

Arabic Women's Literature: The Terminological Problem and Stages of Development

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Abstract:

In the present paper we elucidate on the nature of the term "feminine writing" and review the history of Arab "feminine writing" from the so-called "Age of Revival" in the nineteenth century till today. We find three basic approaches to "women's literature", ranging from full acceptance to total rejection. As for the historical evolution of "feminine writing", we find that while at first, literature written by women did not deviate from the literary norms of their male counterparts, eventually and gradually women began to deal with formerly taboo topics, to express a growing self-awareness, and to demand freedoms and rights in a more mature and comprehensive manner.

1. Women's literature: the terminological problem

The term "women's literature" has raised numerous issues and has been a subject of debate and controversy among scholars, critics and writers, some of whom embraced the term enthusiastically while others rejected it off hand, when others used it unwillingly. Scholars and critics have ranged between support and opposition while trying to answer the question which surround the term: Is there a women's literature which differs from what men write?

As mentioned above, there are two basic positions vis-à-vis the concept of "women's literature". According to one, this is a legitimate term, since women have their own specific characteristics, and so does their writing.¹

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¹ The novelist Saḥar khalīfa supports the view that women's literature exists. She maintains that whenever a woman writes, it is "women's literature", although not necessarily "feminine literature". The difference between these two: the former is written by women while the latter deals with women's issues, specifically the problem of women in the Arab world (Muḥammad

According to the other, the concept should be rejected off hand since, so its adherents claim, no differences exist between men and women as far as literary craft is concerned, and one should not fall into the trap of assuming that they are distinct.¹ Both views can be found among men and women alike, critics as well

Barāda et al..1998. "Qaḍāya al mar'a al 'arabiyya: munāqashāt al māida al mustadīra: riwāyat al mar'a", *Fuṣūl* 17: 442-443). The literary critic Ḥusayn al Manāṣra and the author Dēzy al-Amīr both claim that feminine writing has characteristics of its own. Al Manāṣra says that we must recognize the fact that women possess an important attribute which appears in their writings and which does not appear in the writings of men about themselves or even when they deal with women, especially in narrative writing. The attribute in question is the fact that women sense the things which happen to them from childhood differently (Ḥusayn al Manāṣra. 2008. *al Niswiyya fī al thaqāfa wal ibdā'*. Jordan: 'ālam al kutub al ḥadīth, pp. 4-6). According to al-Amīr there is a women's literature and a men's literature, and that to ignore this fact means to refuse to recognize reality, since men and women have worlds which each have their own characteristics, some the same and others different (Aḥmad al Ḥamīdi. 1986. *al Mar'a fī kitābātihā: 'ntha burjuwāziyya fī 'ālam al rajul*. Damascus: Dār Ibn Hāni, pp. 13-14).

¹ Laṭīfa al Zayyāt rejects the term "women's literature" because, so she claims, it connotes that "feminine writing" are inferior in quality or that women's issues are less important, a judgment based not on an examination of such writings but rather on a prejudice against the writer's sex. This causes women's works of literature to be considered second rate, just as women are considered second rate in life and society (Laṭīfa al Zayyāt. 1993. "Shahāda fī al kitāba wal ḥurriyya" *al-Hiḥā*. Cairo, p. 12). She believes that the expression "women's literature" constitutes an attempt to denigrate what women write (Laṭīfa al Zayyāt. 1994. *Kull ḥādha al ṣawt al jamīl–mukhtārāt qiṣaṣiyya lil kātibāt al 'arabiyyāt*. Cairo: Nur, Dār al mar'a al-'arabiyya lil nashr, 1st edition, p. 10). Another woman who opposes the use of this term is the critic Khālida Sa'īd, who asks: "If one focuses on a writer's sexual identity (man or woman), does this not make us ignore general human, cultural and national aspects of the literary work, as well as the writer's personal experience and consciousness, and the work's artistic merits?" (Khālida Sa'īd. 1991., *al Mar'a, al taḥarrur, al ibdā'*. Casablanca: Nashr al fanak, p. 86). The writer Sihām Buyyūmi takes an even more extreme view; she claims that

as writers. Other critics take an intermediate position which recognizes that women have had their own unique historical and social experiences which made them prisoners of circumstances and caused them to develop a character of their own, but at the same time refuses to admit that these differences are caused by inherent traits which put bounds on the literature which they write.¹

In the present study, we shall see that despite the term's popularity and its dominance in Arab cultural discourse, it must be dealt with carefully. We may adopt the term "feminine writing", to refer to the attention which Arab women writers give to women's inner world, on the assumption that women possess esthetic and artistic characteristics of their own, which differ from those of men, and emotions felt only by women, so that men are incapable of describing or expressing them. It is based on our belief that no male writer, be he ever so sensitive, can truly encompass women's secret inner selves, especially the pain which Arab women feel. Only feminine writing has the power to express it. This makes what women write distinct from masculine writing. The feminine perspective which, in our opinion, gives a possible justification and validity to this term. If, however, the term "feminine writing" is used as a criterion of

putting women writers into the narrow corner called "women's literature" is a great loss to literature, and that women who accept this are dabbling in literature and not real writers; furthermore, they put these chains on themselves before anyone else did (Bushusha Bin Jum'a. no date. *Al Riwāya al nisā' iyya al maghāribiyya*. Tunisia: Manshūrāt sa'īdān, pp. 40-41). "Salma al-Khadrā' al-jayūsi's division of literature into masculine and feminine is mistaken and distorts, since the truth of the matter is that the issue should not be perceived from the perspective of the writer's sex but rather from the perspective of whether it is good or bad literature in content and style, irrespective of whether the author is a man or a woman" (ḥusayn Manāshra. 2002. *al Mar'a wa 'aḥqātuha bil ākhar fi al riwāya al 'arabiyya al filasṭīniyya*. Ammān: al Mu'assasa al 'arabiyya lil dirāsāt wal nashr, p. 260).

¹ Nāzik al A'rajī, *ṣawt al unthā – dirāsāt fi al kitāba al niswiyya al 'arabiyya*. Al Ahālī lil ṭibā'a, Damascus, 1997, p. 1.

biological classification, then we reject it, since in that case it would imply that women were inferior and would constitute discrimination between men and women.

Our view as expressed above is based on the fact that literature, provides a perspective which is fundamentally human, without any connection to a person's gender. Indeed, we cannot deny that biological and physiological differences between men and women exist, but that does not mean that the two sexes differ with respect to their creative abilities. Thus, when we agree to use this term we do so with the understanding that it stands for the set of features and attributes which can be repeatedly seen in the writings of women and which make these writings different from the "other" (male) literature; the act of creative writing in and of itself is not a criterion for accepting the term.

2. "Feminine writing": a historical overview

Novels and short stories written by women have gone through several quite varied and successive stages, each characterized by different types of core content, before reaching the current level of boldness in dealing with the issues which they address.

A. Women's literary awakening: the stage of imitation:

Women have certainly experienced masculine oppression of the worst kind. Controlled by patriarchal societies¹ and a masculine culture, women lived

¹ The anthropologist Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as a social system in which men control, oppress and exploit women (Sylvia Walby, 1990. *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p. 214). The term patriarchal society, according to Hishām Sharābi's definition, can apply to both comprehensive (society, state, the economy) or partial (family, individual) social structures, as a conceptual, political and social system based on concepts of authority, control, subservience and oppression. Commands and prohibitions are the two focal concepts around which life revolves in a patriarchal society from birth to death (Hishām Sharābi, 1987.

through ages of literary darkness and imposed silence, during which their role was limited to serving and begetting children, with no opportunity to study and develop. The result of all this was that women were absent from the literary scene, and their right to express their experiences was ignored. Since writing on their part was considered as a violation of the traditions imposed by society, and before that by the tribe, traditions which do not recognize women's right to express their mind¹. However, women did begin to attempt to extricate themselves from oppression and to combat the negative image which society had of their sex; this they did by writing.

Critics and scholars have differing views on when women first began to write literature. Some claim that the beginnings go back to pre-Islamic times, and that women at that time already played an important role in writing, both in poetry and in prose². Most critics, however, believe that the true beginnings of "feminine writing" are to be found in the nineteenth century, in the Age of Revival (*nahḍa*)³.

al Bunya al baṭrakiyya – baḥṭh fī al mujtama' al mu'āṣir. Acre: Dār al aswār, 2nd printing, pp. 11-18).

¹ 'ālī al-Qurashī, *Naṣ ṣ al mar'a min al ḥ ikā ya iḥā kiṭābat al ta'wīl*. Dār al madā, Syria, 2000, p. 56.

² See: Buthayna Sha'bān, *100 'ām 'alā al riwāya al nisw'iyya*, Dār al ādāb lil-tawzī' wal nashr, Lebanon, 1999, pp. 25-28; idem, *al Mar'a al 'arabiyya fī al qarn al 'ishīn*. Dār al madā lil thaqāfa wal nashr, Damascus, 2000, pp. 8-8; Muḥammad Ma'badi, *Adab al nisā' fī al jāhiliyya wal islām*, Maktabat al ādāb, Cairo, 1983, pp. 9-11.

³ Margot, Badran and Miriam Cooke (ed.). *Opening the Gates, A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*. London: Virago Press, 1990, p. xix; Bonnie G. Smith. *Global Feminisms since 1945*, London: Routledge, 2000p. 15; 'Umar Kaḥāla, *Al Mar'a fī 'ālamay al 'arab wal islām*. Mu'assasat al risāla, Beiru, 1978, p. 62; Miriam Cooke. "Arab Women Writers" in: Margot Badran (ed.), *Modern Arabic Literature*. U.S.A Cambridge University press, 1992, 1992, p. 444.

Women were given support in their first attempts at writing literature by men who understood the important role which women have in bringing about a social revival, and who therefore championed the cause of women and attempted to procure them their rights.¹ The first call for liberation came from Rafa'a al taḥṭāwi, who attacked Arab women's lowly status and called for educating women and freeing them from oppression. Then came Qāsim Amīn, who defended women's rights and called for making women better educated in order to protect the family and improve the way children are raised. Buṭrus al Bustānī played an important role in demanding respect for women. Others who championed the call for liberating women during that period were Luṭfi al Sayyid, Sa'd Zaghālūl, Muḥammad ḥusayn Haykal, Muṣṭafā al Manfalūṭī, ṭaha ḥusayn, and other writers and intellectuals².

These calls and movements had a distinct effect on women and engendered the birth of the feminine intifada in that same century, which was carried out by

1 Rashīda Binmas'ūd gives this stage the name "masculinization of the cause of women". At this stage there were men who demanded that women's issues should be heeded, and that education should be universal, so that women would have the ability to understand their problems (Rashīda Binmas'ūd, 2002. *al Mar'a wal kitāba: su'āl al khuṣūṣiyya/balāghat al ikhtilāf*. Morocco: Ifrī qiyā al sharq, p. 25).

² Women critics and writers themselves do not seem to have any problem in admitting the importance of the role which men have played in supporting the cause of women. Thus, for example, Āmāl al Sabaki explicitly admits that the credit for the birth of the women's movement belongs to men, who realized through the fact that they had made greater strides than women in the field of work and education, and so were able to call attention to women's inferior status (āmāl al Sabaki, 1994. "Itlāla 'ala al ḥaraka al nisā'iyya fī al qarn al 'ishrīn". *140*. Cairo, July 1994, p. 94; Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī, *Dirāsāt 'an al mar'a wal rajul fī al mujtama' al 'arabī*. Al Mu'assasa al 'arabiyya lil dirāsāt wal nashr, Beirut, 2nd printing, 1990, p. 805..

the first generation of Arab women writers, in the years 1886-1925.¹ Perhaps the most prominent feature which most of the women writers of that generation had in common was that they were fairly well educated, having been born into middle- or upper-class homes. They had an opportunity to see at first hand the freedoms which European women had obtained, and this helped them in their strivings to bring about an improvement in the lives of Arab women².

Another distinctive feature of these women of the first generation was that they hid behind pseudonyms. In fact, many Arab women writers have hidden behind other names, or concealed themselves through code names. For example, the writer Malak ḥafni Nāṣif called herself "Researcher of the Desert" in an attempt to hide her true identity; Zaynab Fawwāz took the nickname "Pearl of the East"; 'ā'isha 'Abd al Raḥmān called herself "Daughter of the Coast"; and Mayy Ziyādah occasionally wrote under the name "Isis Kūbiya", and on other occasions used the name "Khālīd Ra'fat".³ According to Nāzik al A'rajī the use of pseudonyms is a clear expression of a perception of inferiority of what was

¹ Miriam Cooke, "Arab Women Writers", in Margot Badran (ed.), *Modern Arabic Literature*. USA: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 444.

² *Ibid*, p.444.

³ Joseph Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 49. This development was not unique to Arab women, but had taken place previously in the West. A glimpse of this is provided by Ostriker: "English women writers feel that their spirits are filled with terror and fear, and their writings bear the stamp of cowardice and secretiveness" (Alicia Ostriker, 1991. *Writing Like a Woman*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, p. 1). This is what drove women to adopt masculine names such as George Eliot; the same goes for the sisters Brontë, who for a long time wrote under a man's name because their society would not have taken a woman writer seriously (*ibid.*).

known as "feminine literature", and also a borrowed elements of power which they assumed depended on masculinity and were absent in femininity¹.

At first, the voice of women was heard most clearly in poetry. Warda al-Yāziji was the first woman Arab poet. Her collection *ḥadīqat al ward* (*Rose Garden*) was published in 1867.² 'ā'isha al Taymūriyya's book *Natā 'ij al alah wāl fi al aqwāl wal af'āl* (*The Results of Circumstances in Word and Deed*) is considered the first story collection which depicts the feminine consciousness. Zeiydān calls it a pioneering text in the history of the Arab short story, one which possesses courage and a depth of presentation³.

In addition to the men who championed the cause of women and helped them find their footing in the world of literature, there were the literary salons, which played a major role in enriching and invigorating women's literature. These salons constituted an important authority, in which women played a decisive role and which gave women a good opportunity to express their own opinions and to exchange ideas with the intellectuals and writers who headed the salons. The best example of this is the well-known literary salon conducted by the Arab woman writer Mayy Ziyādah,⁴ which succeeded in attracting the deans of literature and thought in Egypt.⁵ Another important factor in bringing women and writing

¹ Nāzik al A'rajī, *ṣawt al unthā – dirāsāt fi al kitāba al niswiyya al 'arabiyya*. Al Ahālī lil ṭibā'a, Damascus, 1997, p. 29-30.

² Zeidan, *op.cit.*, p. 57.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁴ Ziyā dah is considered a victim of Arab feminine consciousness, just as Virginian Wolff was considered by many women liberationists in the West to have been the victim of feminine consciousness there (Buthayna Sha'bān, *100 'ām 'alā al riwāya al nisō'iyya*, Dār al ādāb lil-tawzī' wal nashr, Lebanon, 1999, pp. 38).

⁵ For more on the literary salons, their history, influence, and role in strengthening women's cultural standing, see Joseph Zeidan, 1995. *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years*

together was the Arab press, which gave women the opportunity to express themselves and so to develop their literary awareness and their thinking.¹ The magazine *al Faḫāt* (*Girl*), launched by Hind Nawfal in 1892, was the first women's magazine; this was followed by numerous others, whose main focus of interest was women, their literature, rights, liberty and future,² for example: *Anīs al jaḫīs* (*Close friend*; 1898), *Shajarat al durr* (*Tree of pearls*; 1901); *al 'arūs* (*Bride*; 1905); *Faḫāt lubnān* (*Girl of Lebanon*; 1914), and *al Khidr* (*Boudoir*; 1923).³ One of the most prominent women who played a role in the emergence of women's magazines was Fāḫīma al Yūsuf, who founded a publishing house which she called Rōz al Yūsuf. This became one of the largest publishers of its

and beyond. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 50-55; Sha'bān, 1999, pp. 28-30; Zuhūr Kirām. *Al Sard al nisā'ī al 'arabi: muqāraba fi al maḫhūm wal khīḫāb*. Casablanca: Sharikat al nashr wal tawzī' al madāris, 2004, pp. 51-52.

¹ Evidence for the importance of the women's press which appeared in that period and its standing is the fact that Salīm Sarkīs, when he published a journal in Egypt by the name of *Mir'āt al hasnā'* (*Mirror of Beauties*) he did not mention the name of its editor Maryam Muzhir, but then he did mention it in the journal *Sarkis* in 1907 (Anwar al Jundi, no date. *Adab al ma'a al 'arabiyya, al qiḫḫa al 'arabiyya al mu'āḫira, taḫawwur al tarjama*. Cairo: Maḫba'at al risāla, p. 7). It is also said of Taysīr ḫubyān, the author of the first Jordanian novel, published in 1940, had it printed in the newspaper *al Jazāra*, where it was ascribed to a girl, in an attempt to promote its sales (īmān al-Qāḫī, 1992. *al Riwāya al nasawiyya fi bilād al shām: al simāt al nafsiyya wal fanniyya 1950-1985*. Damascus: al Ahāli lil ḫibā'a wal nashr wal tawzī', p. 19).

² In the words of these magazines' editors; see Sha'bān, 1999, pp. 39-40.

³ For more on the subject of women's magazines, the issues with which they dealt, and their names, see: al-Jundi, no date, pp. 4-7, 30-69; Zeidan, 1995, pp. 238-248; al-Sabki, 1994, p. 95; Sha'bān, 1999, pp. 39-40; Miriam Cooke, 2001. *Women Claim Islam*. New York: Routledge, pp. 2-5; Anīs al Maqdisī, 1973. *al Ittijāhāt al adabiyya fi al 'ālam al 'arabi al ḫadīth*. 5th printing. Beirut: Dār al 'ilm lil malāyīn, pp. 271-274.

kind in the Arab Orient, with two magazines, *Rōz al Yūsuf* and *ṣabāḥ al Khayr* (*Good morning*)¹.

Women participated from the very beginning in writing about the women. This is exemplified by the first attempt at defining the feminine heritage, made by the Egyptian writer of Lebanese origin Zaynab Fawwāz in her *al Durr al manthūr fi ṭabaqāt rabbāt al khudūr* (*Scattered pearls on the classes of mistresses of the women's quarters*),² in which she described the achievements and the life stories of prominent women and drew a picture of the important role played by women in writing throughout history.³

The first generation of women writers produced works of various types. For example, some women story writers took their raw material from historical figures and events, from which they drew lessons which they used in expressing the issues of their day. Perhaps the best example for the use of the historical dimension is Zaynab Fawwāz's *ḥusn al 'awāqib* (*A good outcome*, 1895).⁴ On the other hand we also find the moral dimension figuring prominently in the stories of that period, as can be seen in Labība Hāshim's story "Shīrīn or the Girl of the Orient" (1907). The women writers of that period also dealt with some of the social issues associated with Arab women's sufferings in their relations with men, as in Labība Hāshim's *qalb al rajul* "A Man's Heart" (1904), where the author compares women's decency with men's egoism and perfidy. The

¹ Rashīda Binmas'ūd, 2002. *al Mar'a wal kitāba: su'āl al khuṣūṣiyya/balāghat al ikhtilāf*. Morocco: Ifrīqiyyā al sharq, p. 40-39.

² Al Makataba al kubra al am'riyya, Cairo, 1894.

³ Another of her noteworthy books is *al Rasā' il al-zaynabiyya* (*Zaynab's Letters*), in which she addresses issues of women's rights and place in society.

⁴ This has been described as "the first realistic historical novel which contains most of the elements of a modern novel, with respect to the characters, the topic, and the atmosphere" (Sha'bān, 1999, p. 48).

entertaining character in the story is evident, in which I consider it, as a trait of the writings of some women at that stage¹

At the beginning of the 1930s, with the increase in the number of educated women interested in literature, and especially in the art of the short story, new women writers appeared on the scene, in whose writings the feminine short story was divested of its tendency towards superficiality . This development can be seen in the writings of Suhayr al Qalmāwi in her short-story collection *Aḥādīth jiddāī* (*Stories of my grandmother*), and in ‘ā’isha ‘Abd al Raḥmān's collection *ṣuwar min ḥayātīnā* (*Pictures of our lives*). Other prominent feminine voices which reinforced the position of women writers were ṣophie Abdullah, Amīna al Sa’īd, and Jādhibiyya ṣudqī.²

In conclusion, we may say that the initial stage of “feminine writing” was characterized by imitation of the dominant literary style. The feminine voice was still feeble, imprisoned within the confines of a patriarchal society. The views expressed in “feminine writing” were in agreement with those put forth by their male peers. The writings of this period described the surface and did not penetrate into forbidden territory. They adhered to the dominant social and literary standards and did not develop unique artistic characteristics of their own. More than one critic has noted that the most prominent features of “feminine writing” at that stage were the sadness, pain and deprivation which it conveyed, its darkly pessimistic outlook, while at the same time it called for the liberation

¹ ‘Imān al-Qāḍī, *al Riwāya al nasawiyya fī bilād al shām: al simāt al nafsīyya wal fanniyya 1950-1985*. Damascus: al Ahāli lil ṭibā’a wal nashr wal tawzī’, p. 23.

² Her works are considered the richest short-story corpus in the history of Arab women's story writing, as revealed in her story collections *Mamlakat Allāh* (*God's kingdom*, 1954), *Baka qalbī* (*My heart wept*, 1957), *Shay’ ḥarām* (*A forbidden thing*, 1959), and *Layla bayḍā’* (*A white night*, 1960). See: Binmas’ūd, 2002, p. 42.

of women and showed women's position in society; "feminine writing" at the time were also inordinately influenced by European literature¹.

B. The stage of protest and rebellion:

Most critics are agreed that Layla Ba'lbakki's novel *Anā Ahyā* (*I live*, 1958) was the spark which set fire to the fuse of revolution and rebellion in "feminine writing" and planted the seeds of liberation in women's literature: "Commencing with the explicit declaration of a feminine conscience which publicly expresses its right to speak, to write, and to live, in an attempt to break away from the historically recognized division into a literature-creating entity (men) and an entity which is present as a object in the writings (women), women have changed from object to an entity in their own right, in other words from something perceived to an agent, who produces new formulations of conventional concepts".²

This rebellious, revolutionary trend was adopted by many women writers in the wake of the novel's publication, among them Kollette Khūri, Ghāda al Sammān, Imly Naṣrallah, Layla 'sēran, Aḥlām Mustaghānīmi, Latifa al Zayyāt, ḥanān al Shaykh, Saḥar Khalīfa, Salwa Baker, Muna Jabbūr, Layla al Aṭrash, and Nawāl al Sa'dāwi.

The feminine voices of that period did their best to combat the dominant image of women in society and to change the social system. In their writings they presented contrasting examples of men and women, and made desperate attempts to disprove conventional opinions about women: "Women writers searched for a wider horizon of liberty, in which women would find their missing equilibrium

1 See: al-Jundi, no date, pp. 16, 121; ḥanān 'Awwād, *Qaḍāyā 'arabiyya fi adab Ghāda al Sammān*, Dār al ṭalf'a lil ṭibā'a wal nashr, Beirut, 1989, p. 23.

² Zuhūr Kirām, 2004. *Al Sard al nisā'ī al 'arabi: muqābala fi al mathūm wal khiṭāb*. Casablanca: Sharikat al nashr wal tawzī' al madāris. 2004, pp. 52-53.

between their inner and their social selves, between what they wanted to say explicitly and what was shrouded in silence".¹

The rebellious and protesting tone of "feminine writing" in this period, The stage of protest and rebellion, was due to a number of nearly simultaneous causes and factors, the most important of which were perhaps the convulsions and disturbances which the Arab world underwent at the time. Fadwa ṭūqān noted in this connection that "my own coming out from the 'confines of the women's quarters' occurred during a dramatic stage in the history of the Arab nation; with the fall of Palestine the traditional structure of Arab society sustained a political, social and cultural shock".²

The feminine "literary intifada" in the Arab world against the restrictions imposed on them by society was carried out in the form of allusions charged with images and metaphors. Another factor was the increasing involvement of Arab women in social and cultural activities. More women pursued their education and entered universities, which provided them with an opportunity to participate in various cultural and political activities. Some women also left their native social milieu and moved to other countries in order to study or for other purposes. This gave them an opportunity to become acquainted with others' writings and cultural experiences, and liberated them from the restrictive control of their own societies. In addition, women went out to work and were able to occupy important positions. This increased their self-confidence and their awareness of their role in society, as active and financially independent members of that society.

¹ Nazīh Abu Niḍāl. *ḥadā'iq al'untha: dirāsāt naẓariyya wa taṭbīqiyya fī al ibdā' al niswiyy*. Dār azmina lil nashr wal tawzī', Ammān, 2009, p. 43.

² Fadwa ṭūqān, *Riḥla jabaliyya riḥla ṣa'ba – sīra dhātīyya*. Dār al shurūq lil nashr wal tawzī', Ammān, 3rd printing, 1988, p. 142.

Women's increased cultural and social integration also brought about a widening gap between women's painful position in reality and their expectations. This great chasm engendered among many Arab women writers a tendency to use their writings in order to demand the liberation of women and to call for improvements in their social situation. The fact that most of these pioneering women writers belonged to the middle class was yet another factor, since it meant that they had direct contact with Western culture and social ways, both in their studies at private colleges and in their visits to Europe. This generated a considerable dualism, between this new culture and the dominant traditions in their society. In this climate of change, they produced novels in which they expressed the inner world of women and presented an intimate and courageous picture of what they felt and wanted..¹

These social, political and cultural developments were reflected in women's literary and cultural output. In some of their writings women in the stage of protest and rebellion expressed a demand for a change in the social customs and traditions which were oppressing them, and characterized by sharp accusations against men, whom women held solely responsible for their oppression and backwardness.² "Feminine writing" during this period had a number of special

¹ Zaynab Jum'a, *ṣūrat al mar'a fī al riwāya: qirā'a jadīda fī riwāyāt Imli Naṣrallāh*. Al Dār al 'arabiyya lil 'ulūm, Beirut, 2005, p. 20.

² In the context of his discussion of the stage in which "feminine writing" were characterized by rebellion and protest, Nazīh Abu Niḍāl notes that the common denominator in the novels of that period was the antagonism between the sexes. Most of the heroines in these novels conclude that men are directly and solely responsible for women's oppression and lack of rights. The novels thus constitute a defense of the victim (women) and an indictment against the criminal (men). The critic mentions the titles of some Arab women's novels to prove his point (Nazīh Abu Niḍāl, 2004. *Tamarud al untha fī riwāyat al mar'a al 'arabiyya wa bibliyughrāfiya al riwāya al neswiyya al 'arabiyya (1885-2004)*. Beirut: al Mu'assasa al 'arabiyya lil dirāsāt wal nashr, p. 35.

characteristics, for example a specifically feminine courage, and a willingness to intera dark regions of the femininepsyche.

C. The stage of self-realization or modern feminine discourse

The second half of the twentieth century saw some quick changes in succession, including some important developments in the Arab world, as a result of the growing global openness created by advanced means of communication. These developments reached women as well. Women also made great strides in education, and so were able to enter a host of new fields of work, and gain more financial independence for themselves. At the same time male control of women weakened, as a result of the fact that Arab societies began to rid themselves of inherited customs and traditions which made women subservient and marginal, and because many of the long-standing opinions on women's inferiority were being challenged.

The emergence of women's movements in the Arab world, supported by the governments themselves, had a very strong effect on the new “feminine writing” discourse. Now, in contrast to the rebellion and protest which characterized “feminine writing” during the 1950s and 1960s, women writers began to present their own literary experiences with a lesser measure of direct animosity and explicit anger, and retreated from their call to focus on women as an adversary of men. Rather, they tried to mend the male-female split. They used their pens and voices to fight against the social and cultural structures which make oppression possible, instead of fighting against men and condemning them. “Feminine writing” began to free themselves from the oppressive dominance of men and to come out of their own shell in order to renew their attacks on cultural conventions, after they had been freed of their previous fears and became liberated.

“Feminine writing” of this period, the stage of self-realization show greater self-awareness, maturity and universalism in their demands for freedom and rights. But at the same time they are more insistent in their demand for full

equality between women and men. In this period, too, women writers also publicly broke taboos and dealt with topics which they had previously been forbidden to approach; for example, they no longer shied away from proclaiming their own physical needs as women. Women writers of this period declared that they were different from men writers, since Arab women now had new issues imposed on them, which no one could describe who did not experience in person being deprived of the dominance of male concepts in society. in addition to women's special mental and physical experiences, which men could neither understand nor express¹.

The stage of self-realization or modern feminine discourse showed a quick growth in the number of novels by women; the quantitative increase was accompanied by greater conceptual and artistic maturity, with women gaining better mastery of their language, using more creative artistic elements in their writings, and providing more profound perspectives through the use of mature techniques in their novels.² These substantive and stylistic innovations can be seen in the works of many women writers, such as Najwa w Huda Barakāt, Rasha al Amīr, Qamar al Kīlāni, Dīna Salīm, Samīha Kharēs, Hayfā' al Baytār, Fawziyya al Shwēsh, Aḥlām Mustaghānmi, and others.

1 Muḥammad Sawā'id, *Marōḥ il taṭawwur al mar'a fi al adabiyāt al 'arabiyya al ḥadītha, Miṣr namūdhafan*. Dār al hudā, 2007, pp. 143-144.

2 For more details on the evolution of artistic tools among Arab women writers see: Muḥammad Mu'taṣim, *Binā' al ḥikāya wal shakṣiyya fi al khīṭab al riwā'i al nisā'i al 'arabi*. Rabat: Dār al amān lil ṭibā'a wal nashr. 2007.