

Memory Representations in the Arabic Feminist Novel: A Focus on Selected Narratives

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تمظهرات خطاب الذاكرة في الرواية النسوية العربية - قراءة
في نماذج مختارة-

الملخص:

تهدف هذه الورقة إلى الكشف عن تمظهرات الذاكرة في روايات "شهقة الفرس" لسارة حيدر، و"للجوع وجوه أخرى" لوفاء البولعيسى، و"شهباء كفراق" لأحلام مستغانمي. كل هذه الروايات هي نتاج أدبيات عربيات معاصرات عملن على تمييز الممارسة الخطابية النسوية في الأدب من خلال مواضيع عديدة تظهر حال المرأة في العالم العربي، وقد تم الاعتماد على المنهج الموضوعاتي في هذه الدراسة، وأظهرت نتائجها وجود ثلاثة تمظهرات مختلفة للذاكرة؛ حيث برز الألم النفسي في رواية سارة حيدر، وذاكرة الجوع في محكي الطفولة المعذبة عند وفاء البولعيسى، والذاكرة الحسية عند أحلام مستغانمي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: خطاب نسوي؛ ذاكرة؛ ألم نفسي؛ أدب عربي معاصر؛ طفولة معذبة.

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Abstract:

This paper study aims at uncovering the potential representations of memory in Sarah Haidar's *The Horse Snort*, Wafa Albueise's *Hunger Has Other Faces*, and Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Delicious as Parting*. All the tackled narratives are the products of contemporary female Arab novelists who worked on distinguishing the feminist discursive practices in literature through various themes that showed the position of women in the Arab world. A thematic is adopted for this study. The results revealed the occurrence of three different memory representations in the narratives. Psychological trauma appeared in Haidar's novel; the childhood tales' memory was prominent in Abuleise's novel; and the sensory memory was distinguished in Mosteghanemi's novel.

Keywords: feminist discourse; memory; trauma; contemporary Arab literature; tormented childhood.

Introduction

Memory is not just a cognitive faculty that stores and retrieves information, it is a set of life events and conditions through which one has struggled. As a concept, it is implied in several fields like psychology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy and literature. Indeed, narrators may be affected when they are delivering a story. It is the impact of memory that worked in the discourse of narrating events (Caruth, C; 1995, 21-23).

The post-colonial literature has brought several narratives that presented human life experiences that are full

of physical and psychological pain and harm. Literary works explored how impactful trauma. The latter has become a commonly analyzed theme where memories, introspections, retrospections, flashbacks and awful remembered moments are put in a narrative discourse. Authors mostly narrate their own wounds and sufferings at different stages of their lives (Rogers, N; 2004, 14-15).

The Arabic novel is a seductive cultural text that represents the status and conditions of Arab societies in depth. It accommodates some kinds of events and facts that no other literary genre could present in a single format. For that, some critics believe that it dominated other literary genres today and became more widespread, prosperous and sophisticated, until it became the "New Arab Diwan" as they put it.

The contemporary Arab novel has not been limited to the male voice only, it has also become adorned with a female voice. Indeed, the Arab literary arena is filled with significant female novelists like Ahlam Mosteghanemi, Fadhila El Farouk, Bayan Sharwana, Radwa Ashour, Suha Jalal Jawdat, Miral Al-Tahawi, Wafa Albueise, Leila Abouzeid, and Yasmina Saleh.

As we read many of the contemporary Arab women's narratives, the memory is found there. By reading these texts, readers would realize that memory has a special function in such fictional writings. The researcher stands at this point for description, analysis and interpretation purposes. In this respect, one might ask 'how can memory be shaped or represented in the Arab feminist literary discourses?' To deal with this problematic, a descriptive thematic and analytical approach is adopted. to study three chosen literary works which are: *The Horse Snort* (Shahqatu al-Faras) by Sarah Haidar (2007), *Hunger Has Other Faces* (Li al-Jou'a

Wujouhun Okhra) by Wafa Albueise (2006), and *Delicious as Parting* (Shahiyan ka Firaq) by Ahlam Mosteghanemi (2019).

First, the memory discourse will be presented with references from the target novels. Then, the common memory representations will be distinguished and signified in the narratives' discourses and in the combination of authors' realities and imaginations.

1. Traumatic Memory Discourse in Women's Narratives

1.1 Memory and Women

Memory is closely related to women in general and the female writer in particular. A female narrator provides and retrieves the finest details, even if they are of no importance. However, this retrieval process may weigh her down at times being unable to go beyond her sensitive nature and to keep something in her memory without the other. Thus, everything she goes through is stuck in her mind despite the pain and trauma of recalling.

When women write about women, Al-Ghdami (2006) claims, "the female voice is the one that speaks in the sense that writing is not a subject that tends to her individuality. However, she is a psyche attached to her gender and to her kind. The self, as feminine, transforms itself into an object, turns her dream into a written text, and makes her nightmare a language." (210).

In this respect, the novelist Sarah Haidar (2007) posits:

It seems to me that my head is weighing hundreds of tons and this intense, consciousness, intolerable of the outside world, in its slightest detail, with the smallest of its creatures ... I did not drink as much as it makes me

dizzy, and the amount of drug that Marwa brought me was not enough to let fireworks go into my soul. From where is the terrible feeling that the earth is in my guts? And everything inside has become of concern to me in some way. Where are these successive images rushing in my head? (12).

As if the novelist has been escaping her psychological state and memory to the mind takers -alcohol and drugs- that disrupt her mind and distract her from such conditions. However, a woman's memory, by its nature, insists on tiring her to find herself in front of accumulated piles of memories that cannot be forgotten.

2.1. Women and Trauma Discourse

Trauma occupies the largest part of memory. The latter records a picture of physical or psychological pain. As Sadek argued, the psyche's pain may occur without a pain in the body, and they may both become entangled in the human memory (Sadek, A; nd, 2). He further added, "pain is linked, first of all with love, through a strong conditional link that cannot be disassembled or moved ... a link that remains inside a person's brain cells until their death ... and feeling trauma is the restoration of a love experience, story, position, moment." (Sadek, A; nd, 28).

That is clearly evident in Sarah Haidar's novel "*The Horse Snort*". The pain in this novel resulted from the suffering of the woman / wife in a bitter silence, as a result of the man's preoccupation with his work, with his writings, in a fictional virtual world, which he soon got bored of. Haidar (2007) writes:

He is drowning in his papers as usual .. alone in a house

that reminds him of people he did not know, but they live in an illogical memory, linked to another life, to another era .. He searches in the walls and curtains for a grain of dust that may lead him there .. Then he remembers his last novel, and the problem of the man who does not want his wife to hear his footsteps as he left the room and the house at night, and he does not know why he wanted that since he chose to leave by stealth (5).

The wife here does not want to limit the man's freedoms and creativity for that she used to ask him to bring his literary works to the light. Yet, what was provoking her was that he was drowning in papers without any significant benefit. He was writing novels, stories, and plays, but he does not publish them; they are only read to the family and close ones. As if his goal is writing for the sake of writing and not publishing; and this is what upsets her. Neither he published in his life, nor did he ordered others to do that after his death. That seemed to her like playing a hiding game. Besides, she thought that if he neglected the affairs of his house, and did not take into account the psychological aspect of his wife, he had to -at least- bring his writings to the light, otherwise they would be useless.

Moreover, we find that what causes her disgust many times is that the man behaves as he wants, and practices his desires with complete freedom. Meanwhile, she was always busy with missions of housework and raising children. The lady reports:

He likes to sit near the window and contemplate this strange reversal in the movement of the universe, while his wife sleeps with worries, which has grown in the last days on the lands of silence and blue darkness .. his wife

sleeps like someone who writes a hard story thinking at every turn that she has come to an end, but a new path suddenly appears and forces us to continue (Haidar, S; 2007, 95).

The memory discourse in the female novelist's sense is apparent. For that, women were triggered to write for the purpose of creating the female presence in human reality (Ben Sayeh, L; 2012, 334).

At a time when the female protagonist scolded her husband for his stubbornness and negligence, this made her live a deafening silence and a devastating emptiness to the point where she felt the need to pursue illegal ways to satisfy her desires. She stood there through his writings reflecting his view of life and its characters, as if he was also suffering. She discovered that she is as useless as the characters. Indeed, she had to suffer in silence, live in emptiness, stop her heart from beating, or live as if she does not exist. She further narrates:

I have read all his writings as someone performing an autopsy on a corpse or someone exhuming a grave... The main characters cross his texts as transparent shadows that fade with light ... I discovered that all his novels are emptiness and not anything else. His protagonists are mere ghosts that sweep the desert of words without being a part of moving the wheel of events, without its absence having any effect on the progress of the whole story to its end... Existent and completely non-existent as the quiet sadness that befalls us in moments of extreme happiness. Exactly as a shadow that follows us every day, but we forget that it exists and we do not care about it (Haidar, S; 2007, 108).

Women -in general- and female writers -in particular- do not want to be superior to man, compete with and surpass him. However, they want men to feel them, acknowledge their contribution and never overstep their prerogatives. Countless are the times when a simple smile could stop their tears and when a caring gaze could glue together the broken parts from her heart. In this respect, Al-Jahiz (1964) claims:

We are not, nor is any sane person, saying that women are above or below men by a class or more; yet, we have seen people who treat them severely, despise them with great contempt and deprive them from their rights (151).

Therefore, when reflecting on what has occurred and what is taking place today, we can say that women have been mistreated and psychologically tormented. This made images of alienation and torture appear in such narratives due to the bitter reality they live or have to survive in. Such a reality reveals only devastation, distress, confusion and unattainable dreams.

2. Childhood and Body Memories in the Feminist Novel

1.2 Childhood Memory

The events in the narrative of childhood memory convey stories of children who have suffered oppression and torment as a result of social conditions, racial discrimination, verbal and physical violence, and other types of oppression, bullying, and psychological torture. This can be viewed in Wafa Albueise's *Hunger has Other Faces* (2006). It narrates the story of a little girl who was deprived of her family and lived far from them. The little girl was forced into estrangement at a time when she desperately needed a warm

embrace and a merciful heart to contain her. She lived with a pitiless woman who mistreated her. For her uncle, the Libyan girl was a successful project that would destroy the unfortunate child.

The concept of alienation was often repeated in the girl's speech. She portrayed herself in a strange country lost her needs with no shelter. The girl claims:

Cairo is a noisy awake city, that never calms down nor sleeps; here I am lonely, defeated, scared, exhausted and hungry walking on its streets. Faceless people walking ahead, no one of them dared to look at me or ask me anything. I used to see people walking quickly... I envied them with all my heart, all of them, going back to their homes where they would find sleep, rest, food and family. But I was alone wandering the streets without an identity, streets that do not know me, cannot tell that I am hungry and tired, nor can they -if tried to read me- to understand me. I am the forsaken stranger (Albueise, W; 2006, 71)

The poor girl was suffering in silence. She felt a strange as she is far from her family and overwhelmed by pain and hunger, and dominated by loneliness and fear. As her eyelids yearned for sleep, her heart has become infiltrated with envy. Thus, jealousy made her exceed the limit in craving something for herself only to envy, which is wishing the demise of others' blessing and grace (Al-Adawi, M; 1995, 7).

Perhaps, this kind of envy is not blameworthy because the poor girl's condition and suffering made her wish the blessing that someone else enjoys for herself. That might satisfy and rest her, or the blessing's satisfaction would be dropped from the envied until they become all equal (Al-

Adawi, M; 1995, 10). It is in such ways she could adapt with the other and share with them her hopes and pains without feeling marginalized and inferior.

2.2 Discourse of Body Memory

The use of the senses has a great impact on the process of good remembrance and retrieving because a huge amount of information enters our senses through the eye, nose, ear, tongue and flesh. Besides, full attention and awareness of these information transfers them to the long-term memory, and it is stored forever. If you are asked the lemon taste, for example, you would feel its acidity only by the fact of mentioning it; and if you are asked about jasmine you would recall its scent.

In this respect, the mental image of milk reflects the close relationship between the novelist Ahlam Mosteghanemi and writing. In her novel *Delicious as Parting*, she narrates: “Personally, the desire to write begins with my need to drink a cup of hot milk. Milk means to the Algerians what tea means to the English, and coffee to the Bedouins ... I need it to tune my mood and my anger that overflows and cools as quickly as the mood of all white-hearted people.” (Mosteghanemi, A; 2019, 18) The milk color -white- holds meanings and connotations that reach the point of contradiction. As it is a symbol of clarity, serenity, and purity (Weiss, S; 2013, 124), it indicates death, annihilation, and surrender (Omar, A.M.;1982, 69). That was the case of Mosteghanemi who felt for a while that she was almost perishing from the world of literature, and surrendered for five years long where she stopped writing.

Indeed, the psychological impact of memory is inevitably reflected on narrating authors, namely if there is a

sort of a physical pain:

Who admires my misfortune, should ask my tears ... and ask my pillow, and all mawawil and the wailing songs I was brought up with in my first emotional and political adolescence. Because of the amount of tears I shed at the time in front of Egyptian films and Arab news, I found myself today threatened by dried out tears and desertificated groves of illusions, so that the ophthalmologist surprised me by prescribing artificial tears for the treatment of the dry-eye disease (Mosteghanemi, A; 2019, 14-15).

The narrator could not imagine, as it cannot be, that one day tears are bought from pharmacies. Moreover, when the novelist reviewed the old tape of events, she only had to grab her pen, which, as she describes, is the most painful and most telling: "to write means to remember, and to remember means to be miserable, so there has never been a combination between happiness and literature, nor between happiness and the Arabs." (Mosteghanemi, A; 2019, 7).

Like every person who wants to avoid studying or writing, they make a thousand excuses and busyness to be distracted with. Eating food was an escape to Ahlam whenever she started to write the first page, and if only she blamed herself because she realizes well that she was only evading. Mosteghanemi (2019) adds:

Haruki became a friend who I talk to at night, I share my laughter with him whenever I jump out of my bed to the kitchen looking for something delicious to devour so that I can encounter writing, or rather, escaping from the moment of sitting down to write, so I say, perhaps Haruki would "devour everything" in the kitchen at this

late hour of the night like me going back and forth somewhere in Japan looking for a piece of Sushi to swallow it to write a new text (18).

Through this, she recalls Haruki's saying about people who are unable to write, and those who open the fridge at three in the morning searching for food. That was compared to her case, for that, the author seems challenged with some sorts of psychologically-painful factors that may stop her to write or lead her to think of other issues.

3. Results and Discussion

Throughout the three analyzed novels: Haidar's *The Horse Snort*, Albueise's *Hunger Has Other Faces*, and Mosteghanemi's *Delicious as Parting*, we found that the memory discourse is represented differently in terms of representation.

First, the pain memory was discursively apparent in Haidar's novel. The author referred to the eternal struggle between a man and a woman, emphasizing the patriarchal view that positions the man in the center and marginalizes the woman. That worsened the protagonist's psychological state when she focused on the dire consequences of her husband's neglect, including the pursuit of illegal ways to satisfy her desires and overcome her pain. The traumatic discourse shaped the memory of her pain when she reacted in such ways to express her repressed feelings.

Second, the hunger memory was discursively embodied in Albueise's autobiographical narrative. Several terms associated with 'hunger' were put throughout the novel. Being hungry for food, as real hunger, can be mirrored with being hungry for social stability, namely when described by mixed

religious feelings and senses of belongingness between the mosque and the church (hunger of religious knowledge). Apart from that, being hungry for emotions and empathy in a small community reflected the author's memories. For that, Abuleise was attacked after the publication of *Hunger Has Other Faces* and was outrageously accused as calling for Christianity and contempt for Islam. However, she was bold and frank in describing events and addressing the three prohibited topics of religion, gender and politics. The author, besides, uncovered oppression policies and criticized political and social situations.

Third, Mosteghanemi provided specific shape of sensory memory. The discursive elements in *Delicious as Parting* presented the theme of body memory, particularly the sensual and sensed representations of it. Since humans -and especially novelists- describe the smells of bread, traditional dishes, or musical instruments with their senses that lived them, they collapse directly into memory, and awaken an endless number of memories. The latter create several discourses if they meet to form an integrated fabric in literary works. As Mosteghanemi brought pictures of the past into the present, she could weave them back together as a combination of reality and imagination.

Conclusion

In the Arabic novel, memory comprises various facets that would generate salient number of discourses from one discourse. Moreover, memory is considered as a solid bridge that passes through barriers, cuts through boundaries and links together all that is contradicted. It is also related to history in the sense that it allows the author to recall past events, digs deep in them and even reformulate them to conglomerate them with the present and the future. For that, novelists can

attain tools of writing from their memories that convert all visual, audio and spoken forms of events into a written text.

The memory discourse is attached to women more than men. For that, the feminist discourse derived from memory is more effective and successful. Women, then, are not only good at storytelling and narration; they also possess an extraordinary ability to recall events vividly and reproduce them in a new literary format. Further, feminist discourses, in relation to memory, preserve their genetic component that makes it unique. Besides, childhood tales are retold through memory discourse where ordinary events are ignored while deep moments are preserved and implanted in the mind. Memory can also be (re)shaped and manifested as sensory comprising smell, taste and visual memories that transmit to us information with emotions. The latter is stored in the long-term memory to be brought out in creative writing tools by which authors can be inspired.

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