

The Oriental Women in some of Radwa Ashour's Novels: A Feminist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how feminist theory can be identified in some of Radwa Ashour's novels. It sheds light on the impact of the author as an Arab feminist in her portrayal of different female characters in some of her novels including *Al-Rihla* (1983), *Granada* (first published in 1994 and translated in 2003), *Maryama w-al-Rahil* (1995), *Farag* (2008), *Specters* (2010), *Heavier Than Radwa* (2013) and *The Woman from Tantoura* (2014).

Keywords: Oriental women, Radwa Ashour, Feminist.

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminist theory is the theoretical, fictional and philosophical expansion of feminism to explore the essence of gender disparity in a variety of fields. According to Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, a feminist is not restricted to be a woman; however, the word feminist can refer to both a man and a woman calling for equality between both sexes in the political and social life " ...within or outside the movement..." (Baumgardner & Richards,2010, p. 54).

Feminist literature is different from that of women's literature. While the later depends on the biological difference between the two sexes, the former stresses both women's rights and their roles in the society as they perceived for themselves beyond gender roles and patriarchy. This is in parallel with Al-Assal who sees that a woman writer must express her female identity by writing about herself and women's cause that has been neglected so long as women are cruelly alienated "from their bodies" (Al-Assal,2008, p.38).

Feminism along with social movements aims at achieving economic, personal, social and political equality between the two sexes. In this way, the key principles of feminist practice will cover how personal experience is linked to real-life by representing the different manifestations in the social and political system. Thus, the process of achieving equality will be in parallel with the utmost end of

being equal. Feminism also explores how the power that has been used as a sort of oppression against women will be a way of reclaiming women's power on their own. Moreover, feminist thinking will change separations between the two sexes and replace them with dualism.

Kelly (1982) emphasizes the mechanisms by which feminism performs in the period from 1400 to 1789. In other words, Kelly summarizes the way feminism is ranked in society. First, feminism is considered a reaction against male unfair treatment of women. Second, women are marginalized to be a sexual desired object for men and thus not only the biology but also the culture would be the discriminative factors behind the superiority of males over females. Third, feminism seeks to call for "...opposing the prejudice..." (Kelly,1982, p.6-7) that is imposed upon women in the male-dominated society that considers men as superior to women.

In Nancy Hartsock's essay about feminism and the development of its strategy (1979), Nancy displays the procedures upon which feminism accomplishes its analysis. First, feminism expresses the daily life that stresses the real difficulties women suffer from. This makes feminism as a movement that looks real because it handles what clashes women have to undertake to strengthen their position in the society in which they live. Second, feminism is a changeable movement depending on what women encounter in the society they live in and in this way it modifies its perspectives to fit whatever she experiences in real life. Third, it transforms the "social relations" (Hartsock,1979, p.64) to satisfy the real needs of women.

In her essay Towards a Feminist poetics (1979), Elaine Showalter outlines three phases of development in feminist theory. The first is "feminist critique" (Showalter,1979, p.10) where the implied ideologies behind literature are examined. The second is "Gynocritics" (Showalter, 1979, p.10) where the textual meaning is exhibited. Finally, "gender theory" is the third phase where literary implications of gender structure are studied "(Showalter,1979, p.10).

Radwa Ashour is a university professor, a writer, a literary critic, a feminist and a translator. She follows the footsteps of her teacher Latifa Al-Zayyat(1993) who thinks that "... The liberation of the country came before the liberation of women. In a deteriorating society, the situation of women becomes unspeakably worse. As a woman myself, a woman's cause was mine. But I was not consumed

by this issue because I was interested in my country as a whole, which included all its men and women (Al-Zayyat, 1993, p. 284).

As a feminist, Ashour proclaims that the social and political context is as important as the personal experience because it decides the framework through which the events will take place. She also expresses how the culture where she lives is different from that before. Thus, Ashour says that "...we work within a culture that a thousand years ago accepted what it does not accept today, for it was less fearful and more self-confident. Today, we live in a disturbing anxious culture that has no self-trust" (Ashour, 2010). In this way, Patriarchy is not the only challenge facing Arab writers, but also "an external factor represented in the colonization of the region that had kicked out what remained of the small margin of freedom" (Al-Assal, 2008, p. 184).

Radwa Ashour wrote seven novels, two short story collections, and five criticism books. She won "the 1994 Book of the Year Award" from the Cairo International Book Fair for her novel "Granada". Her works have been translated into English, French, Italian, German and Spanish. She was awarded the 2007 Constantine Cavafy Prize for Literature. She died on 30 November 2014.

2. INSTRUMENTATION

The research displays how feminist theory can be applied to Ashour's novels through the depiction of oriental women. In an interview with Ashour, she observes the criteria upon which a feminist work is appreciated or not as she says "I am not a fierce supporter of feminist literature, but I don't negate whoever brings it into play. What is important as far as I am concerned is the application: would it be a smart discussion that takes into consideration the artistic and aesthetic values of the text? Or would it be a mere light discussion that categorizes the woman writer and believe women's writings should only be a burst of emotions or only be about the writer's relationship with men? What I mean is that we should widen the scope, not narrow it" (Ashour, 2010).

The research will tackle the following novels as entitled *Al-Rihla* (1983), *Granada* (2003), *Maryama w-al-Rahīl* (1995), *Farag* (2008), *Specters* (2010), *Heavier than Radwa* (2013) and *The woman from Tantoura* (2014). It surveys how Ashour succeeds in revealing the personal trauma of her protagonists

along with the social and political suffering of the whole nation.

3. METHOD

3.1 *Al-Rihla*

Al-Rihla is a diary profoundly occupied with political issues, literary works, and "people's struggles" (Hartman, 2015). Ashour (1983) describes it as the most crucial reason for "our times" (Ashour, 1983, p. 215). It is linked to Ashour's *Specters* as it depicts how Ashour spends her study in the United States when she was there in the 1970s. Ashour (1983) says that she Left Cairo on 30 August 1973. Her wallet held some cash and a couple of photos of her family. Then, Ashour emphasizes the effect of having Salah Jaheen 's cartoon which reminds her of the beloved melody of Soura that makes her ask if " our generation can freeze this moment in time like a photograph taken under our victorious flag" (Ashour, 1983, p. 212).

This memoir written by Ashour reflects people's struggles and the political suffering of her time. Ashour (1983) observes her desire to study "...Afro-American literature..." (Ashour, 1983, p. 215) because she is so enthusiastic to understand the Afro-American crisis and the sufferings Afro-American people endure in real life.

Thus, *Al-Rihla* reflects not only Ashour's journey but also that of Black Americans with whom she engages in the United States. As a feminist, Ashour expands her personal experience into that of the general political experience by making a comparison between the miseries of both her generation in the Arab world and those activists in America reflecting the spirit of the period she describes between 1960 and 1970. Hartman reveals that Ashour's Arabic identity and being a feminist affects her description of the fights of her female characters and Ashour's "deep engagement with Palestine"(Hartman, 2015, p. 210).

Furthermore, Hartman sheds light on how all liberation movements such as "Anti-colonial movements "(Hartman, 2015, p.210) are represented in Ashour's *Al-Rihla*. Hartman further explains that Ashour portrays the feelings of sorrow people experience after 1967 and "...the way members of it faced the challenges of the times with passion and intellectual honesty" (Hartman, 2015, p. 210).

3.2 *Granada Trilog*y

*Granada Trilog*y was first published in Arabic in 1994 and translated into English in 2003 by William Granara. It consists of three parts: *Granada*, *Maryama*, and *Al-Raheel*. The sentimental relation of Arab history with Al-Andalus foreshadows the pain and loss in all literary works. Granara describes Andalusia as a representative of Jihad in the Islamic world and the place in which religion overwhelms the world with peace and justice. Tolerance spreads everywhere that makes people from different religions live with each other performing their rituals in peace. Granara also observes how Andalusia is stable in the social, political and cultural fields of life. Thus, Andalusia's people make use of their culture and think of applying their knowledge to achieve scientific progress that flourishes the way they live. In this way, Andalusia becomes the basis "of artistic innovation and intellectual expansion" (Ashour, 2003, p.59).

*Granada Trilog*y tells the story of three generations of Abu-Jaafar's family during a whole century from the surrender of Abu-'Abdullah Ibn Muhammad to King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile in 1492. It follows the families through the tragedy of the Castilian takeover of their existence and the vigorous prohibition from Andalucía in 1609.

From a feminist point of view, both Salima and Maryama are best fitted to play the role of feminist who is not only oppressed but also miserable. Salima and Maryama are widely different. While the first was unable to understand defeat and destruction; the latter tried to resume her life in the new era representing the attempts of Andalusia's people to adapt to the new circumstances. Moreover, Radwa Ashour exposes the misfortunes of Abu-Jaafar's family along with miserable fates of the Muslims of Granada, the Natives of North America, or the women of Christian Europe. The lives of Abu-Jaafar's family are always shaped by either the new oppressive law of Castilian rule or their misery. Sa'd married Salima and they lost their child. Na'eem lost both his wife and his son after a dreadful attack by the Castilian armies. Hassan (Salima's brother) married Maryama who is later banished.

3.2.1 *Granada* (The First part of *Granada Trilog*y)

Granada is the first part of the *Trilog*y that expresses the personal suffering of Salima. It describes how Salima tries to understand death by exploring the human body via books and manuscripts. However, the novel ends with Salima's public execution for being falsely convicted of witchcraft.

Ashour (2003) displays the tyranny exercised against Salima as she is treated like an animal such as a hen or a rabbit that can be put in the basket. Ashour emphasizes how colonialists humiliate Salima because she represents the cultural identity of Andalusia because of her knowledge. Ashour describes her as "...tied in a basket." (Ashour, 2003, p. 91).

Salima is humiliated by the court that falsely accused her of guilt and she is treated offensively as Ashour says "her feet were inflamed and swollen from torture (Ashour, 2003, p.95). She is tortured because she cures the patients from illness. She uses her father's books that she hides from the Castilians who conquer Andalusia and impose restrictions on the people. Salima is burnt and Ashour describes how much pain she suffers from. Moreover, Ashour makes the protagonist question her calmness when she knows that she will be sentenced to death. Ashour observes that Salima wants to die because she cannot be able to adapt to this new era of power. Consequently, she did not cry and complain; however, she is quiet and does not humiliate herself to her enemies.

As a feminist theory, *Granada* exceeds the personal experience of Salima's death to express the political and social system by recalling witch-hunt movements in Europe and North America during the early modern period (1450-1750).

3.2.2 *Maryama* (The Second Part of *Granada* Trilogy)

Maryama is the second part of the trilogy that also represents the miserable experience of the feminist protagonist Maryame. It starts with Maryama's dream of having a better future. However, the novel ends with Maryama's misfortune as she was expelled from Granada, and died during her journey to exile.

After Maryama's death, her grandson Ali decides to escape the expulsion convoy. Ali enters Granada again and reclaims his grandmother's house. Unfortunately, he is prosecuted and jailed for three and a half years realizing his inability to stay in Granada any more for his sickness of his former acquaintances. The personal is also linked to the social and political system. Jose, a former Arab, exposes the different alliances formed after the Castilians ruled the city. As a result, there are two consequences of the new system of power. The first is the ethnic or religious bonds that are no longer at the Centre of this system. The second is the gradual demise of the community.

3.2.3 *w-al-Raḥīl* (The Departure)

Finally, *The Departure* is the third and the last part of the trilogy. It portrays Ali's life after he escapes

from Granada. Ali moves to a small village where Muslims are discriminately treated. Ali can find a place among them because of his knowledge of the Arabic language and his ability to read their old manuscripts and teach their kids. The oppression spreads everywhere via the unfair taxation system, the feudality adopted by the Castilians, the illegal punishments, and the restrictions of both religious rituals and using the colonialists' language. Thus, the trilogy ends where the trip to the other shore begins by transferring the remaining Moors across the sea.

3.3 Farag

Farag (Release) is Radwa Ashour's novel that describes the story of two political prisoners in different Egyptian eras. While Nada is a political prisoner during the Sadat era, her father faces political imprisonment in the Nasser regime. Although the novel's title metaphorically suggests a male name, the story is told through the young female protagonist Nada. Ashour (2008) describes the protagonist as follows:

"We see her as a smart unconventional young girl early on. In her day-dreaming and imagination, she does not hesitate to tell her mother "you ruin my singing" when she interrupts her to adjust her tone. She runs to the bathroom, locks herself up and sings in a louder voice. "The joy of expressing myself combines with the joy of teasing my mother"(Ashour, 2008, p. 9).

As a feminist, Ashour (2008) bestows on the protagonist's mother the talent of narrating stories to Nada and how she is "attracted by the resonance in her sentences, the light of her eyes and the sudden movement of her head when it joins her in the narration" (Ashour, 2008, p.76). In contrast, Nada's father doesn't either write or talk about his years of imprisonment. Also, *Farag* is a feminist novel that expresses the personal misery of Nada's mother as perceived from her perspective through the letter Nada finds after her mother's death. From her perspective, Nada knows why she leaves the man she loves, abandons her only daughter, and returns to her own country after many years of loneliness. The personal experience of the protagonist is also expanded to reflect how Egypt and the Arab world are strongly symbolized in the appearance of Farag, the symbol of freedom and hope. Thus, the novel ends with Nada going back to her aunt in the south of Egypt after her trip to Lebanon that is just liberated

from the Israeli forces. This is parallel with Ashour's announcement that political life shapes the personal life of the protagonist. Nada says

"I am the daughter of this land and this region that, really aspires for freedom, had paid a lot but has to pay more still" (Ashour, 2008, p. 209).

3.4 *Specters*

Specters is an Egyptian campus novel that can be analyzed by feminist theory. As Ashour (2000) puts it, *Specters* is "a semi-autobiographical" novel of both the author and her colleague (Ashour, 2000, p.91). It tells the story of Shagar, a teaching assistant of History at Cairo University who is insulted because of participating in the students' demonstration in 1971. It represents not only the false superiority of some academics in universities, but it also illustrates the effects of the political, social and economic conditions on such academic life. Ashour illustrates that she writes "by a process of association, and leave[s] it to the pen to move like a shuttle between the past and the present" (Ashour, 2000). Shagar's attitude reflects her belonging to the homeland and the dean's lack of consideration of national issues which stress P. R China's consideration of scholars as seizing authority over the students and lacking the devotion of "academic study itself" (China, 2010, p.137).

The researcher displays how feminist theory can be applied to Shagar's suffering of tyranny because of being patriotic as the dean proclaims that Shagar's participation in the demonstration performs by the university students affects her professional life of teaching in the university. He threatens her of being dismissed as she isn't a university member and she does not get her Ph.D. The dean says "I can dismiss you from the university!" (Ashour, 2010, xp.86).

Moreover, the research extends the feminist theory of Shagar's suffering into an overall misery in the social and political life as materialism and adaptation to circumstances spread everywhere increasing corruption, treachery and seizing the public properties. Ashour reveals that a professor can claim to write a book that is written by" a departed colleague "(Ashour, 2010, p.258) and when he is convicted of theft by the court, he may be hired as the head of the department as if he is rewarded for his corruption. Ashour further expresses that Shagar is sad because of the corruption surrounding the university life and Ashour emphasizes Shagar's reaction by saying " it's the university that's in the

coffin (Ashour, 2010, p. 260).

Throughout the novel, Shagar represents how feminist she is. She not only expresses the power practiced against her by the dean, but also she stresses her power by refusing to surrender and defending her political beliefs by choosing to resign. Qualey says that Shagar's reaction represents "the real Radwa Ashour daydreams of doing" (Qualey, 2011, p.32). In this way, Ashour describes how Shagar refuses to adapt to the exploitation she witnesses in her university life choosing to resign.

3.5 *Heavier Than Radwa*

Heavier than Radwa can be approached from feminist theory. It applies the feminist principle of how personal experience is linked to the political and social system. It is an autobiography of Radwa Ashour's agony not only for her physical experience as a cancer patient but also for her nation's suffering from an oppressive political system. Thus, the title is a symbolic representation of both the immensity of these two forms of soreness and the composure of facing them. It metaphorically uses the protagonist's first name 'Radwa' which is also a mountain in the Arabian Peninsula to stand for both heaviness and steadiness. This research surveys how these two stories of misery and struggle are interweaved from a feminist perspective. As for the personal experience of the heroine, the novel focuses on the protagonist's struggle against cancer as follows "... four operations to the head...to remove parts of skull bone and brain membrane...25 sessions of medical nuclear radiation therapy distributed over five weeks" (El Wardani, 2013).

On the other hand, the political experience is displayed through the Arab Spring Revolutions that are spread everywhere from Tunisia to Egypt and other countries to reveal the strength of crowds in front of the political tyranny. The demonstrators stand against injustice to call for their rights even if some were wounded or even dead. The writer describes how personal and political suffering can be united as follows:

"It is a coincidence that I'm now under the surgery in the hands of two surgeons who are using their scalpels in my head, and Tunisia is under fire after Bou Azizi has burnt himself. There is no relation between the two events, but I'm linking them because of history. I will watch the old man who says, "This is your chance, Tunisian youth..."The personal pain represents and

resembles the general pain" This man's face, hair, and speech take me back to my self-image and utter with my tongue, me, Radaw, the daughter of Meyyeh Mostafa, the woman in her sixties who got old for such a moment"(Ashour, 2013, p.48-49).

Conceptualizing power and challenging separations are other principles of feminist theory that can be handled by this research. Although both the protagonist and the nation are oppressed either by cancer or dictatorship, they can reclaim some sort of power in fighting them. Furthermore, the protagonist's painful experience of cancer is no longer expressed separately, however, it is reshaped in her nation's experience of regaining freedom In her article, Radwa Ashour on the Train of Images in the Egyptian Revolution, Elnamoury points out that "... To Ashour, in this outstanding carnival-like cultural confluence the Egyptians are marvelously employing all the inherited and acquired energies in service of the revolutionary act...The beleelah carriage sends greetings to the Egyptian people" (Elnamoury, 2012, p.3).

3.6 The woman from Tantoura

Feminist theory can also be manifested through Ashour's *Tantoura*, a historical family novel. Ashour portrays the young protagonist girl who is called Ruqayya who lives in Tantoura, a Palestinian village. The heroine lives in Palestine from pre-1948 and she suffers from multiple exiles: in Lebanon, Egypt, and Dubai. Ashour reveals that Ruqayya is uneducated; however, she is very smart and stubborn. Throughout the novel, Ruqayya tries to understand what she and her family encounter in Palestine. Ashour says that Palestine has great recognition in the Arab consciousness and that Palestine has deadly connotations with "massacres, refugee camps, terrorist attacks, war, occupation, checkered keffiyehs and suicide bombers (Ashour, 2014, p.10).

Thus, Ashour reveals that the protagonist's suffering results from her painful loss and diaspora. The novel also shows the fraught relationship between Ruqayya and her exiled children. As a feminist novel, the protagonist's painful experience of her own is accompanied to reflect the crisis of Palestine and the events of Sabra and Shatila. Ruqayya emphasizes how her memory flashes back to scattered images of the scenes of death taking place in Palestine and the miseries people endure as a result of their current occurrences. The Palestinians bury their relatives every day. Ruqayya reveals how painful this misery is by saying " when someone we love dies, we place him in a shroud, wrapping him tenderly and digging deep in the earth (Ashour1, 2014, p.50).

4. RESULTS

The research ends with proclaiming how Ashour efficiently portrays the oriental women in some of her novels of which the researcher has chosen *Al-Rihla* (1983), *Granada* (2003), *Maryama w-al-Rahīl* (1995), *Farag* (2008), *Specters* (2010), *Heavier Than Radwa* (2013) and *The woman from Tantoura* (2014). Throughout the narrative process of Ashour's novels, the researcher gets in touch with the general features of Ashour's portrayal of her female characters which are stubbornness, smartness and being fully aware of their personal, social and political crises.

As a feminist, Ashour uses the major principles associated with the feminist theory which can be summarized as follows. First, she highlights the protagonist's misery through a sequence of events leading her to misfortunes. She uses either a metaphoric symbol to link her pain to that of the nation as in *Heavier Than Radwa* or bring her up in a traumatic nation to strengthen her political and social consciousness as in *the woman from Tantoura*. In this way, the personal experience of the heroine will be seen in the framework of the social and political context as a whole.

Second, Ashour does not represent the image of oppressed women in a male-oriented society to show how humiliated women are. Instead, Ashour explores the ways through which power is reshaped not as a protagonist's excuse for her weakness but as a supplementary factor in strengthening women's identity. Ashour portrays a heroine that has a conscious self not only in her own life but also in the world as she portrays the image of the heroine in *the woman from Tantoura*. Although Ashour observes that the heroine is not well-educated, she also stresses that she is smart enough to contemplate the events that take place around her in her beloved nation of Palestine.

Third, the process through which Ashour describes her heroine's conscious suffering either personally or politically is more important than representing her ill-fated end. At last, Ashour perpetuates her vision in the novel to stress one of the principles of the feminist theory which is challenging separations. Throughout the above-mentioned novels under study, the heroines' ways of living are categorized by dualism. Ashour does not advocate her heroine's fate as the main core of her novels. She does not describe her heroine individually as well. However, Ashour puts her heroine in the larger context of the whole nation as being a manifestation of how the nation's burdens are much important than individual cases. Ashour also does not exert much effort in representing how women are exploited and dominated by men and the whole injustice surrounding women's existence.

Consequently, both men and women are seen not as separate. Instead, they are criticized and judged from the viewpoint of dualism. In this way, the researcher sees that Ashour succeeds as a feminist to describe and apply in practice the ways through which we could evaluate to what extent the aesthetics of feminist works should be.

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