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**The Representation of Feminist Ideology in the Emirati Science
Fiction in Arabic**

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Abstract:

In comparison to Western science fiction, there is a lack in the publication of science fiction novels in Arabic. The absence of Arab women characters leads Nora Al Noman, an author from the United Arab Emirates, to write her novel *Ajwan*. The writer shows the significant role of this genre in dealing with issues related to Arab women. This article aims to examine the characterization of the major female lead, Ajwan, in an alternative world and how she represents the feminist ideas. It focuses on the reaction of the protagonist to the concept of gender in a patriarchal society. Feminism is used as a theoretical framework to analyze the subversion of gender roles. In a post-apocalyptic world, Ajwan, who belongs to the Havaiki, experiences otherness in Al Zafir. However, she challenges marginalization and misogynist thought. Consequently, the major female lead becomes the empowered woman in her Arab community.

Keywords: Gender; Feminism; Patriarchy; Arabic Science Fiction; Al Zafir station

Introduction

Through science fiction, writers depict the unknown in a futuristic world where everything is possible. In comparison to the Western world which witnesses a golden age in the publication of science fiction novels, there is a little interest in this genre in the Arab world. However, Nora Al Noman, an author from the United Arab Emirates, is one of the few Arab women writers who contributes to this field of literature through her novel, *Ajwan*. The author is encouraged to deal with issues that she is interested in such as the state of being a woman in the Arab society. This article seeks to analyze the characterization of the major female lead who struggles to have a good future in a post-apocalyptic world. The futuristic society, which focuses on the relationship between men and women, is a reflection of the actual world. In a male-oriented community, Nora Al Noman explains how Arab women must find escape. Therefore, this article examines the ways in which the writer tries to subvert gender roles through using feminism a theoretical framework.

1- The Feminist Ideology

In *Woman: Her History and her struggle For Emancipation*, B. S. Chandrababu and L. Thilagavathi state that the term feminism is derived from the Latin word “femina” which refers to “women” or “having the qualities of female.”¹ According to Jane Pilcher & Imelda Whelehan, this term stems from the French expression “féminisme” which means a woman “with masculine

¹ Chandrababu, B. S, & Thilagavathi, L. (2009). *Woman: Her History and Her Struggle For Emancipation*. Chennai: Bharathi Puthakalayam. pp. 18.

traits” or “the feminization of a female body.”¹ In *A Feminist Dictionary*, Cheris Karmarae and Paula Treicmler state that Teresa Billington Grieg defines this concept as follows:

Feminism may be defined as a movement seeking the reorganization of the world upon a basis of sex-equality in all human relations, a movement which would reject every differentiation between individuals upon the ground of sex would abolish all sex privileges and sex burdens, and would strive to set up the recognition of the common humanity of woman and man as the foundation of law and custom².

Therefore, feminism refers to equality between men and women in terms of social, legal, political, and economic rights. It changes the prevailing ideas and point of views about women.

The history of feminism can be divided into three waves. The first wave was in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries in the UK and USA. The main focus of the feminists was the promotion of equality between men and women in terms of property rights. Moreover, during this period, women’s suffrage became the center of interest of the feminist movement. In Britain, women won the right to vote, in 1918, through passing the People Act.

The second wave started after the World War II (1960-1980). The emergence of the Civil Rights Movement in the USA influenced women’s thoughts. They were encouraged to defend their rights since they were marginalized. The necessity of having a sex power and a gender equality were increased during that time. The publication of *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir contributed to the field of feminism because the writer analyzed in details the oppression of women. Through her nonfiction book *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan criticized the predominant thought that women are just child-bearers and persons who take care of the household. According to Barbara Ryan, “Friedan was protesting the limits of a family-centered role for women”³

The third wave started in the USA in 1990. It emerged as a response to the failure of the second wave. The “woman question” was the major question that

¹ Pilcher, J. & Whelehan, I. (2004). *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies*. Trownbridge, Wiltshire: The Cromwell Press Ltd. pp. 48.

² Karmarae, C, & Treicmler, P. (1985). *A Feminist Dictionary*. Boston, London: Pandora Press. pp. 158.

³ Ryan, B. (1992). *Feminism and the Women’s Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement, Ideology, and Activism*. New York, London: Routledge. pp. 42.

was looking for an answer¹. Feminists questioned the meaning of being women in the late twentieth century. The third wave witnessed a diversity in the point of views among women. Third world feminism started to compare between oppression of women within Western and non-Western patriarchal societies. In an interview with Sophie Smith, Nawel El Saadawi reveals that “class and gender” lead to the oppression and marginalization of all women in the world. However, women, in the Arab world, are affected by other factors such as colonialism and neo-colonialism². Arab women

Suffer from their husbands, from sexual assaults, from very, very marriage laws. They suffer from the oppression of the father and husbands, and men in general. So, the oppression of women is triple. Triple – globally by colonization, locally by the State and personally by the family. The man is oppressed globally by the colonization and locally by the state, but in the family, he is the oppressor of the woman³.

From the previous text, El Saadawi explains that in comparison to men, women suffer from triple oppression which complicates their situations in the Arab world.

2- The Emirati Science Fiction and Nora Al Noman

In his book *The Road to Science Fiction Volume 1: From Gilgamesh to Wells*, James Gunn states that,

[Science fiction is...] The branch of literature that deals with the effects of change on people in the real world as it can be projected into the past, the future, or to distant places. It often concerns itself with scientific or technological change, and it usually involves matters whose importance is greater than the individual or the community; often civilization or the race itself is in danger⁴.

Therefore, science fiction is the literature of imagination which allows its authors to present an alternative world that is not similar to the current one.

¹ Tong, R. P. (1998). *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*. Boulder Co: Westview Press. pp. 9.

² Smith, S. (2007). “Interview with Nawel El Saadawi (Cairo, 29th January 2006).” *Feminist Review*, 85, pp. 66-68.

³ *ibid.* pp. 66.

⁴ Gunn, J. (2002). *The Road to Science Fiction Volume 1: From Gilgamesh to Wells*. Lanham and Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. pp. vii.

However, In comparison to Western science fiction, there is a lack in the publication of science fiction novels in Arabic. Most of stories, in this genre, are written by non-Arab authors. Although the Arabic culture is very rich and diverse, it is hard to find an Emirati literary work with an Arab character in a futuristic world. Therefore, there is a lack in the representation of the lived experience of the Emirati women by female writers.

Al Noman, the Emirati science fiction writer, became interested in this genre at the age of fourteen. Science fiction movies such as: The Star Wars, and novels of Arthur Clarke, Frank Herbert, and Anne McCaffrey attracted her attention. As a child fascinated by this genre, she expressed this feeling by saying: “I was a Sci-fi geek” in an interview with Asfour Rana from *The National* newspaper¹. She demonstrated that when she was young, most of science fiction novels were written in English. Therefore, she decided to write science fiction stories in Arabic language. In an interview with the author M. Aurangzeb Ahmed, she explained that,

[Her] kids like [Her], fell in love with books, English books to be precise. And when I looked for Arabic YA [young adult] books, I found a handful, and none worth the effort of having to negotiate, bribe or intimidate my kids into reading. It was a lost cause. And I was left dejected by the fact that my kids would not read Arabic. So I decided to write, and since my favorite books are a YA were sci fi, I wrote what I knew, and fervently hoped that it was enough to get YA interested in reading Arabic [...]

[...] You see them [young adults and teenagers] at movie theatres, hungry for the next sci fi flick which always happens to be in English of course. So, they are interested in SF; but they don't find it in books. Those who read English find it easy enough. I believe we can not only turn this around through creating interesting SF worlds in Arabic; but we can also turn it around for a more scientifically oriented generation interested in studying science and majoring in research and development to turn ideas/dreams/SF into reality².

¹ Al Noman, N. (2016). “Sci-fi author Nora al-Noman: We need to work together. Nobody, male or female, can make it alone.” *The National*. Accessed March 8, 2022, from <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/sci-fi-author-noura-al-noman-we-need-to-work-together-nobody-male-or-female-can-make-it-alone-1.153816?videoId=5644227740001>.

² Al Noman, N. (2012). Interview by Muhammed Aurangzeb Ahmed. Islam and Science Fiction: Interview of Noura al-Noman. *Islamscifi.com*. Accessed June 12, 2022, from <http://www.islamscifi.com/interview-noura-alnoman>.

Al Noman felt frustrated because she did not find science fiction stories in Arabic for her kids. For that reason, she decided to write *Ajwan*.

Al Noman talks about her experience as an Arab woman who write in this genre. In an interview with Muhammed Aurangzeb Ahmed, she states,

Frankly, writing SF in Arabic is quite challenging specifically because there is little out there and the terminology has therefore not been standardized yet. I don't know if there is a stigma, especially in the past decade or so where there's been an increase in SF film popularity. I think Arabs would find it strange that a woman is writing SF – an Emirati woman writing SF is even stranger. What would a woman in an abaya know about science, creating worlds filled with aliens and building action filled plots?¹

She criticizes the ways in which others looks at her as a woman who writes science fiction. The predominant thought shows that women should keep away from the scene because they have nothing to do with this genre. However, in 2013, *Ajwan* won the Etisalat award and it is considered as a good contribution to the field of the Emirati science fiction.

3- *Ajwan* as an Empowered Woman in a Post-apocalyptic Society

Al Noman's *Ajwan* is set in a post-apocalyptic world. It tells the story of a young girl called *Ajwan*. This protagonist, who is eighteen years old, lives on planet which includes two different species. The first one are the Havaiki who reside on the underwater cities and the second one are the Okamo who live on land. Each community has its own culture, rules, and customs. *Ajwan*, who belongs to the Havaiki, wants to change her destiny by accepting her new job as a marine biologist, on the Okamo territory, because of the harsh rules of her society. She disobeys her parents and she marries Rakan who belongs to the Okamo. However, she feels nostalgic for her homeland and that is why she has returned to it in order to meet her parents. It is unfortunate that a meteorite has fallen on the planet. As a result, this meteorite caused widespread devastation. Along with 350 survivors, *Ajwan* is fortunate enough to survive the incident. In order to ensure her safety, she boards a military spaceship which belongs to the Consociation of United Planet. The spaceship heads towards Al Zafir, a military

¹ Al Noman, N. (2012). Interview by Muhammed Aurangzeb Ahmed. Islam and Science Fiction: Interview of Noura al-Noman. *Islamscifi.com*. Accessed June 12, 2022, from <http://www.islamscifi.com/interview-noura-alnoman>.

space station, because it is the only safe place. Because of harsh conditions, Ajwan learns how to adapt to this new change in her life.

Al Noman uses science fiction as a platform to depict issues that are related to Arab women. The inclusion of an Arab protagonist redirects the meaning of being a woman in the Emirati society. The major female lead has an Arabic name which means cove. Al Noman reveals that Arab women are central in her literary works and in an interview to *The National* newspaper, she explains that Ajwan “had to have an Arabic name because I feel that Arab[s...] need to be proud of Arabic names and concepts.”¹ Through inserting an Arab woman as a major character in her fiction, she is able to depict a world where Arab women can reach higher positions. *Ajwan* can be considered a counter discourse to Western science fiction which is dominated by Western characters.

In the novel, there are two different communities: the Havaiki and the Okamo. The author depicts them as enemies and this is why they live separately. Each community is preoccupied by its own space which lead to the failure of the establishment of a good connection between them. Ajwan explains this complicated relationship as follows:

The Okamo land-dwellers’ civilization is based on chaos and conflicting emotions. I wonder how this civilization has not yet destroyed itself. Without their relationship to her people [the Havaiki] about rejecting wars and settle them around the borders and spheres of influence, they [the Okamo] might have caused a destruction to the whole planet².

This hostility affects negatively Ajwan’s safety. The rejection of the any cooperation between the two communities leads to the destruction of the planet because they have not made any scientific plans in order to face emergency cases.

Ajwan wants to marry Rakan from the Okamo. However, her father rejects her wish,

Her father [Gathi] interrupted her with an unusual intensity [...] that is enough. You do not feel ashamed that you show us all these sharp

¹ Al Noman, N. (2016). “Sci-fi author Nora al-Noman: We need to work together. Nobody, male or female, can make it alone.” *The National*. Accessed March 8, 2022, from <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/sci-fi-author-noura-al-noman-we-need-to-work-together-nobody-male-or-female-can-make-it-alone-1.153816?videoId=5644227740001>.

² Al Noman, N. (2012). *Ajwan* (أجوان). Cairo: Nahdat Misr. pp. 10.

emotions. Is this Ajwan, the daughter of Haviki, or Ajwan, the Okamo? [...] This is what happens when we mix with the land-dwellers¹.

However, Ajwan does not accept the customs of her community and she disobeys her father.

I didn't come here to get some sort of license from you to marry the man I love. I just came to tell you, that's all. And stop looking at each other as if I am lunatic! I am a grown woman. I have the right to choose my own life partner, even if he doesn't adhere to your strict standards as the ideal husband to your darling princess daughter².

El Saadawi considers patriarchy as a big problem that prevents Arab women's progress³. Therefore, Ajwan fights against patriarchy because she has the belief that she is the only one who can decide her destiny. However, this decision costs her something else. Her rebellion and break of the rules make her an outcast. In other words, she becomes an "other."

The fall of a meteorite on the planet causes a massive destruction. In a post-apocalyptic world, she is obliged to go to Al Zafir station in order to survive. However, everything looks different and strange. She is in a new society that must follow its own rules. For the second time, she experiences the state of being an "other." Life in the outer space is very harsh,

Will you ask them? I'm worried, Mona. I'm not like you. My clothes do not suit me and my skin is dry most of the time, and the food does not fit my digestive system. I am afraid that if I can not find a solution soon, my life will never be comfortable, and I will have diseases that I do not know anything about them. How can I deal with this new situation?⁴

Ajwan starts to question the new living conditions in Al Zafir station. In comparison to her hometown, the climate is dry and the food is not appropriate for her digestive system.

Al Noman depicts her protagonist as a woman who is eager for education. In *The Hidden Face of Eve Women in the Arab World*, El Saadawi explains that,

¹ Al Noman, N. (2012). *Ajwan* (أجوان). Cairo: Nahdat Misr. pp. 11

² *ibid.* 71.

³ El Saadawi, N. (2007). *The Hidden Face of Eve Women in the Arab World*. London, New York: Zed Books. pp. 20.

⁴ Al Noman, N. (2012). *Ajwan* (أجوان). Cairo: Nahdat Misr. pp. 31.

From the moment [that an Arab woman] is born and even before she learns to pronounce words, the way people look at her, the expression in their eyes, and their glances somehow indicate that she was born incomplete or with something missing¹.

This why Al Noman demonstrates that Arab women must have an opportunity in education as men because gender does not constitute a problem to achieve higher levels. Before the fall of the meteorite, Ajwan has accepted the job as a marine biologist in the Okamo land. She becomes the first woman, from the Havaiki, who works for the Okamo.

By getting education, the major female lead can develop her intelligence to improve her situation. She struggles for her ambition to get a job in the Okamo land despite the refusal of her father. An Arab man do not like a brilliant woman because it makes him in a lower position than her. According to Muhammed Sharif Chaudry, it is mandatory on every Muslim, whether male or female, to acquire knowledge. A woman has the same right as a man to get education². In the Arabian countries, the authority of women is limited. The male is the state who takes most of decisions. Therefore, Ajwan has the spirit to break with traditions and the desire to change patriarchal culture.

Moreover, in Al Zafir station, she begins to acquire new skills through studying all the day. Her education helps her to develop the power of empath which is a strong emotional relationship with those who suffer inside. Through this mental power, she can understand what others hide in their emotions, especially for those who have PTSD, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. She can support them to recover. She wants to leave Al Zafir station because she believes that place will destroy her dreams. In other words, she will remain in the position of the “other” because everybody in the station considers her as an alien. However, through this special power of empath, she is able to convince the commander Rohani to leave this place.

Before the fall of the meteorite, Ajwan was pregnant. When she gives birth to her new born baby on Al Zafir station, she tries to raise him without the help of men. Unfortunately, when she decides to leave the station, unknown attackers kidnap her baby. She makes a research to discover who is behind the scene. She comes to know that the leader of these attackers called Al Tarek. This

¹ El Saadawi. N. (2007). *The Hidden Face of Eve Women in the Arab World*. London, New York: Zed Books. pp. 20.

² Chaudry, M, S. (1997). *Women's Rights in Islam*. Delhi : Adam Publishers & Distributers. pp. 116.

mafia man wants to become the president of the Planet Esplendor. He sends his followers to kidnap the baby because he has special capacities. Her baby inherits her unique power. Therefore, Al Noman wants to convey that an Arab woman who has special skill could be an asset to any community. Ajwan, who plans to restore her baby from the mafia, becomes the first Havaiki woman that stands against Al Tarek.

When she has left Al Zafir, Ajwan decides to become a strong woman in order to change her status as an “other” to an empowered one. This is why she joins the Special Forces which is a military group under the leadership of General Baz. This general trains her as a man with his harsh words,

If you don't stop thinking that everything which happens in your life is out of your control, if you continue to think that others control your life, if you don't change this impotent way of thinking, then others will keep manipulating your life and deprive you of the choice to shape your own destiny. Neither I nor an army of generals could ever be able to help you take control of your life¹.

Al Noman shows that an Arab woman has a physical power as a man. Within this group, she works hard to develop another power which is telekinesis. Through this new power, she is able to move objects at a distance by a mental power.

Ajwan resides in four different communities and she proves that she is the prototype of the feminist figure. In the Havaiki society, she breaks gender roles in order to pursue her dreams. In the Okamo land, she works as a marine biologist and she marries the man of her own decision. In Al Zafir Station, she develops the power of empath and gives support to other persons. In the planet of the Special Forces, she develops her physical and mental skills. Through this long journey, she transcends her trauma in a post-apocalyptic world and she becomes the strong woman of the future.

Conclusion

Through science fiction, writers depict the unknown in a futuristic world where everything is possible. In comparison to the Western world which witnesses a golden age in the publication of science fiction novels, there is a little interest in this genre in the Arab world. However, al-Noman's *Ajwan* can be considered a good contribution to the Emirati science fiction. The author

¹ Al Noman, N. (2012). *Ajwan* (أجوان). Cairo: Nahdat Misr. pp. 278.

succeeds in depicting issues that are related to Arab women. The major female lead shifts from the position of an “other” to the status of an empowered woman. She fights against patriarchy and she changes the meaning of gender roles in terms of education and physical power. Consequently, in a post-apocalyptic world, Ajwan represents the feminist ideas.

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