

Feminising the Literary Language in the Novels of Ahlam Mosteghanemi

تأنيث اللغة الأدبية في روايات أحلام مستغانمي

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Abstract :

Since language and literature are generated by a patriarchal socio-cultural system which marginalises the feminine voice, women writers experimented with new techniques to destabilise the masculine linguistic and literary realm and establish their own feminine literary dominion. Drawing on the theories of Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, this paper discusses how the Algerian novelist Ahlam Mosteghanemi adopts an approach to language which produces writing that is feminine. In her novels, *Dhakirat al-Jasad* and *Fawda al-Hawas*, Mosteghanemi attempts to restore to the literary language its irrational "Semiotic" feminine character through her use of poetic language and cyclical narrative.

Keywords: Ahlam Mosteghanemi, cyclical narrative, Feminine writing, Law of the Father, poetic language.

ملخص :

نظرًا لأن اللغة والأدب هما نتاج عن نظام اجتماعي ثقافي ذكوري الذي يهشم الصوت الأنثوي، فقد جربت الكاتبات النسويات تقنيات جديدة لزعزعة عالم اللغة والأدب الذكوري وتأسيس هيمنتهم الأدبية الأنثوية. بالاعتماد على نظريات هيلين سيكسوس وجوليا كريستيفا، تناقش هذه الورقة كيف ان الروائية الجزائرية أحلام مستغانمي تبنت منهج للغة الادبية الذي جعل كتابتها انثوية. في روايتها، ذاكرة الجسد و فوضى الحواس، تحاول مستغانمي أن تعيد إلى اللغة الأدبية طابعها الأنثوي من خلال استخدامها للغة الشعرية والسرد الدوري.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أحلام مستغانمي، السرد الدوري، الكتابة الأنثوية، قانون الأب، اللغة الشعرية.

INTRODUCTION

Because language and literature are produced by a phallogocentric socio-cultural order (Kline D. , 2009: 206) which strips women of their own tongue and crushes contact among them, female writers feel coerced to devise other modes for recounting their stories and reconnecting with other women. In order to challenge the tradition which has silenced and marginalised them, women authors experimented with new techniques to crash the masculine linguistic dominion as well as pass on their own stories in diverse ways. Man has masculinised the literary text and shaped the literary canon which has become his own prerogative. The act of creating a literary text or the writing activity itself is being associated with the penis/pen metaphor (Aruna, 2010: 59). Women eventually have to re-establish their legitimate status not by joining the patriarchal artistic dominion but rather by destabilising its order and creating their own feminine literary realm.

Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva are mostly concerned in their theories with highlighting the difference of female's link with language and thus the need to recover a more positive female identity by escaping the canon marked by the traditional Symbolic Order. For those feminist theorists, women cannot basically step outside of phallogocentrism so as all at once to think and write unfettered by the laws of patriarchy that shape the linguistic discourse. Rather, women have to work like a virus from within masculine discourse in order to infect and radically alter it, hence "leaving open the possibility of a different language" (Irigaray, 1985,p 80).

In the light of the theoretical output of the abovementioned French feminists, this paper discusses how the Algerian novelist Ahlam Mosteghanemi attempts through her approach to language to create writing that is feminine by experimenting with narrative techniques that challenge the readers' expectations relating to genre conventions.

Because Arab male national narratives are characterised with rational "Symbolic" prosaic order, Mosteghanemi, in her novels *Dhakirat al-Jasad* and *Fawda al-Hawas*, is intent to deconstruct those characteristics by restoring to language its irrational "Semiotic" feminine character. The Algerian novelist disrupts the conventional forms and genres of her Arab compatriot male writers, breaking in the process, not only the modes of Arab literary traditions but also of structured, stereotypical beliefs and visions. She seems through her fiction no longer upholding the traditional norms of narratives, offering instead diverse trends of creative style. In order to destabilise the traditional Arab patriarchal literary realm, the novelist intentionally employs a number of techniques. While choosing standard Arabic (the language of the Father), Mosteghanemi attempts to feminise it in her exceptional way by appealing to a poetic narrative language where prose and poetry become one. Also, in order to bring back to literary language its genuine female character, she adopts an unconventional circular mode of telling her stories rather than the traditional linear one associated with men.

2. Feminine Poetic Arabic against Patriarchal Standard Arabic

Mosteghanemi has occupied a position in the modern Algerian male-led realm of Arabic novel writing by using Arabic language to re-inscribe Algerian nationhood outside francophonie. Nevertheless, unlike her Algerian arabophone male contemporaries such as Abdelhamid Benhadouga and Tahar Ouettar, whose use of Arabic is realistic and prosaic, Mosteghanemi attempts to feminise and liberate this language from the traditional yoke of the "Law of the father". In fact, the persistent

renewed attention to her novels (more than nineteen reprints in ten years and hundreds of thousands of copies) might be for the reason that hers are not novels in the Mahfuzian characterisation of the novel (Omri, 2008: 252). It has been asserted that in addition to the Algerian and Arabic context in which she sets her novels, Mosteghanemi's unique writing style's deviation from the conventional form of novelistic compositions lies at the very heart of the writer's unrivaled readership and recognition in the Arab world (Omri, 2008: 252-253). Indeed, the novelist seems to be concerned with unfettering Arabic from the chains of cultural and political traditionalism to the end of showcasing that Arabic is able of communicating a progressive apparition of the future of both Algerian women and men: "One need not liberate Algerian women, at the expense of Algerian men and the Arabic language, indeed both must be freed if women are to be free" (Tageldin, 2009: 483).

Mosteghanemi's novels dwell in a blank area between prose and poetry, becoming narrative counterparts to the stunning poetry of Nizar Qabbani. The poet announces:

The novel (Dhakirat al-Jasad) got me dizzy, and I don't usually get dizzy because of a novel. The reason for the dizziness is that the text I have read is similar to me, it is crazy, savage, human and sensual and against the law, just like me. If anyone asked me to put my name under this extraordinary novel, which was haunted by the rain of poetry, I would not have hesitated for a moment.

In his article, "Local Narrative Form and Constructions of the Arabic Novel," Mohamed-Salah Omri (2008) asserts that Mosteghanemi's texts inhabit the empty zone between poetry and prose [. . .] The local forms by performing love in a combination of two traditions of maddening love - the poetic legend of Leila and her mad lover (Majnoun) of the eighth century written in verse and Qabbani's poetry, on the one hand, and on the other, the tragic and violent passion that governs the Algerian novel *Nedjma*. (253)

In his assessment, Omri confirms the poetic character of Mosteghanemi's novel which is evocative of the eighteenth century Arab poetic-verse legends and Qabbani's poetry.

In *The Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva presents the notion of the "semiotic" (Lacan's Imaginary/Pre-Oedipal Stage) in opposition to that of the "symbolic" (the Law of the Father). The semiotic is tightly attached with the feminine (unconscious), it is the pre-linguistic condition of the child marked with contradiction, meaninglessness, disruption, drive-energies and rhythmic free play which identifies with mother-child communication and distinguishes no gender difference. Yet, this process is subdued by the infant's entry in the symbolic rational order. Kristeva describes the rhythmic pattern (semiotic process) as the "other" of language, in this way, she urges women to utilise that language in their literary productions. Indeed, she considers the outflow of semiotic energy in writing as a contestation to phallogocentrism while reactivating the tie to the repressed, instinctual and maternal aspect. Kristeva sees the poetic language of women's writing as one which undercuts mainstream conventions, disrupts logic, truth and identity through a heterogeneousness, a multiplicity of meanings and significations, what she calls "semiotic meaning". There is an aspect of language that is relational, and this aspect, according to Kristeva (1980), reveals itself through the quality of rhythm and musicality:

This heterogeneousness detected genetically in the first echolalias of infants as rhythms and intonations anterior to the first phonemes, morphemes, lexemes and sentences [. . .] this heterogeneousness to signification operates through, despite, and in excess of it and produces in poetic language 'musical' but also nonsense effects that destroy not only accepted beliefs and significations, but, in radical experiments, syntax itself, that guarantee of thetic consciousness (of the signified object and ego). (133)

While masculinity is traditionally associated with rationality, law and order, femininity is aligned with the semiotic, transgression and revolution: "Although originally a precondition of the symbolic, the semiotic functions within signifying practices as the result of a transgression of the symbolic [. . .] It exists in practice only within the symbolic and requires the symbolic break to obtain the complex articulation we associate with it in musical and poetic practices" (Kristeva, 1984: 118). The semiotic precedes the symbolic and is repressed by it, concurrently it "speaks" through and subverts the symbolic through music, art and poetry. For Cixous, woman's writing should be a "flow of 'luminous torrents', excess, never-ending and open, without hierarchy, repressive logic or control, and it can never be theorized, enclosed and coded" (Nayar, 2002, p 102).

Mosteghanemi blurs all existing boundaries of genres between the language of prose and that of poetry. In mingling these two literary genres, she gives birth to a new feminine literary language in which words flow smoothly, without being repressed by order, enclosed or coded. Her narrative discourse is characterised with a strong poetic rhythmic language or narrative poetry based on symbolic metaphorical constructions and loaded with contradictions, paradoxes, emotional visions and lyrical tone. In so doing, the novelist is in a way of restoring to literary language its rightful "semiotic" female character, stolen by the "symbolic" Law of the Father.

Departing from the conventional opening of the novel, a paragraph which prepares the reader to delve into the world of the story and its characters, Mosteghanemi begins *Dhakitrat al-Jasad* with the following expression: "What happened to us was love. Literature was all that did not happen" (Mosteghanemi, 2013, p 9). Such an original opening challenges the readers' expectations of the conventional introductory paragraph. Instead of reading a traditional opening such as a particular scene in a given time and space which introduces him the characters and the setting of the story he is reading, the reader is faced with an unusual opening phrase which creates in him the interest to probe the events of the story.

Moreover, Mosteghanemi's texts are exemplary of the integration of that is not integrated and merging the opposites. This is conspicuous even in the titles of her novels which come out as titles of poems rather than of fiction. At first sight, we come upon an atypical poetic language in her titles that infringes all traditions. By relating memory to the body in the title *Dhakitrat al-Jasad*, Mosteghanemi breaks the rules that relate memory to man and associating it here with the body is an association with that is unusual. Also, in *Fawda al-Hawas* (Chaos of the Senses), chaos is connected to the senses while it is usually related to objects or thoughts. It seems that Mosteghanemi consciously selects such eccentric titles to rouse the reader's interest: "What matters to me is sensation," she says in one of her interviews.

Mosteghanemi's narrative discourse distances itself from the traditional novel and its simplistic language into an evocative one awash with symbolism and metaphors. The recurrent use of allegories and metaphors in her novels is remarkable. For Cixous (1976), the regular use of metaphor and poetic language, in order to depart from the pre-established rules of male writing, makes women's authored texts best instances of *écriture féminine* (879).

The dialogue which takes place between Hayat and Khaled in Fawda al-Hawas about the white colour which his friend wears illustrates Mosteghanemi's metaphoric literary language. Hayat says, " في مدينة تلبس التقوى بياضا " "in a city that wears a white piety" (Mosteghanemi A. , 2017: 65). Here, Hayat compares the city to a woman and piety becomes a worn white dress. One of the demonstrations of the poetic language is the refutation of the common rule by imposing many contradictions in one sentence, such as the hero's response to Hayat's question: "He smiled and said, 'My friend isn't really happy. He just has an extravagant way of showing his sadness, that's all. White, for him, is actually the equivalent of black!'" (Mosteghanemi A. , 2015,p 62). The writing here mingles joy and sadness, white and black which is one feature of poetic language that merges the opposites and combines that cannot be combined.

Another case in point that reveals the use of poetic language can be traced in the following dialogue from the same novel:

I said, 'I've never met anybody like you in this city. So I'm curious to know what city lives in you.' As though he'd divined the aim behind my question, he retorted, 'My answer to a question like that won't do you any good. Like authors who live in one city in order to write about another, I live in one city so that I can love another, and when I leave it, I don't know which of the two cities had been living in me, and which of them I'd been living in. At present, I'm a vacant flat. I left Constantine for love, and she left me out of disappointment!' (63)

The writer in this dialogue uses metaphor to liken her hero's love to Constantine, a city that he does not inhabit, to that to cities that are not inhabited by the writers who write about them. His love for Constantine grows when he does not live in it but in another city just like the writers who live in one city to be able to write about another. Cities here are attributed both physical and spiritual connotations. They are places where we can live but also they can live within us. This is apparent in Khaled's statement that he is in the present a vacant flat, meaning that no city lives in him. Also, Constantine is likened to a woman whose lover has left her to retain his pure love for her while her leaving is due to her disappointment of the relationship.

In his reading of Dhakirat al-Jasad, Abdullah Al Ghudami claims that the novel is an outstanding subversion of the patriarchal language, where language becomes another heroine in the literary text. In his book *Al Maraa wa Allugha (Woman and Language)*, Al Ghudami argues that for a long time, man has controlled writing for his own advantage and woman becomes an object detained within his language. Like Kristeva, Al Ghudami deems that language was at first female and lost this femininity after man's occupation. As such, language and the act of writing have to be recovered by their female rightful owners as asserted by Mosteghanemi (2013): "We write to bring back what we have lost and what has been stolen from us by stealth" (57). Al Ghudami considers Mosteghanemi's text as the outcome of great efforts in the field of

feminine writing which makes a break into the world of language with its poetic narrative discourse.

3. Cyclical versus Linear Time :

Linear time has always been associated with the “masculine”, the public socio-political domain, the logical and the ontological, that of language. *Écriture féminine* on the contrary advocates non-linear, cyclical writing that circumvents “the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system” (Cixous, 1976: 883). According to Kristeva, first-wave feminists tried to find a room within men’s linear time, or “Father’s time”, the phrase she borrows from James Joyce to designate how men follow a linear time. Kristeva (1986) attempts to differentiate and draw attention to the sexual dissimilarities which render practices of the two genders different from one another (15). According to the theorist, it is ridiculous and even damaging to believe that women would fit into the masculine linear time, rather, women must appeal to the cyclic patterns relating to their time in the household including: preparing meals, doing house cleaning, performing laundry and caring for kids, and to make such cyclical acts principal forms in the same way as those of men. For Kristeva (1986), this is fundamental since “female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations” (16). In her attempt to escape the Symbolic phallogocentric order and to reclaim to literary language its female gender, Mosteghanemi follows a non-linear cyclical plot which makes her writings exemplary of *Écriture féminine*.

In *Dhakirat al-Jasad*, Mosteghanemi follows a cyclical time. The main character and narrator Khaled revisits during the course of the narrative critical moments in Algeria’s colonial history in an attempt to make sense of the present, and how far it has changed. The novel opens with Khaled’s return to Constantine after a long absence and slowly goes back over his failed relationship with Ahlam, his life as a painter in Paris, and his experiences in the Algerian Revolution.

Khaled can only cure himself from the demons of his past experiences by revisiting them, and not by distancing himself from them as is the case in the conventional linear plot of *Bildungsroman*. Mosteghanemi blurs the conventions of the traditional *Bildungsroman* by narrating the story of her hero as he goes through his retrospective which brings him back to his birthplace during the Liberation War and with this homecoming, memories of his early days, adolescence and youth are brought back to life.

Since memory operates in a circular, rather than a linear way, Mosteghanemi’s novel follows a circular plot, contesting the tradition of the linear plot, which is characteristic of the *Bildungsroman*, where the classically male artist progresses chronologically from childhood up to the point where he can declare himself an artist. Also, in the traditional *Bildungsroman*, the protagonist’s growth is mostly external, while Khaled’s is mainly internal.

4. CONCLUSION

Language is not the prerogative of men only and in this way should not be masculinised. It is initially female and therefore should reinstate its genuine gender at the hands of its female proprietors; men are mere illegitimate robbers. By feminising her literary language, through techniques of cyclical narratives and poetic musical language, Mosteghanemi is willing to hand back the female gender its legal position through the literary text.

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