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Male and Female University Students' Perception of Feminism, Feminist Literature, and Gender roles

إدراك طلاب الجامعات من الذكور والإناث للنسوية و الأدب النسوي و ادوار الجنسين

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Abstract

Higher education in Algeria has known considerable changes by the inclusion of the teaching of feminism and feminist literature where modern gender roles have been bloomed. University students are exposed to read and analyse some different feminist novels in Literature classes that are written by famous feminist authors such as Angela Carter, Alice Walker, Virginia Wolf, Tony Morrison, etc. The paper aims to investigate female and male students' perception of feminism, feminist literary texts and gender roles. The perception of male students regarding modern female gender roles portrayed in feminist novels was studied by using a self-administered questionnaire to randomly selected 60 English students from Sidi Bel Abbess university. Results revealed that teaching feminism and feminist literature is a framework for female students through which to understand women's experiences in male-dominated societal institutions; however, male students still believe in patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity. Male students were found to still believe in patriarchy and have more traditional opinions on gender roles. Suggested recommendations are given to improve gender equity and equality.

ملخص

الكلمات المفتاحية:

عرف التعليم العالي في الجزائر تغيرات كبيرة من خلال إدراج تعليم النسوية والأدب النسائي حيث ازدهرت الأدوار الجنسانية الحديثة. يتعرض طلاب الجامعة لقراءة بعض الروايات النسوية المختلفة وتحليلها خلال فصل الأدب مثل أنجيلا كارتر ، أليس ووكر ، فيرجينيا وولف ، توني موريسون ، إلخ. تهدف الورقة إلى بحث تصورات الطلاب والطالبات عن النسوية والنصوص الأدبية النسوية وأدوار الجنسين. تمت دراسة تصور الطلاب الذكور فيما يتعلق بأدوار الأنثى الحديثة التي تم تصويرها في الروايات النسائية باستخدام استبيان ذاتي الإدارة لاختيار 60 طالبة عشوائياً من جامعة سيدي بلعباس. أظهرت النتائج أن تعليم النسوية والأدب النسوي هو إطار عمل للطالبات لفهم تجارب النساء في المؤسسات المجتمعية التي يسيطر عليها الذكور. بينما لا يزال الطلاب يؤمنون بالسلطة الأبوية والرجولة المهيمنة. النتائج أظهرت ان الطلاب الذكور لديهم آراء أكثر تقليدية حول أدوار الجنسين. تم في الأخير تقديم توصيات لتحسين المساواة بين الجنسين والمساواة. قدمت في الأخير بعض التوجيهات للوصول إلى مساواة و عدل بين الجنسين.

الحركة النسائية
جنس
تعليم عالي
الأدب النسوي
طلاب الجامعات.

1. Introduction

Students grew up with innate sex-stereotyped beliefs. They come from homes with traditional gendered roles. Some research suggests that parents are the primary influence on gender role development during the early years of life (Santrock, 1994; Kaplan, 1991). Therefore, students learn gender role identity and expectations since childhood. They become aware of gender stereotypes and engage in gendered activities, but they also start to adopt personality characteristics that show the ways they have identified with their understandings of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'.

Girls and boys themselves, through the influence of family, peer, and media cultures, often treat each other with avoidance and hostility. Boys in particular often refuse contact with girls and actively resist assignments and activities they associate with femininity (Jacquelynne.S. Eccles & Phyllis Blumenfeld, nd, p.59). The students have got previous knowledge about the stereotypes of naming sex-based harassment and its gendered nature (Jennifer L. Berdahl, 2007, p.426). They are to explore the role of gender in shaping their lives and their environment and the possibilities of a different future. Therefore, students are to become critical readers where they express their views and responses to the literary work. Students' background knowledge about gender and experiences may affect their reading. 'The reading of any work of literature is, of necessity, an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of some particular reader' (Rosenblatt, 1994, p.212). That is to say the reader of any text can be affected by the content of the literary text by responding positively or negatively based on the reader's attitudes and perception of the topic.

As literature is considered as a real portrayal of culture and society and it depicts people's real life, ideas and dreams in certain periods and space creatively and in an imaginary way even the social changes are often treated in literary texts, for instance, most of the feminist women writers write about the various objectives and goals of feminism and feminist theories and try to represent the femininity through the use of heroine protagonists to break down the patriarchal system. Many literary texts handle gender and

cultural issues have been productive by many feminist formulations of gender. Besides, feminist literary theory aims at developing critical consciousness in the reader about the operation and functioning of oppressive structures of patriarchal ideology in the text. This means teaching feminist literary texts in the classroom for the increase of critical awareness. A study showed that literary theory encourages and enables students to generate the new and innovative meaning of the text by utilizing their real-world experiences and their beliefs. The literary theory as a pedagogical tool also takes into consideration the principles of social learning and community learning (Munazza Yaqoob, 2011).

Students are engaged in dialogues and encouraged to interact and negotiate the meaning of a text in the light of their varied experiences of the world. He argued that a female student can form a feminist interpretative community that focuses on the gender issues of the text. Based on this guard an issue may be raised here that what about a male student, what an interpretative community he could be form if he dealt with women literature.

Since a feminist literary text is considered as a passage to intercultural reading in foreign language education and that reading is in common sense, a social production that can be disputed, discussed, questioned, formalized, developed and affirmed. The issue here is whether students engage in reading such literary work and what perceptions can a male reader and a female reader possess on feminist literature

The following question will be investigated:

-What are the female and male students' perceptions of feminism, feminist literature and gender roles?

This research study will envisage the following three central objectives:

- To investigate if students actively engage in feminist texts,

- To explore students' attitudes to gender as a category of literature and a category of literary and cultural analysis in the classroom.

- To survey to what extent students cultural background about gender roles and gender identity affect their

choices of reading.

It is hypothesized that concerning male students, increased masculinity will be associated with negative attitudes toward feminism and negative attitudes toward nontraditional gender roles, and in female students, they hold positive attitudes toward feminism and negative attitudes toward traditional gender roles.

2. Literature Review

Studies have shown that when teachers try to call on girls equally or include more curriculum materials about girls and women, boys will rebel (David Sadker, 1999). In Davies's (1989) study of preschoolers, she found that children did not have access to feminist readings of "progressive" fairy tales, even though the readings were readily available to most adults. For instance in 'Tony The Paper Bag Princess', a heroine princess rescues a prince who then criticizes her for getting rather grubby in the process. The prince exclaims that he is not a prince but is a bum and cancels her plans to marry him. Davies (1989) found that the preschoolers were more sympathetic to the prince than the princess.

Another research study has been carried out by Sonya Andermahar (2000) to examine students' perceptions of gender and feminism, in particular, showed that among the students who opt for women's writing modules there are different attitudes to the concept of gender. The research reveals the majority of students see gender as an important category of social experience and analysis shaping their reading choices and pleasures. However, at the same time, they resist certain feminist concepts which consider man as the other (Martin Montgomery, et al, 2007). A research study showed that during the researcher's study with his students in classroom girls decided to write a story with a girl heroine, boys disagree and found it boring. One of them said that if the girls were in the story it wouldn't be exciting at all. Girls would be playing house or doing dress up.

Moreover, Jennifer R. Spoor and Justin J. Lehmilller (2014) found that female participants have positive attitudes towards the course title (Psychology of Gender versus Psychology of Women) than male participants, regardless of the title

Many other studies have been conducted in the field of gender and education in the different educational levels to investigate the gender issues among students and teachers. However, little research has been done about gender perceptions of feminism, feminist literary texts and gender roles in higher education.

3. Conceptual Framework

The following section aims to provide the reader with a conceptual framework so as to help him understand the background of the study.

3.1. Definition of Feminism

The term Feminism refers to the thought that a woman's position is lower than that of man in societies that place both sides within different economic or cultural classifications (Taylor, 1992). In the eyes of feminists, women are not treated equally and do not obtain their rights in societies that organize their interests and determine their priorities according to the vision of the man and his interests, for nothing but that she is a woman; and in light of this patriarchal model, women become everything that does not recognize the man, or whatever he does not please himself. The man is strong and the woman is weak, the man is rational and the woman is emotional, the man is always ready and the woman is passive, etc. That perspective associates women everywhere with negativity and denies their right to enter public life and play a role in the fields of culture, politics and economics as the man and equally with him. In this respect, it can be said again that feminism is a movement that works to change these conditions to achieve that lack of equality, and it does not claim that women possess the truth, but rather try to say that men do not monopolize it (Jackson et al, 1996, p.692). Feminists insist that this injustice is not constant or an imperative, and that women can change the social, economic, and political system through collective action, and therefore the feminist endeavors aim to improve the position of women in society.

The idea that a man can adopt a feminist position is disputed. Tania Modelsky, for example, distinguishes between a man's contribution that involves analyzing and dismantling male power, and a man who speaks on behalf of a woman or out of a woman's position.

In the field of the study of literature, culture and cinema, feminist criticism takes the form of analyzing production and consumption mechanisms related to specific texts or practices from a feminist perspective, knowing that there are different ways of dealing, all of which are feminist, and all allow for pluralism within the framework of different knowledge and within the framework of feminism itself. Maggie Hamm says in the introduction to the book, "Feminist Trends", 'Feminism is a multifaceted movement in cultural and historical terms, and its goals have received support throughout the world, and the effectiveness of feminism can be evaluated if we look at the feminist discourse and the extent of its penetration in Thinking at the level of daily life' (Maggie Hamm, 1992). The term feminism appeared in the Western literature in 1895, while the concept of the term represented in a feminist act demanding women's rights began with the end of the eighteenth century.

As for the adoption of the term feminism in the fields of humanities, it officially began in 1910, in an international conference that was attended by prominent feminist Clara Zetkin, when the eighth of March announced an International Women's Day, which is the date adopted by the League of Nations to commemorate the civil disobedience carried out by workers in New York learned in 1895 to protest the miserable conditions in which they were suffering, and in which some of these workers died.

3.2. Feminist Literature

Feminist literature is fiction, nonfiction, drama or poetry which supports the feminist goals of defining, establishing and defending equal civil, political, economic and social rights for women (Wikipedia, 2020). Feminist literature means to interrelate feminism in literature where women used their pens to advocate their rights to change the traditional gender norms. Feminist literature is based on the principles of feminism and includes all literary works centering on a woman's struggle for equality and to be accepted as a human being, before becoming a victim of gender stereotypes. It includes the criticism of the role of women in society and the oppression of women. Authors of feminist literature tend to understand and

explain the difference between gender and sex. They think that while sex is natural and predetermined, the gender has been created by the society along with a particular perception about gender roles. They also believe that gender roles can be changed over time.

Feminist literature and feminist literary criticism came into existence in the middle of the twentieth century, the seeds were sown in the eighteenth century. Writers who wrote works with an underlying feminist principle include Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf as some of the earliest representatives of this movement. Famous works of feminist literature, both non-fiction and fiction, include Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, *Feminist Fairy Tales* by Barbara G. Walker, Alice Childress's *Like One of the Family*, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, *When Everything Changed* by Gail Collins, and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*.

Virginia Woolf is another feminist writer in her book "A Room Of One's Own", she tackles many feminist issues in this text such as women's lack of access to education as well as their economic and social dependence on men (Virginia Woolf, 1929). Also, Judith Butler wrote *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity*, in which she calls for a new way of looking at sex and gender. According to Judith gender performativity explains how gender identity is formed through a set of acts. She argues that gendered acts interactively constituting gender identity. (Judith Butler, 1990)

Women in feminist literature are always featured as the protagonist who usually does not readily accept the traditional female role determined by society. For example, in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, was a woman who knew her own mind. She decided to follow her own path towards what she wanted in spite of the societal pressure to choose a partner and to lead a life that was pre-decided for all women. Austen did not approach any of these things blatantly. Elizabeth did not put on an outward fight in order to choose her life course.

The entire work is subtle and the protagonist's only clear characteristic is assertiveness. This approach to such issues is very typical of feminist literature. Women in such works are ready to make their own decisions, to express their personal choices as well as dealing with the consequences of these choices, decisions, and actions.

Although every woman is a daughter, a mother, a sister or a wife, any work of feminist literature first deals with her as a woman. The identity of these female characters is not determined by these relationships, roles, or stereotypes. Rather, it is their choices and beliefs that define their identity and they are then associated with these roles (Questia, 2020).

3.3. Feminist pedagogy

Feminist pedagogy places the responsibility on the students not as the traditional measures of education being the responsibility of the teachers. It also suggests that the best learning environment should be one wherein students' opinions and ideas are regularly contributed to the learning process. The role of the teacher is to guide students into interpretations or conclusions that are founded in facts within any text or material (Arnold, 2000, p.10 ; Weiler, 1995, p.105)

Feminist pedagogy can be employed in elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, or universities. Since each individual is different and thus their background, motivations, ideals, are all diverse, discussion within the feminist pedagogy can be difficult as it relates to literature because it forces students to open up, share personal views or understandings, make assertions derived from facts, and accept that there are many right answers and that being different is not wrong. The goal of feminist pedagogy is mainly focused on equality. It challenges students to avoid controlling others. According to Shrewsbury there are three concepts that are fundamental assumptions and values for a feminist classroom (Shrewsbury, 1993, p.10)

1. Empowerment: Power plays a crucial role in students' development and learning. It is also an essential part of creating a creative learning community. In a feminist pedagogy, however, power is defined not as domination that limits power (as in an understanding

of power as domination), but as energy, capacity and potential. In a feminist classroom, the aim is to raise the power of all students. The teacher is no longer the unique source of knowledge and the classroom leader, yet she or he assumes the role of 'activation of multiple perspective' (Scering, 1997,p. 64)

2. Community : The feminist classroom cultivates a sense of collaboration, connection and care within classroom in which decision making can take place. Hence, students share a sense of responsibility for the learning of others, not just their own. Also, Collaboration helps the learner to integrate his or her skills of critical thinking in the feminist classroom and improving his or her ability with others (Shrewsbury, 1993, p. 11). Ultimately both female and male learners are brought together in a feminist classroom and act toward a more equitable society (Novek , 1999,p.235)

3. Leadership : Developing leadership is an important part of a feminist classroom. Both students and teachers share power opportunities and assume responsibility for teaching and learning respectively. The feminist pedagogy aims at increasing the students' interaction in the classroom through dialogue and stimulate their curiosity (Scering, 1997,p.65)

Therefore, students gain leadership skills through responsible participation in developing aspects of the course. While, the feminist teacher serves as role model and helps "members of the class develop a community, a sense of shared purpose, a set of skills for accomplishing that purpose, and the leadership skills so that teacher and students may jointly proceed on those tasks." (Scering, 1997, p.65)

3.4. Teaching Feminism and Feminist Literature in The Algerian Universities

During the last 50 years, there are considerable progressive feminist movements worldwide. In Algeria, for instance, feminism is taught at universities as compulsory modules for the last two decades. More Algerian female students are studying gender issues and feminism in our universities and abroad. They hold much awareness about the teaching and the practicing of feminism that requires much sensitivity and support. Teaching feminism in the classroom is

easy as students have different cultural and social backgrounds. They may not accept such subjects, notably boys. Besides, feminism has become of great interest among teachers. They try through their lectures and selected feminist readings to raise awareness among both female and male students to highlight the various principles of the different feminist theories, what feminism advocates for and its interrelation with literature. Therefore, students started selecting feminism and feminist literature as topics of their Licence, Master and Ph.D. dissertations where they tackle woman's desire to change her life and position in society to be a citizen with equal rights and duties.

4. Research Methodology

The study was carried out on a sample of female and male students at higher education that was randomly selected since they study Feminism and Gender studies as compulsory modules. 60 students selected randomly from the department of English at the university of Sidi Belabess. Students were in their 4th and 5th year of study (Master 1 and 2).

A quantitative approach was implemented to meet the research objectives. A questionnaire was designed to elicit female and male students' perceptions of feminism and gender roles portrayed in feminist literary work. The respondents were questioned after having lectures in the literature class. The questionnaire included mainly questions and statements to assess male students' perception regarding feminism and gender roles and expectations portrayed in feminist literary texts. The researcher used closed-ended questions to elicit quantitative data that will be easily processed and interpreted later.

5. Results and discussion

Of the 60 students who participated in the study 70 % were female and 30% were male. When asked about their opinions of feminism and studying it, 90.9 % of female students agreed on studying it and they thought that feminism is important to contribute to women empowerment. 60% of them thought they were superior to men and that they can be dependent on themselves. 60% of them had the idea to be equal to men in all different life aspects. While 95% of male

students claimed that they did not agree with studying feminism, they claimed that they did that just for examination. 80% stated that they would not support feminism. They declared that women had to respect the social gender norms not to alter and that they should be assigned to the traditional gender norms. 75% of them stated that women could not be equal to men. Just, few of the questioned boys stated that they respected women's call for their rights and their independence (Table 1).

Table 1:

Participants' attitudes about feminism and studying feminism

Statements related to feminism	Gender	I agree	I do not agree
I like studying feminism	Female	90.9 %	0.1%
	Male	5%	95%
feminism is important to contribute to women's empowerment.	Female	90.9 %	0.1%
	Male	/	/
Women are superior to men	Female	60%	40%
	Male	/	/
Women can be dependent on men.	Female	60%	40%
	Male	/	/
Women can be equal to men in all different aspects of life	Female	60%	40%
	Male	25%	75%
I would support feminism	Female	20%	80%
	Male	/	/

Table 2 shows the opinions of participants about social gender roles and activities. For the statement 'Women's role is to take care of children and household' 80% of male students stated that they agreed. For the statement 'Women's role is to serve their husbands and stay indoors' 70% of them stated that they agreed. As for the statement 'Women can go out for work and support themselves and their families' 85% of them did not agree whereas for the statement 'Men are breadwinners and the family leaders' 95% of them stated that they agreed. While 90.9% of female students did not agree except the statement 'Women can go out for work and support themselves and their families' 90% of them stated that

they agreed (Table 2).

Table 2:

Opinions of participants about social gender roles and activities.

Items related to gender roles	Gender	I agree	I do not agree
Women's role is to take care of children and do household'	Female	19.1%	80.9%
	Male	70%	30%
Women's role is to serve their husbands and stay indoors	Female	29.1%	70.9%
	Male	70.3%	29.7%
Women can go out for work and support themselves and their families	Female	90.9%	0.1%
	Male	25%	85%
Men are breadwinners and the family leaders	Female	59.3%	40.7%
	Male	95%	5%
Women's jobs are limited to teachers, nurses secretaries	Female	50%	50%
	Male	60%	40%

In our study, when the opinions of students about feminism and studying it in literature class were examined, it became salient that nearly all of the male students stated that they did not agree with studying feminism. It was observed that male students had more traditional attitudes than female students in most items related to feminism. On the other hand, it was found that the attitudes of female participants to feminism and studying feminism were more positive than men. In his article, Hanafi (2019) found that unlike boys, girls have positive attitudes toward feminism and the study of feminism in literature. On the contrary, male students believe that other more important themes should be highlighted in the course of Literature rather than feminism as similar to our study (Hanifi, 2019)

These findings demonstrated that students were not knowledgeable of feminism. It was suggested that students would happen to know about feminism only in university life. This indicates that male students hold negative attitudes towards feminism and teaching it at university; this is due to the preconceptions they inherited from their parents at home and also the gender stereotypes prevailing in the society that perpetuates male superiority and domination. Male students' attitudes to feminism in the Algerian EFL classroom teaching context are affected by their

cultural and social background since results revealed that the majority of them have traditional views about feminism and gender roles.

When the items about gender roles and activities are examined in our study, it is seen that the majority (70%) of the male students agreed with the item " Women's role is to take care of children and household". (70.9 %) of the male students in our study stated that they agreed with the item " Women's role is to serve their husbands and stay indoors ". Similarly, almost all the male students (95%) claimed that they agreed with the item "Men are breadwinners and the family leaders". This demonstrates that university male students have traditional opinions toward gender roles. It seems that they would live in a masculine society where women are marginalized and subordinate. This is confirmed when the male students did not agree with the item "Women can go out for work and support themselves and their families" (85%). Compared with, (85%) of female students were found to agree with this item while they do not agree with the items "Women's role is to take care of children and do household", "Women's role is to serve their husbands and stay indoors" and "Women's jobs are limited to teachers, nurses, and secretaries". This opinion explains that female students desire to have a share of talking to feminism issues. Most female students believed that feminism needs to be involved and taught through Literature classes or as modules to correlate with the growing recognition of women's rights in current Algeria.

In our study, it was observed that male students had more traditional attitudes than female students in their gender roles. Thus, this study is an important work for finding out the views of university students, which will shape the future of gender roles and provide resources for possible interventions in this regard.

6. Implications

Universities are able to inform and alter students perceptions for the better. The findings suggested that the majority of male students hold negative attitudes towards studying feminism and feminist literature as well as gender roles. They believe in gender stereotypes and injustices. Change will only happen

if students are offered with new and alternative ways of thinking about gender and gender roles. Exploring personal identity and culture can change individual's attitudes. Examining these issues critically can have a transformative impact on student relationships and could lead to change on a larger scale. It is imperative that our students go beyond the labeling exercise of feminist or not to understand discrimination and gender-role stereotyping. A facilitator is invited to organize a programing based on working with students to better understand the topics that are important to them around important issues. Based on the findings of this study on feminism and student perceptions, lecturers should pay attention to raise awareness among male students to be open minded and most importantly to be tolerant to reduce verbal and physical abuse of women.

7. Conclusion

When the views of all participating students regarding feminism were examined, it was shown that male students did not support feminism and studying it at university unlike females. Also, when the opinions of the participants regarding gender roles were examined. It was revealed that male students had more traditional attitudes than female students when the findings were analysed and evaluated, it was confirmed that the students' cultural and social background have an obvious impact on their attitudes toward feminism and gender roles in particular, and women and its position in society in general.

To change the negative attitudes among university male students who will be soon leaders and responsible. It would be recommended to sensitize university students about gender equality and the importance to be tolerant to raise their awareness about the subject. Also, it is appropriate to motivate the students to discuss the topic and to share it with peer education. As a result of this study, it could be recommended that :

This study should be repeated in groups which are larger and from different universities of different rigions with quantitatively and qualitatively.

In order to increase the awareness of university students on the importance of studying feminism

through feminist literature and the role of women in society, various activities should be promoted.

It is worth saying that men have a great role in the perception of women in a society, so it could be better to increase the awareness of men and their ability to emphasize in this topic.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest

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