

## **Narrative Alienation and Representations of the Self and the Other in the Contemporary Arab Feminist Novel**

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### **Introduction**

Women's venture into the realm of novelistic writing has marked a radical paradigm shift in the structure of contemporary Arab literary discourse. It has effectively destabilized the central male hegemony that had long been entrenched in the collective and cultural consciousness for centuries as the absolute "center of the universe" and existence.

Feminist writing was by no means a mere aesthetic luxury or emotional outpouring; rather, it emerged as a conscious act of resistance. It initiated from a meticulous examination of the self and the depiction of its inner worlds, subsequently expanding to lay bare the underlying mechanisms of the patriarchal order. Furthermore, it lifted the veil on the manifestations of both physical and symbolic violence—such as oppression, exclusion, rape, and forced marriage—which women endure in their daily realities. This narrative shift has ignited a profound value-based and epistemological conflict within the contemporary feminist novelistic corpus, fundamentally reshaping the dialectical relationship between the feminine "Self" and the dominant "Other."

In this context, the manifestations of violence inflicted upon women multiply as a deeply rooted structural phenomenon within the patriarchal authority. This violence does not stop at the boundaries of physical and material abuse; rather, it extends to encompass symbolic, cultural, and linguistic dimensions that reinforce what can be termed the "culture of silence." Consequently, it poses a direct threat and inflicts a genuine alienation upon the Arab feminine identity and its human essence.

Contemporary Arab feminist novels stand out as one of the most prominent critical discourses exposed to uncovering and dismantling these dynamics. Through their texts, women novelists strive to transform the "Self" from an alienated, passive object (patient) into an active, critical agent (agent) capable of confrontation and rebellion.

### **Research Problematic**

Based on these premises, the central problematic of this research crystallizes in examining the dimensions of "**Narrative Alienation and Representations of the Self and the Other in the Contemporary Arab Feminist Novel.**" This study attempts to unpack the ways in which feminist narrative conceptualizes the violence of the

(male/patriarchal) Other, alongside the mechanisms through which it alienates the feminine Self both physically and morally.

To ensure a comprehensive scope of this problematic, the research poses the following sub-questions:

- How did the manifestations of physical and material violence (such as battery, rape, and forced marriage) manifest in feminist novelistic texts, and how did they contribute to reducing the female to a "deferred scandal" or an object of possession?
- What are the mechanisms of symbolic and moral violence upon which the dominant Other relied to impose a "culture of silence" and marginalize the feminine identity?
- To what extent has the contemporary Arab feminist novel succeeded in empowering the "Self" to liberate itself from the oppression of patriarchal authority, thereby moving from the sphere of submission to the space of rebellion and self-fashioning?

Through a critical analytical approach applied to pioneering novelistic models—such as *The Taa of Shame* (Taa al-Khajal) by Fadhila El Farouk, *Soft Sleep* (Noum Na'im) by Alia Mamdouh, and *We Are No Longer Your Slaves* (Lam Na'ud Jawari Lakum) by Sahar Khalifeh—this research seeks to explore these answers and dismantle the structures of narrative oppression, aiming for a deeper understanding of the dynamic relationship between the Self and the Other.

### **First: Physical and Material Violence**

Within Arab feminist novelistic discourse, physical and material violence directed against women constitutes one of the most raw and jarring narrative manifestations. This is primarily because it shifts the value-based conflict from the realm of implicit dialogue or ideological dispute to the level of direct, "concrete victimization" of the feminine Self. In this context, the body is no longer a mere neutral biological datum; rather, within the feminist novelistic imagination, it has been transformed into a "cultural and sociological battlefield." Across its very geography, the patriarchal system exercises the ultimate degrees of hegemony and ownership.

From a deconstructive critical perspective, physical violence—manifested in battery, abuse, violation, and forced marriage—does not emanate from an isolated individual impulse or a transient behavioral deviation on the part of the character of the dominant "Other" (the father/the husband). Instead, it is the byproduct of an inherited cultural and institutional order that legitimizes the crushing of woman's being and relegates her to the margins. In their texts, Arab women novelists deliberately employ this pattern of violence to expose societal taboos and customary norms that reduce the female to the image of a "structural flaw" (Awrah) or a "deferred scandal" that must be disciplined and besieged through coercive force.

Accordingly, the depiction of material violence in the feminist novel assumes two critical dimensions: on the one hand, it functions as the Other's mechanism to alienate

the Self and strip it of its physical and psychological freedom. On the other hand, it acts as a radical narrative catalyst that drives the violated and oppressed "Self" to break free from the culture of submission and seek avenues of rebellion and liberation. The manifestations of this physical violation multiply, escalating from the daily wounds of the body to the suppression of its existential desires—the critical deconstruction of which is distributed across the following thematic configurations:

### **1-1: Rape and Battery**

The cause of women has garnered remarkable and pivotal attention within Arab feminist novelistic corpora, as women writers launched their narrative revolution to defend the alienated and violated feminine Self against the dominant male "Other." These texts have meticulously documented the violent practices directed against women, alongside the recurrent disillusionments that loom whenever they attempt to break free from the shackles of male captivity. It is undeniable that feminist narrative portrays women within an environment fraught with a stereotypical, instinctual gaze that legitimizes the violation of their bodies. This pushes them into the realm of forced rape, harassment, and various manifestations of material violence—phenomena that structurally reflect upon patriarchal thinking and contribute to shifting patriarchal authority from paternal care into coercion and the dispossession of the feminine "Self's" identity.

Perhaps the finest critical citation we can present in this context is what novelist Amel Mokhtar recorded in her novel *The Rocking Chair (Al-Kursi Al-Hazzaz)*. With sharp narrative audacity, she sought to expose and dismantle the scene where the protagonist, Zeina, is raped by her cousin, Samy. The brutality of the patriarchal order then intensifies as the exact same violative act is repeated by her uncle, "Abu Samy." The protagonist describes the first encounter, stating:

"Then Samy dragged me by my hand, leaned my head against the trunk of the grapevine, and began sucking my lips... lifting my white dress, which was speckled with black dots, and shoving his finger between my thighs..."

Although Abu Samy severely punished his son upon witnessing his act, this punishment was not a victory for the victim as much as it was a desire to monopolize the authority of violation. A few days later, he cornered her alone, exercising his narrative and physical alienation upon her, which the protagonist expresses by saying:

"He drew me close to him and whispered in my ear: 'Samy is still a child who hasn't learned the rules of the game well, but as for me...' I swallowed my voice, my words, and the dry saliva in my throat. I realized there was no way left for me to repel the oncoming hurricane-like assault... He sat me on his knees, spread my thighs apart, pulled aside my panties, and brought me close to the opening of his trousers."

Within the patriarchal paradigm, the biological milestone of a girl's puberty becomes a problematic turning point. Both the father and the mother anticipate this biological indicator as an announcement of the feminine body's readiness for exchange, intermarriage, and the consolidation of male centrality through the marriage contract.

Yet, in the collective consciousness, this puberty is paralleled by a profound sense of shame and apprehension, besieging the female with anxieties of disgrace and the dread of losing her virginity. Feminist writings have boldly unveiled this brutality, depicting how this oppressive system strips the female of her human value and symbolic honor. The father receives the tragedy of his daughter being raped or abused with striking emotional coldness. Instead of providing protection, he disowns her and inflicts a compounded violence that takes the form of flogging, verbal abuse, and social ostracization, utterly refusing to comprehend the psychological and physical agony the victim endured following her abduction or rape.

Within the novelistic landscape that dismantles patriarchal violence and its jarring manifestations, Fadhila El Farouk's novel *The Taa of Shame (Taa al-Khajal)* holds a powerful presence. The author narrates the tragedy of a young woman, Yamina, who was subjected to rape, violence, and bloodshed by terrorist groups. Narrating the moment of violation, she states:

"The night the terrorists came to our house, I implored them, I kissed their feet to leave me alone, but one of them struck her with a rifle on her head, and she fell unconscious..."

The harshness and tragedy of the narrative culminate after the protagonist survives and her brother joins the army, as she collides with the "violence of rejection" exercised by her father. The father does not welcome his daughter returning from hell; instead, he shocks her by denying her very existence and casting her outside the walls of the house. In the eyes of Yamina's father, the violated feminine body entirely nullifies the girl's existence and degrades her being, which manifests in her statement:

"The officer told me that your family refused to receive me again... He initially denied that he even had a daughter."

This denial represents the zenith of narrative and existential alienation. As soon as the father learned of the abduction, he chose rejection and denial as a means to purify the tribal system, reinforcing the supreme importance of a girl's virginity, which dominant male society views as the sole, absolute indicator of honor and morality, according to the prevailing perspective: "*a woman without virginity is a woman without life.*"

Along the same trajectory comes Sahar Khalifeh's novel *We Are No Longer Your Slaves (Lam Na'ud Jawari Lakum)* to reinforce the documentation of paternal cruelty and absolute hegemony over the domestic space. The author depicts the material and symbolic violence inflicted upon the mother through severe beatings that accompany states of drunkenness, alongside cursing and insults. Thus, the manifestations of patriarchal violence multiply, transcending battery and verbal abuse to become the "violence of existential denial and rejection" following rape. The father does not seek to pursue the perpetrator or trace the underlying causes; rather, he contents himself with clinging to the rigid patriarchal rule that reduces a woman's entire being to her hymen.

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### **Second: Symbolic and Moral Violence**

Symbolic violence is classified as one of the most dangerous mechanisms of oppression directed against women, owing to its invisible nature that utilizes language, beliefs, and cultural codes to entrench male hegemony. The gravity of this type of violence lies in its capacity to transform "domination" from an external coercive practice into an internalized mental structure within the feminine consciousness. Consequently, this grants patriarchal authority an absolute legitimacy, positioning it as the center that organizes social relations and their guiding values.

Moral and psychological violence has manifested in contemporary Arab feminist novels through various configurations, such as contempt, humiliation, ridicule, and systematic marginalization. The roles of producing and circulating this violence are distributed among the males of the system (the father, the husband, the brother); however, the "father" monopolizes the image of the tyrant within feminist narrative, mastering the subjugation of the feminine Self and the dispossession of her voice. The character of Hassiba in the novel *Sultans and Prostitutes (Sultan wa Baghaya)* offers a tragic model of this authoritarianism. Paternal oppression and the coercion into submission and silence ultimately drove her into the abyss of deviance, forcing her to seek refuge in brothels. This occurred after the father divorced her mother as a punishment for giving birth to a female. Hassiba narrates this tragedy, stating:

"Upon my father's return from the army, he married for the third time out of spite for her mother who had given him a daughter... meaning her... Her mother died of sheer heartbreak."

This male-dominated system persistently strives to reduce woman to a negative image that highlights her permanent inferiority and the genetic and authoritative superiority of the "Other," relying on a cultural framework that views the female as an underaged, legally incapacitated being. This condescending perspective manifests through the character of Farouk in Sahar Khalifeh's novel *We Are No Longer Your Slaves*, as he exclaims in denunciation:

"I wonder how any woman, no matter her intelligence, beauty, and cunning, can control a man when she is nothing more than a woman?"

This reductionist gaze represents the core of psychological and moral violence; it is the starting point that shackles the female and prevents her from leaving the quadrant of marginalization, which explains the novelists' endeavor to dismantle these stereotypes to liberate themselves from their bondage. "Silencing" and "concealment" become prominent mechanisms of this symbolic oppression, where *"silence has been historically imposed on women, and a deliberate blackout was cast over everything related to them and their lives, to the extent that women's lives and their affairs came to be termed the 'culture of silence.'"*

The "culture of silence" manifests as a daily practice within the domestic space; a girl dares not express her opinion or declare her desires in the presence of the father or brothers, rendering her opinion a mere subordinate echo of the father's decision, devoid of any capacity for discussion or refusal. Thus, psychological violence becomes a silent yet lethal violence; because it leaves no trace of flogging or insult upon the body, it targets the female's soul directly, crushing her emotions and her human essence.

### **Second: Representations of the "Self" and the "Other" in the Contemporary Arab Feminist Novel**

Contemporary Arab feminist novelistic writing has transformed into a remarkable creative and critical phenomenon, provoking widespread debate within the cultural arena among readers and critics alike. The problematic binary of the "Self" and the

"Other" emerges as one of the most compelling critical approaches for interrogating and dismantling the structures of contemporary feminist narrative.

In terms of conceptual definition, the term "Self" (أنا / *The Ego*) is indicated in linguistic lexicons, including *Al-Munjid*, as a detached pronoun denoting the focal elevation of the speaker within the sentence and the narrative. However, the critical approach transcends this linguistic boundary to link the Self to "Identity" in its ontological and sociological dimensions. The investigation into identity is *"an epistemological search, or rather, the very construction of this identity, or the continuous tracking of its construction in light of the commonalities that unify a nation. As for the search for identity, it is often an ideological quest... an alignment... a choice of stance... an ideology."* This confirms that the study of feminist narrative discourse has necessarily imposed a broad cultural dialectic surrounding the formation and construction of identity.

Although the 1970s witnessed a sort of feminine immersion into the "collective self" and a withdrawal into communal concerns—a result of decades of marginalization endured by women, which prompted many writers to escape the details of a jarring reality toward therapeutic writing—those attempts were not spared from harassment, defamation campaigns, and counter-systemic rumors. Nevertheless, the creative Arab woman clung to the novelistic discourse, transforming it into a spacious creative battlefield wherein the binary of the Self and the Other manifests in its finest critical and deconstructive confrontations, capitalizing on her high capacity to observe realities and expose sociological taboos.

The presence of the Self and the Other binary is not accidental to the narrative act; rather, it is a structural configuration inherent to every narrative practice: *"Every novelistic narrative necessarily includes a Self and an Other, whether the narrator is the Self or the Other..."* From this premise, the "Other" is defined as the antithesis or the mirror confronting the "Self" and its identity, and its existence has become an ontological necessity for the realization of self-awareness. While the Other multiplies in cultural studies to assume religious, ethnic, or civilizational guises, in its core concept, it represents separation and alterity:

*"Every person is an 'Other' to anyone else on earth, regardless of the forms of their presence—be they a partner, a pacifist, an invader, or an occupier—and regardless of the relationship that binds them to the Self, whether it is a relationship of conflict or respect. Yet, it is impossible to deny the role the Other plays regarding the Self's perception of itself; paradoxically, it represents an object of temptation and a source of caution at the same time."*

Undoubtedly, the examination of the Self and the Other in Arab feminist narrative leads us directly to dismantle the binary of (Man / Woman), and how phallocentric centrality displayed a categorical and systematic rejection of the emergence of the woman writer's voice in the literary sphere. This rejection and systemic resistance formed a radical catalyst for the liberation of the feminine Self, unleashing her repressed emotions and

creativity in the form of groundbreaking novelistic texts, at the vanguard of which stands the novel *The Taa of Shame*.

The image of the Self in the contemporary Arab feminist novel manifested through the technique of the "participating narrator" or self-narrative (*Autofiction*), where woman takes charge of producing her own narrative voice. This Self has appeared in feminist corpora through sorrowful, problematic formulas such as: *the oppressed Self*, *the violated Self*, and *the raped Self*—signifying the tyranny of social reality and the siege of the four walls that curbed the creative and liberatory inclinations of young girls. The novel *The Taa of Shame* represents the supreme paradigm of this suffering. The author fashioned the dual images of "the violated Self" and "the shameful Self" as companions to all stages of a female's life, narrating how that *Taa* (the *Taa of feminization*, viewed as a mark of deficiency and a flaw in the patriarchal imagination) continued to haunt the protagonist even within the space of forced marriage. It became a *Taa* that dictates the shame of entry and exit, regulates the tone of expression and speech, and suppresses the spiritual and physical existence of woman.

In contrast, feminist novelistic discourse paused before the question of the male "Other" as the echo and the referential existence following the Self. It was processed through novelistic imaginations to appear intertwined with the patriarchal system governing the male world. This Other escalates in his exercise of narrative and psychological alienation, beginning with the greedy father who contracts the marriage of his minor daughter out of a desire for the dowry, moving through the details of daily paternal violence and the disowning of his own blood following the tragedy of rape, and arriving at the husband devoid of human sensitivity who reduces woman to her biological dimension and an object for bed-chamber gratification alone.

The issue of the Self and the Other remains a problematic pillar with extended dimensions in the critical arena, given its reliance on the structural conflict of roles between the "oppressed protagonist" and the "masculine Other," and the multiplicity of its epistemological manifestations alongside the diversity of the novelistic experience and its motivating themes.

Patriarchy manifests as a dominant alienating structure that directs the plot of events and the destinies of characters in feminist narrative. The father centralizes himself in the position of an earthly deity controlling the destinies of the family, casting the female's being and identity to the furthest fringes of the margin. This systemic oppression, which destroys and distorts the features of femininity, is brilliantly captured by the Arab woman novelist. This is vividly demonstrated in the novel *Soft Sleep (Noum Na'im)* by novelist Alia Mamdouh, where the protagonist narrates the tragedy of this dissolution, stating:

"I celebrate the scattering of beautiful images like a flock of dreams escaping from me... and a society that oppresses a woman crouching in her studio... striving to please it out of fear... compliance... and erasure."

Through this narrative utterance, feminist writers intentionally exposed the mechanisms of "existential alienation" inflicted upon the feminine Self by the Other (the father/society), which worked to strip her of her freedom and reduce her tragedy through linguistic signifiers laden with pain and melancholy, such as: *oppression, pain, sadness, and tragedy*.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the aforementioned trajectories of critical documentation and deconstruction, it can be concluded that the dialectic of the "Self" and the "Other" in the contemporary Arab feminist novel did not stop at the boundaries of transient narrative representation. Rather, it constituted a structural and visionary axis aimed at laying bare the system of "narrative" and existential "alienation" exercised against women within the masculine imagination. The applied approach to the studied novelistic corpora has yielded a set of central findings replete with critical implications:

**First**, the research has unveiled the roots of material and symbolic violence as an institutionalized order inherited by patriarchal authority. The novels demonstrated how the female body—from the pivotal moment of puberty—is reduced to the mold of a "deferred scandal" or subjected to coercive, utilitarian exchange. This physical alienation manifested vividly in scenes of rape and forced marriage, exposing the glaring contradiction between oppressive customary practices and the objectives of Islamic Sharia, which establishes pure mutual consent as the foundational cornerstone of any cosmic contract.

**Second**, symbolic and moral violence appeared within the narrated texts as an invisible tool, yet one that is far more lethal to the feminine identity. Through the language of marginalization, denial, and disparagement, the dominant "Other" sought to perpetuate the "culture of silence" as an alleged systemic virtue. This silent violence did not flog the body; instead, it oppressed the soul, dispossessed the being, and transformed woman into an "object of subjugation" both sensually and materially. This was brilliantly documented by women writers in novels that formed milestones, such as *The Taa of Shame* by Fadhila El Farouk, *Soft Sleep* by Alia Mamdouh, and *We Are No Longer Your Slaves* by Sahar Khalifeh.

**Third**, the study has proved that the transition of feminist novelistic discourse from the quadrant of therapeutic writing and subjective withdrawal to the space of deconstruction and confrontation has granted the "Self" the capacity to re-represent itself narratively. Woman is no longer a mere passive "object" (patient) upon whom the act of alienation is inflicted; rather, she has transformed into a critical "agent" who writes the body, dismantles phallogocentric centrality, and reshapes the collective consciousness of society.

**In conclusion**, interrogating narrative alienation in the contemporary Arab feminist novel opens new horizons within the apparatus of modern criticism. It confirms that women's writing is by no means an aesthetic luxury; rather, it is an integrated ontological project that seeks to transcend the traditional binaries of conflict with the

Other, aiming ultimately at establishing a human space grounded in egalitarianism, mutual respect, and the recognition of the legitimacy of difference.

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