

Arab Woman's Own Brand of Feminism: a Study of Feminist Issues in Contemporary Women Writers of Arab Diaspora

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Abstract

The present paper aims at studying feminist issues in contemporary women writers of Arab diaspora. Arab women literature has been an area where everyone can engage in direct dialogue with new perspectives. Arab feminism is, in fact, the invention of Western education which revolutionizes feminine thinking and highlights individuality among the Arab women. The western bearing encourages women Arab writers to demonstrate their vigor to take foreign values. Arab women novelists worked to unveil the feminine psyche despite difficulties shown by society. Their cultural encounters have a direct impact on their strategy in deconstructing Western attitudes toward Arab culture. Their experiences contribute to the process of emancipating Arab women. The Arab Diasporic woman writing, as a creative art, is advantageous to grasp movements of such commitment to grant women the status they deserve. Feminism has been well acknowledged among Arab women writers as they cannot stay unconcerned with Arab women suffering.

Key words: Women writers, Diaspora, Feminism, women literature, and Arab culture.

"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman."

(De Beauvoir, 1953:281)

1. Feminism: Contextual Framework

Fundamentally, Feminism is a western concept. This term is also taken from French term "feminist" which was used regularly in English. It has been articulated differently in different parts of the world by different people especially women depending upon their level education, background and consciousness.

The term "Feminism" was coined by Alexander Dumas in 1872 in a leaflet L' homme femme. He used it to describe the emerging of women's movement for the belief in and support of equal rights based on the idea of the equality of sexes and rights. It is an attempt to understand woman from the woman's point of view. Feminism redefines the politics of power based on gender, gender, class, caste and race. Women's marginality is targeted by a number of feminist writers. They "still debate long and hard over what should constitute feminist sexual politics." (Hadjipavlou, 2010: 112)

Feminism in Literature aims at interrogating patriarchy and the social mindset in both men and women which endorses gender inequality. The feminist thoughts are clearly expressed in Peter Barry's *Beginning theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory* (2002) as he states: "It explores the nature of female world and outlook, and restructures the lost or suppressed records of female experience" (122). Feminist writers had to confront with the complete disregard with women needs. The need for a reexamination of the ways of exercising social power over gender roles introduces another way of viewing women based on the abolition of social distinction related to any coding of gender differences. This new spotlight on gender represents the next step in the evolution of feminism among scholars and writers as well.

Feminism is a social and political doctrines intended to establish equality in a political, cultural, legal rights and security for women. Women fight for emancipation and liberation from all kinds of oppression. Feminism seeks to "draw attention to the unequal distribution of rights and entitlements in society such as the under-representation of women in business, politics, certain professions and public life" (Hadjipavlou, 2010: 22). In this sense, Feminism is a socio-cultural movement that seeks to secure a complete equality for women with men. It originated in Europe and gradually become a worldwide cultural and political movement.

The changes in the meaning of term feminism have been determined by the genesis of various branches of feminist studies. Definitions of feminism are often followed by an explication of different kinds of feminist criticism and feminist approaches like liberal feminism, radical feminism and black feminism.

The history of feminism is divided into three major periods which have been termed by scholars as "Three Waves". First wave was located "in the establishment of women's movements in the mid-nineteenth century when the focus was on campaigns for female suffrage" (Hadjipavlou, 2010: 26). The movement was motivated by women of different backgrounds. These women campaigned for suffrage and fought for their rights without relying on political parties. The second wave of feminism was emerged in 1960s. Women's Liberation Movement of this period grew out as the wide-spread protests by blacks and women in the USA and France in particular. The publication of numerous oeuvres such as: Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Betty Frieden's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969) raised campaign against the secondary role of women.

Women straggle "may have turned to ideologies of domestic feminism in an effort to create economies of meaning for the privatized world of women's work, giving a cultural presence to what was unvalued and invisible in the public sphere. (Hart et al, 2006: 223). The main focus of second wave feminism was directed more towards the reproduction of women's experience and sexuality. Moreover, different issues like: social and economic conditions were at core of second wave feminists as they were acting upon changing women's reality.

The term 'feminism' is turned into 'feminisms' and similar patterns of feminism from different cultures came into existence. This can probably be called as Third-wave feminism which "still concerned with many of the same problems as their predecessors, but now wishing to work from within the political and legal establishments rather than criticizing them from the outside."(Bomarito, Hunter, 2006: 346) The early proponents of feminist theories were from the West. Although "Feminism is regarded as "western" and irrelevant for third world contexts" (Katrak 2006: 16), third world women have created new brand of feminism.

2. Feminism in the Arab World

Arab women are struggling to adjust gender relationships in family where gender oppression is still a fundamental issue in their daily life. Their identity is constructed through challenge, i.e. transgression of Arab patriarchal culture which legitimates gender inequality. The emergence of feminism has therefore witnessed a strong opposition from Arabic societies which have not yet ready to embrace such movement for a variety of reasons. The nature of the Arab society is basically traditional. It has assumed a set of shared values maintained by gender inequality. Feminism extends far beyond securing women rights in Arab society and gains them prestige and high visibility. It has influenced thinking and diversified ways to examine social issues and providing recommendations for change.

Feminists' claim that the emergence of Feminism in the Arab world is affected by the Arab culture raised the question of compatibility western feminism. Arab women joined the ongoing movements that take up issues such as rape and focused on violence against women. They question the patriarchal habit of thought towards women's roles. They have become independent thanks to their reproductive right.

Women writers of Arab diaspora including: Ghada Samman, Hanan al-Shaykh, Hoda Barakat, and Salwa al-Neimi are well integrated into woman's movement. Increasingly, they are becoming aware of the woman's question in the Arab world and abroad. With their works, Arab women writers present different picture of women journey to gain an equal opportunities with men. Women writers possess a unique opportunity to observe the problems faced by Arab women. At this juncture, they acquainted themselves with the feminist thought and approaches. Their output has become one of the important tools to explore various issues related to identity, representation and memory.

They make effort to awaken women from their passive existence and urge them to break the walls of social and cultural oppression. They also provide their readers with sufficient women protagonists who can be successfully emulated in the real life. They, thus, sow the seeds of great cultural change. The emergence of feminism was an interesting step forward toward against the subjugation of Arab women. Unsurprisingly, feminism has attracted Arab women being both liberating and stimulating. Male power embodied in the universal

institution of patriarchy includes the marginalization of women. Laying aside problems of analysis and classification, feminism stands against the oppression of all women across time and cultures.

Arab feminism created its own brand of liberating woman to solve the issues before Arab women. It tries to find a place within the community and family relations in which women can seek for an identity within the circle of family and society. This is a feature unique to Arab feminism in which Arab women can find site to negotiate their right for liberation at home and abroad.

3. Feminist Issues in Contemporary Women Writers of Arab Diaspora

In the modern women writing of Arab Diaspora, the cultural inheritance embedded with patriarchal subjugation is carefully examined in the attempts of liberating women. In this case, the mobility of women writers has to be read as decolonizing attempts on the one hand and as a cultural engagement on the other. Their primary preoccupation is to study the situation of modern Arab women who are caught up in new social and cultural encounters. Western education loaded them with new values like: individuality and freedom. These values question Arab women's perception of their identity both at homeland and abroad. Through their works, they draw up strategies of survival in a multicultural environment. The diasporic feminist stances depicted by these women writers represent their own experiences.

When talking about Women writers of Arab diaspora, Bedjaoui (2010) says, "[...] despite achieving literary success in the west, they are compelled to play an ambivalent role of preservers of their culture and at the same time being agents of change" (29). These immigrant writers also discuss the contemporary sphere on the individuals in multicultural societies. Their dilemma of choice of appropriating changes in native cultures invites a willing to forge new identities. This indicates that the global changes taking place in culture raised the issues of identity which first change to hybrid then to globalised identity. To save their identity, the diasporic women writers work as the "privileged native informers" (Spivak, 1997: 256). But they are often criticized for having lost touch with reality so that they can cater to the needs of the market forces and policies of writing. It is an acknowledged fact that without their nostalgia and receding memory it is impossible for them to recapitulate the lost homeland.

The questions of identity, migration, displacement and gender are a much relevant issues in postcolonial Arab literature including women writing of Arab diaspora. The second generation of women writers of Arab diaspora has reached a new pattern thanks to their multicultural experience which has clearly reflected in their writings. The new perception of ethnicity, race, and gender shift their concern to wider range of issues. Multiple identities of Migrant are closely examined in the words of Gijbert Oonk (2007) as he stated:

A situational perspective on identity is taken as a starting point. It is assumed that all individuals have multiple identities including, for instance, cultural, religious, gender, class and regional identities, which become relevant in different contexts.

(Oonk, 2007: 236)

In the context of contemporary global migration processes, ethnic identities seem to invoke the origin with which migrants supposedly still correspond. In fact, they are using resources of history to reinforce their origin. It is well acknowledged that time and space are key elements in shaping immigrant identities. The exilic sense which "translates the anxiety of (non-) belonging by evoking the ambivalence of losing one's birthplace while simultaneously attempting to adjust to the land of exile" (Mehta, 2004: 156). It has become a central subject in Arab diasporic literature and Arab women's writing in particular. This would justify the trauma of non-belonging of displaced people. Diasporic writers try to assert the basic truth that the harmony in the homeland can never be substituted. They have perpetually observed that all kinds of displacement whether it occurs within or outside one's own country bring displaced people in humiliation.

The economic imbalance between some Arab countries and the host ones to which Arabs migrate plays a major role in subjugating the Arabs abroad. Women Writers of Arab diaspora examine the problems of the economic rupture between third world and first world. They picture the exhausting efforts the migrants spearheaded to escape from humiliation. Such humiliation mars their self-respect and relegates them to the status of shadows and deprived of identity.

Diasporic women writings give a forum to the subjugated where they can raise their voices and brings out the unified notion of

homeland. Western critics point out that one of significant task in raising diasporic women subjects is the emancipation of indigenous women. They make a compromise between the western and native culture. Women characters often seek to secure themselves both in homeland and host land. The success of diasporic women writers and their growing recognition shows that they mostly project their own experiences through characters from their imagination. Diasporic women writers celebrate the collective identity as a natural outcome of their inbetweenness and unbelongingness state. However, differences in experience of the characters as portrayed by the diasporic women writers under consideration bring in certain notion about the pattern of diasporic life and existence.

4. Conclusion

Arab Diasporic women writers concern themselves with the issue of Arab feminine identity which is greatly shaped by globalization and internationalism. Their novels have witnessed a harsh time, but today they are now well accepted by Western critics. Arab Diasporic women writers struggle to assert their Arab femininity and establishment area of dialogue with men. These novelists provide education, entertainment and enlightenment to its readers and reflect certain historical and political references to be studied as new perspectives. Their writings also attempt to prove the point of feministic approaches. They reflect the inner dimension of individuals by combining the Arab women concerns and hopes. Increasingly, contemporary women novelists daringly explore the Arab women condition through the use of new fictional narrative. In this respect, it is distinct other texts, as they record Arab women's struggle with their cultural context. Arab Diasporic women's fictions have therefore provoked a considerable attention in the Arab world and abroad.

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