¹⁸

Hayat's writing career opens her eyes on her turbulent and chaotic emotions and thus to comprehend the source of her marital problem and to recognise the mistake of her conformity which contradicts her education and intellect. Nuha Baaqeel argues: "Writing affords Hayat a position as an equal to men because it brings her fame and wealth, and at least some control over her own affairs."¹⁹ The heroine does not realise that "the writing process in which [she]'d sought refuge from life would take [her], albeit obliquely, back towards life itself, thrusting [her] into a story that would, one page after another, become [her] own."²⁰ It hence gives her the power to break all moral and cultural rules and to voice her feminine desires and experiment her sexuality out of marital bed. She asks: "Had my literary curiosity led me into this bizarre adventure? Or was I running after love on a literary pretext?"²¹ Indeed, Mosteghanemi is intent to demonstrate how writing makes it possible for Hayat to assert herself not only as a writer but also as a loving and desirable woman. The narrator admits: "Writing is always scary, because it makes an appointment for us with all the things we're afraid to face or understand too deeply."²² Hayat's experience of writing therefore enables her to fearlessly confront all the things that might threaten her existence as a woman and a female intellectual. Thanks to her writing, she is able to break the patriarchal chains imposed on her by her husband and society and as such to experiment not only her intellectual potential as a woman writer but also her womanhood as a desirable female.

Hayat's fictional world does not merely grant her a space to escape her painful reality in a loveless marriage but is also the impetus that makes of her a rebel against the oppressive patriarchal mores of her society. The world where the "impossible love relationship that might join a man of ink with a woman of paper, who meet in the hazy realm between writing and life and set about together to write a book that both emerges from life and rebels against it."²³ Writing then becomes a space of emancipation and equality which grants Hayat an equal stance to man. Baaqeel aptly asserts that "[t]he flourishing career of Hayat as a writer demonstrates her journey along a path from patriarchal oppression [her military husband who neglects her just as her father did in the past] towards a feminist conception of equality and freedom."²⁴ Writing becomes a space of equality which allows the blurring of the established barriers between the two genders, creating therefore a new relationship based on love and solidarity rather than superiority and inferiority in the national sphere. Writing appears as an act of resistance, both as a woman and a novelist writing within the political chaos of the country in the 1990s and against the passivity of all previous generations of oppressed silenced women. According to Baaqeel, "Ahlam/Hayat's choice of writing as a means 'to recover what we've already lost or was filched from us' combines a therapeutic motive with more than a hint of resistance and rebellion."²⁵ In so doing, Mosteghanemi shows that the Algerian woman writer can be a strong advocate of the national cause, on an equal footing with her male counterpart.

Just like Hayat, whose art of writing fiction is the momentum that propels her to revolt over her circumstances and grow up into a more fulfilled woman, so too does Asya's choice to do a doctorate constitute the first step towards her liberation and disentanglement from her conjugal relationship. When asked why she would sacrifice being with her husband and family for a PhD in England, Asya answers: "I don't think I could live without doing something that's mine."²⁶ In this way, in addition to her extramarital affair and separation, holding a doctorate degree is another mode of revolt Asya devises to regain her self-identity. Asya, in her creator's words is "a woman who is able to draw her own destiny and move forward to serve her community positively without the suffocating restraints of a frustrating and hopeless marriage."²⁷

Asya determinedly comes back to her country with a doctorate degree, in full control of herself, throwing behind both her husband and British lover. The heroine's determination to accomplish her self-rule and direct a life of her own enables her to distance herself from the silence, conformity and passivity to which many intellectual Arab women fall prey. As such, Soueif deconstructs the traditional image that Arab woman's life is conditioned and defined in a way or another by her link to men. Fouad Mami claims, "Asya at the end looks fulfilled as she feels she is contributing to her nation with vocational teaching. Instead of surrender to despair, she is hopeful as she is socially proactive and part of the remedy that she has always wanted to take place."²⁸ Indeed, Asya engages in community activities as a teacher of English literature at the American university in Cairo, she also works "in a program offering help to the Egyptian village women. A step courageously taken by her in spite of the domestic pressures in a patriarchal Arab society where marriage is seen as a fundamental foundation of society and where divorced or separated women are looked upon with little respect."²⁹ Asya becomes a distinguished university professor who contributes in building her community. She grows from a succumbed wife into an established intellectual woman with a good comprehension of her feminine and academic needs. By the end of her marriage, Asya succeeds in re-establishing her lost identity and reconstructing a new personality.

By the end of the stories, the two heroines come to recognise that rediscovering and unfettering themselves from a patriarchal organism is an enduring route. Friedan asserts that, in order for women to reclaim their agency, they need to move away from the nuclear family model and its beliefs. Only then, could they lead more fulfilling existence in which they would not have to experience their lives as objects while men are the subjects. Asya is able to unfetter herself through separation becoming more mature and intellectually active in her community. Hayat, though still married, the close of the story alludes that the young novelist will soon sink again in the forbidden love of the story which may cause the end of her marriage: "I'd be willing to ask my husband for a divorce."³⁰

Conclusion:

Whether by choosing to write novels, pursuing postgraduate studies, extramarital affairs or divorce, both heroines Hayat and Asya seem to be resolute to no longer surrender to the moral and social strains exerted upon them. In their feminist discourses, Mosteghanemi and Soueif speak out their concerns by voicing their heroines' female and intellectual identities within their Arab authoritarian societies which thrust them as

submissive and silent. The two novelists are concerned with describing their heroines' process of resistance to reclaim their individual agency and repossess a strong claim over their female-selves and power over their own lives.

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