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**Language and Style in the Women's Novel
in Modern Arabic Literature
(1958-2008)**

*THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE "DOCTOR OF
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By

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Abstract

This study aspires to investigate the linguistic stylistic characteristics of the Arab woman novel from 1958-2008. The starting point of the study is the hypothesis that the biological, psychological, cultural and social gender of the woman writer leave their impact on her linguistic texture and writing tools. The writer of this study traces the linguistic and stylistic phenomena synchronically due to her belief that the political, social, cultural and economic changes that the world in general and the Arab world in particular witness affect the woman's issue and her status, the ideological systems that she believes in, and the ways of expressing these systems.

In the theoretical introduction, the study deals with the most important conclusions that the critical movement in the West produced in the sixth decade of the twentieth century regarding the essence of the uniqueness of the woman's writing. It also shows the four approaches that the critical movement has introduced to explain that difference:

- *The biological approach*, which attributes the difference of the woman's literature to the structure of her body that defines the woman's emotional, mental and creative abilities.
- *The psychological approach*, which connects between the woman's writing particularity and her gender, and believes in the existence of a psychological feminine dynamism that imposes itself on the text, regardless of the cultural differences between the women writers.
- *The cultural approach*, which explains the difference by attributing it to the submission of the woman writer's consciousness, experiences and language to the social standards and powers that are active in her environment.
- *The linguistic approach*, which sees that the distinction of the literature of the woman writer lies in the specialty of the language that she uses.

There are several feminist ideologists who appeared within this critical movement. They believed that the woman writer should create a female language that is specific to her. Some of them tried to put a strategy to achieve this goal. The strategy was characterized by adopting the device of "punning" which is achieved through playing

with words, intensification of metaphors, and new metonymies that stem from the woman's body, the structural fragmentation of sentences, and the employment of the interrogative, the exclamation and emphatic forms. Above all, the woman writer should write in a feminine proud dialect, and should be confident in a reaction to the patriarchal society that pushed her to contempt herself for ages. This call was faced by reservation by another group of feministic ideologists, who doubted the idea of creating a female language, and argued that the suggested strategy is likely to make the woman's language characterized by emotion, spontaneity, and disorder.

The critical movement about the specialty of the feminist narration in the Arab world became active in the nineties of the twentieth century, and we can confine its most important conclusions in the following points: *First*, concentration of the writer on the woman's world, her issues and concerns. *Second*, the writer's focusing on herself, and diving into experiences and station in her personal life. *Third*, the employment of the style of self-narration through the first person narrator. *Fourth*, the writer's tendency to the employment of the emotional declarative style, to explanation, detailing, repetition, and employment of oratory sentences.

The study tries to explore the elements that grant distinction to the woman's language and style. They can be classified into three main axes:

The narrative style: The study deals with the narrative techniques that are employed in introducing the narrated material, its characteristics and functions. It also deals with the character of the narrator, its characteristics, and the points of view that the writer chooses for him. It also discusses the dialectic of the relationship between the writer, the narrator and the character, and the degree of the writer's success in achieving sufficient distance between her, on the one hand, and the narrator and character on the other.

- *Images and expressions:* The study explores the images and the expressions that the woman writer employs in order to recognize the degree of their connection with the writer's femininity, and investigate the semantic fields that they spring from. The study also deals with the characteristics of the language that the writer uses from the point of view of clarity, directness, ambiguity and symbolism, especially when she approaches the intimate feminine issues and with the record of taboos in her society.

- *Motifs and Symbols*: The study investigates also the motifs and symbols that the women writers use. It discusses the manner of introducing the motifs and symbols, the extent of their exposure or ambiguity, the specialty of the sources and semantic fields that they stem from, and the function that they perform.

The study consists of four chapters. **Chapter One** has the title, the Woman Novel: The Foundational Beginning deals with three novels that were published between the years 1899-1958: *Ḥusn al-ʿAwāqib/ The Happy Ending* (1899) by Zainab Fawwāz (1860-1914), *Bayna ʿArshayn/ Between the Thrones* (1912) by Farīdah Atiyyah (1867-1917), and *Arwā Bint al-Khuṭūb/ Arwa, Daughter of Woe* (1949) by Widād Sakākīnī (1913-1991). Chapter One starts with a short description of the cultural and literary scene in which the first Arab woman's novelistic attempts grew at the end of the nineteenth century. The discussion of these selected novels reveals that the writers in that period were not ready yet to get into a writing experience which was different from what was popular at that time due to the political and social circumstances that made the woman's involvement in that field conditioned by non- going beyond the legitimate male borders.

Chapter Two, the Pioneering Woman Novel, deals with the novel of *al-Bāb al-Maftūḥ/ The Open Door* (1960) by the Egyptian novelist Laṭīfah al-Zayyāt (1923-1996) as a sample that represents the period between 1958-mid-seventies of the twentieth century. Before discussing the selected novel, an introduction is given about the political and social conditions that prepared for the emergence of the feminist novel. The introduction deals with two different trends in the feminist writing. The *first* trend is characterized by individual rebellion and focusing on the woman's private issues. This trend appeared in Syria and Lebanon after their official independence in 1946, and achieved internal

Stability. During this period, they witnessed the rise of the bourgeoisie and the openness to the Western intellectual and philosophical trends. The *second* trend appeared in Egypt, which continued to succumb under the imperialistic rule till it finally liberated itself in 1956. This trend was reflected in the Egyptian women writer's commitment to the general national issues besides the women's issues and their dedication to the realistic novel that describes reality objectively and introduces messages about the challenges of the era.

On approaching the issue of *narrative technique* in *The Open Door* we noticed that the omniscient narrator, who knows everything, takes up the process of narration in the novel, which makes the narrated material characterized by objectivity, as it is mostly related from the point of view of the narrator rather than the character. In spite of that, it is noticed that the narrator has tendency to accompany the heroine, and most of the events take place in her presence. The narrator appeared in many scenes to be embodying her character, and performs the task of narration from her point of view. That's probably is what made many critics think that the narrator is female.

In view of this, it can be argued that the writer deliberately combines between the *objective point of view* of the narrator, which enables her to disseminate her ideological system, which she was calling for at the personal level in all the parts of her work and to deal with the general political, national and social issues, which would not be introduced from the point of view of the heroine, due to her young age and her insufficient awareness of such issues, and the heroine's *subjective point of view*, which allows her to introduce the woman's feelings, her concerns, and her concept of the world around her in a direct, true and convincing way because they stem from the female self rather than from an external objective point of view.

Regarding the employment of *artistic imagery* in the novel, it is noticed that they are mostly familiar images, and show no innovation or uniqueness. Besides, they are general images that are derived from various semantic fields, and are not connected with the world of the woman or her femininity. It is also noticed that most of the images or comparisons are so open that the writer gives a special effort to point out their indication and to detail the common features of comparison, which decreases the rhetorical effect and symbolism, and refers the reader back to the unique characteristic that is attributed to the woman's language - her tendency to detailing and elaborate description, which seems to originate from her desire to be sure that she has conveyed her thought.

The language that the writer uses in the description of the woman's motions is figurative language that is abundant with emotional utterances that silently refer to the feelings of her attraction to the man. As the heroine grows up physically and psychologically, associations that express excitement and desire that come over the woman's body. In spite of that, the kinetic verbs continue to be the man's share in the

man-woman relationship. The man appears to be the active partner. He initiates, and expresses his feeling and desires openly, while the woman appears to be in the position of the reluctant, lusted for, and desired receiver. In this period, the woman appears to be reserved in her relations with the man, and cautious in her ways of expressing them as a result of her fear that she would appear to be an easy one, or fall a prey or victim to the man's exploitation.

The writer's language reveals her remarkable interest in giving details of the things that surround her. She overuses adjectives and manner adverbs in addition to the description of the external appearance of the characters, including their skin color, eyes, and hair. However, clothes gain special interest, which is reflected in the writer's description of the specific fashion, kind of textile, and colors in their different shades and degrees. This interest can be attributed to a biological trait, which the woman enjoys having and man does not, in addition to psychological motives that the woman has and make her care to the aesthetic dimensions of things that surround her.

The motifs and symbols in the novel have strong relationship with the character of the heroine, and they are mostly related to the world of the woman, and specifically – the house, which is the main space for her movement and life, including the room, its window, its wall, the mirror. It is noticed also that the writer was seeking to reveal her symbols, as if she was worried that she might not be understood, or probably she wants to be sure that her point of view is conveyed out of care to her message of liberation that she has been holds. This great tendency to directness and straight forwardness and introducing a ready-made explanation to the issues is considered to be one of the shortcomings of the women's writing and implies the impossibility of applying the theory of *death of the writer* in this early period of the process of the woman novel.

Chapter Three, The New Woman Novel, deals with the novel of *Ḥikāyat Zahra/ The Story of Zahra* (1980) by the Lebanese writer Ḥanān al-Shaykh, (1945-). This novel was chosen to be a representative sample of the novels that were published in the period between the mid-seventies to the mid-nineties of the twentieth century. The chapter starts with an introduction about the prominent political events that prepared for a sharp turn in the women writers' general consciousness, including the intellectual, linguistic and stylistic aspects of their works. It also reveals that the 1967 War and the changes that followed in a number of the Arab countries, and the Civil War in Lebanon

which started in 1975, urged the women writers' enthusiasm, and pushed them to get out of the closed circle of the "I" to describe the reality of their countries and treat their urgent problems. That period has such projections on the language and style that the women writers became more willing to adopt the techniques of the modern novel especially the novel of the *stream of consciousness* that serves their need to describe women in crisis, whose private crises are doubled by wars and national tragedies.

The introduction is followed by a description and discussion of the most important stations in the life of the writer, which found out that the writer intends to interweave her life story with the life of the heroine in her novel, especially in the negative painful aspects. The reader realizes here that the writer does not free herself from herself or describes a rosy reality that she dreams of, but deliberately displays her wounds within the folds of her work as she displays the wounds of homeland as an instrument to treat her wounds and reach reconciliation with herself and her reality, and thus, she probably increases the opportunities of building what has been destroyed. In addition, the writer clearly exploits her novel to disseminate in its folds her attitude about the Lebanese Civil War and her opinions regarding a number of general Arab issues. This period confirms also the difficulty of applying the theory of the *death of the writer* on the woman's literature. Ḥanān al-Shaykh is present in this novel through some events from her personal life and through her thoughts and opinions.

The Story of Zahra constitutes a significant leap in the process of the feministic novel. It proves the woman's ability to benefit from the developments and innovations of the general literary trend, and to employ it in the service of the feminist discourse. A number of critics of the novel agree that the novel is affected by the trend of the *stream of consciousness* for its interest in the character's consciousness, and its diving deep in its world. The writer's benefit appears also through the decrease of the univocal domination, which was popular in the pioneering feminist novels. Ḥanān al-Shaykh chooses to introduce her novel through three independent points of view of three characters: the heroine of the novel and two male characters. This variation of voices between female and male in itself constitutes additional innovation in the Arab novel in general and the feminist novel in particular.

The other benefit appears through the adoption of the phenomenon of fragmentation in exposing pieces of information and events by manipulation of the time line in an

intensive way. The novel is based on the technique of free associations and flashback of consecutive events from the near and remote past that are aroused by conditions that the character is living at present. This gains the novel the feature of reality and ability to persuade, though it affects the degree of clarity, as this scattering in displaying the events and memories is compatible with the human being's consciousness and his intellect, which can hardly concentrate on one thing for a long period.

The writer's influence by the modern novel appears also at the linguistic level. It is noticed that the language is extremely connected with the character and its consciousness, as it is kept far away from the systematic standard language in order to fit the internal hidden world of the character. This consideration entailed variation of the language in the novel, and language acquired different features from one character to the other. Zahra's language is a poetic one, and it is abundant with syntactic deviations, which break through the grammar of standard language, and rhetorical deviations, which are manifest in the intensive discordant adjectives, and the frequency of comparison and metaphors. Probably, the most important note that can be made here is that most of the comparisons and metaphors originate from nature in its plants, living creatures, and its inanimate objects, which interlace with the nature of the character, its consciousness and the common features in the comparisons or elaborates in describing the likened to side of the comparison.

It is noticed also that there is intensive direct and straightforward presence of the body lexicon through the description of the woman's body, its excitements, its biological experiences, and the description of her sexual relationship with the man. There are no more words that are considered "taboo". The writer introduces all such words in a simple direct way without any attempt to evade or look for substitute ones. This daring style has raised doubts about the artistic level of the described images and experiences.

As said before, the *motifs and symbols* in the novel are connected intrinsically with the heroine's consciousness and the woman's, but the symbols that are of comprehensive human nature are fewer. The second feature that characterizes the motifs and symbols is the writer's tendency to reveal their indications in a clear way or by giving signals that lead to the indications that she intends to. By doing so, she harms the artistic level

of the novel, and spoils part of their effect on the reader's consciousness, because ambiguity that wraps the symbol gives it depth and effect.

Chapter Four, The Woman Novel at the Outset of the Third Millennium, deals with the woman novels between mid-nineties till 2008, and focuses on three novels: *Kam Badat al-Samā' Qarībah!/ A Sky So Close* (1999) by the Iraqi writer Batūl al-Khuḍayrī (1965-), *Banāt al-Riyād/ Girls of Riyād* (2005) by the Saudi writer Rajā' al-Ṣāni' (1981-), and *Imra'at al-Risālah/ The Woman of the Message* (2007) by the Palestinian writer Rajā' Bakriyyah (1972-). This chapter tries to prove that the woman novel is not merely a phenomenon that is related to women writers, but a literary reality that imposed itself and established its foundations, and the progress of time will not harm the specialty of this genre of literature or weaken it. On the contrary, the feminist discourse will be reinforced as long as there are women who write.

Before dealing with the selected novels, the chapter shows how the economic, cultural and technological awakening that overwhelmed the Arab world in the last three decades contributed to the expansion of the space of freedom that the Arab woman enjoys, and the increase in her awareness of the role of writing, and the availability of the necessary technical tools that are necessary for the facilitation of the writing and publishing process, and consequently, raising the frequency of publishing feminist novels and their number. Besides, the chapter shows how the political, social and security circumstances that prevail in the writer's homeland affects the contents that she introduces.

In spite of the claims of some people that the constituents of the modern world encourage the young writers to be centered on the self and disconnect themselves from the general social and political issues, the novels that are dealt with in this chapter prove the opposite. The three young writers, al-Khuḍayrī, Bakriyyah and al-Ṣāni' are aware of the world that surrounds them, and show their interest in the social and political issues in at discrepant degrees, in addition to their interest in the central one: the woman's issue.

The three novels reveal the strong relationship between the heroine and the writer, either through their inclination to rely on their biographies, or resemblance in identity: profession, origin, and belonging to the same social class, or through their intellectual

and ideological identification. Thus, the feminist novel in this period proves that the woman writer does not try to dissociate herself from the text; on the contrary, she is present in it in a way or the other and she seems to be talking intentionally about real intimate and true experiences, which her masculine society cannot accept. This can be attributed, *first*, to her narcissism and her love to speak about herself, and *second*, to her determination to assert herself, to resist the attempt to abolish her existence and to impose guardianship on her thought and her life style.

Just as the heroine's identity tells about the writer, the text, through its language and style, reveals a lot about the cultural and professional background of the woman writer, who leaves her shades on the tone and rhythm of the narration and the kinds of sentences and language in general. Al-Khuḍayrī works in the field of administration, and we suppose that this element explains the fast rhythm of her narrative technique, the density of her complete declarative sentences and the rarity of exclamatory emotional ones. The educational difference between her parents makes her language unique. It is a mixture of emotionality and rationality, which is full of feelings, especially feelings of sadness and longing. It has no exaggeration or elaboration, and does not adopt the style of mourning and complaint.

Bakriyyah is a plastic artist and a poet, and therefore, we notice that her language is elegant, abundant with figurative images, linguistic deviations, and declarative sentences in different types, and the reader clearly hears in it the sad tone of the female's strained self.

Al-Ṣāni' comes from the field of medicine, and has no literary background. Her language is characterized by simplicity, spontaneity, and inclusion of many colloquial expressions from different Arabic dialects, besides expressions from the English language. This linguistic mixture that keeps company with the merry dialect expresses in a sincere way the language of the new generation of girls, especially those who come from the 'velvet class' from the Gulf, who started adopting the characteristics of globalization, and allowed themselves to keep away from standard Arabic.

In *A Sky So Close!!* The heroine of the novel takes up the role of the narrator through the ten chapters of the novel, through the technique of self-narration. Consequently, the event and the characters are introduced from a unilateral point of view. It seems that

the writer tries to reduce the unilateral voice-control over the narration by bringing in some messages of another two characters in the novel. However, these messages do not actually perform this role because of their lack of the personal element. In fact, the messages do not introduce the consciousness of these two characters, but the writer makes use of them as a tool to describe the soldiers' suffering in the battles and the suffering of the Iraqi people as a whole in the shadow of the siege and war, exactly as she makes use of military communique' in order to document that period in the history of Iraq.

Narration in *Girls of Riyād* is subject to the witnessing narrator, who tells the stories of her four friends, the heroines of the novel, in electronic messages. It is clear that the writer employs a new narrative technique that she has borrowed from the Internet – a technique that is not customary in the Arabic novel in general. The novel starts its messages with introductions written in the style of self-narration through the first person singular narrator, telling about her feelings, and about the writing adventure that she embarks on. Then she turns in the body of the messages into a witnessing narrator to tell the stories of her friends, employing the third person singular, and resorts sporadically to the first person narrator. However, the witnessing narrator does not commit to the limits of her own life or what she hears from her friends, as the reader expects her to do, but she reveals information that is beyond the limits of what she might know from her friends themselves.

The narrator dives into the inner world of the heroines, and describes the minutes of their feelings and dreams. She also does not hesitate to approach the inner world of several minor characters with whom she has no relationship of any kind. Though the voice of the witnessing narrator is present all through the novel, the writer is aware of the necessity of the personal element in the novel. In some scenes the narrator lowers her voice and allows the character to reveal her own consciousness by herself, and thus she looks as if she takes the role of the character, speaks for her, and thinks in her mind. This applies to certain secondary male and female characters.

From the point of view of the narrative technique, *The Woman of the Message* appears to be more structured than the other ones. Besides the self-narration of the heroine, and the scenes of her introspection, the pieces of paper and messages, in which the female first person singular rises, there is also the omniscient narrator, who uses the

third person singular. This narrator often accompanies the heroine and alternates the point of view with her.

However, the two male characters in the novel are self-revealed to the reader through the narrator's closeness to their consciousness in some scenes and alternating the point of view with them, and through their personal messages in which we hear the male first person speaker. On the surface, the novel appears to be multi-vocal, and consequently, the reader expects the levels of language to be varied and multi-levelled out of consideration to the relationship between the character and its language. However, a careful reading to the novel would reveal a different fact, which is that the point of view of the heroine is the dominant one, and the language of the text does not introduce different levels, but is an extension to the poetic language that the heroine employs, and thus, the writer's narcissism is revealed through the domination of one level of language, which is the language of the heroine of the novel.

The three novels that are dealt with in this chapter reveal the writers' determination to break through the traditional principles of novel-writing and to cause a change in the form and method in which the material is introduced. For example, Al-Khuḍayrī inserts into her narrative texture news forecasts and military communique's that are copied literally, while al-Ṣāni' introduces her novel in the form of electronic messages, each of which constitutes a separate unit that includes all the components of the electronic messages. Bakriyyah, however, combines the style of diaries and messages with the style of novelistic narrative technique.

The language of the novels is rich in similes, metaphors, intertextuality, and distinctive female expressions that stem from different semantic and epistemological fields. By doing so, the woman-writer confirms her ability to subjugate the language and form to expressive patterns and structures that succeed in conveying her thoughts and notions.

The theme of the body and the scenes of love at this stage has taken a new dimension that implies that new consciousness started invading the woman's mind regarding her body versus the moral system that she has grown upon. This new consciousness resulted from several goals that the woman seeks to achieve. The *first* is: the writer's attempt to re-evaluate the woman's body after she was forced for generations to deny it and

consider it forbidden, impure, strange, and believe that it does not belong to her as much as it belongs to the males who are in charge of her, and to create reconciliation between her body, soul and emotion instead of separating between them. This explains the writer's interest in introducing scenes of love that join the heroine with her man without any feeling of fear or guilt. The *second* is: the woman's pursuit to emphasize that the woman's body has desires like the man's desires, and it has the right of having pleasure. This message is disseminated through her entering into sexual relations in the absence of love and emotion. The *third* is: her determination to deviate from the cultural, social and moral orders and systems that were established by the male society, in an attempt to establish a new system that acknowledges her humanity and rights.

The novels show that the thoughts and views regarding the subject of body and sex is characterized by a lot of newness, daring, and openness. However, the manner of expressing them and the degree of frankness and direction vary from one woman writer to another. For example, al-Khuḍayrī introduces daring scenes, but in a reserved and evasive language. Bakriyyah shows unprecedented sexual openness, and she deliberately deprives her language of metonymies and figurative expressions in order to make it invasive and direct. Though Al-Ṣāni' declares at the beginning of her novel that her intention is to break through the taboo and reveal lots of the affairs that occur in secret, she remains conservative in her description of the relationship between man and woman, she resorts to lots of hinting, and does not use any words of sexual suggestions.

The three novels reveal the interest of the woman writer in details, especially those that are related to the woman's clothes and her objects. Sometimes, the description takes the form of documentation of places, traditions and experiences that she has had. However, the motifs and symbols that the reader finds in the three novels are strongly connected to the woman's world, and her feminism. Most of them are frequently mentioned in most feminist novels through their process.

In their treatment of the motifs and symbols, the writers use three distinctive styles. Al-Khuḍayrī motifs and symbols are radiant with associations, but she does not hint at the entity of her symbols. There are fewer symbols in al-Ṣāni''s novel, which appears to be more spontaneous and direct. However, Bakriyyah's motifs and symbols are numerous, and the heroine, who constantly expresses her inner feelings, reveals her symbols through hovering around them, and giving signals that lead to their indications.

The three writers prove their abilities to write in a feminine language, though Rajā' Bakriyyah appears to be the most proficient one at building a distinctive feminine language that fits the language style that feminist ideologists, such as the feminist writer, poet and literary critic H  l  ne Cixous, call for. Bakriyyah deconstructs the ready-made linguistic formulas to build up new linguistic ones that are specific to the woman's body, her world and things, and her fields of interest. Her concentration is not exclusive to the woman's internal and external worlds, but on the woman's body as well. She lets out its emotions and needs, which were previously hidden and concealed.

Our observation of the woman novel along its process leads us to the fact that the woman writer is able to feminize the discourse, which has been subject to ideological, patriarchal and linguistic systems for ages. In the course of time, she has managed to change from being a (subject) in man's fiction to an active (self), and has become able to describe her internal, external and imaginative worlds according to her lived experience, her special female conceptions, and the language that is convenient to her and originates from her.

To sum up, the study does not claim that its conclusions constitute everything that can be said about the linguistic and stylistic specialty of the woman novel. In fact, it is no more than an attempt to approach this specialty. The woman novels that were published in the past and those that will be published in the future require further studies that deal with this aspect and trace the components of the feminine discourse, which is still interacting with the world that surrounds the woman.