

Women's Voices: An Analysis of Arab Women's Poetry and Its Role in Empowerment

Aisha Ali Alkhulaifi, Mahidol University, Thailand

The Asian Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper explored the content and poetic style of Arab feminist poems that interact with race, class, sexual orientation, etc. The analysis featured three Arab poets namely Souad Al-Sabah, Ghada Al-Samman, and Fadwa Tuqan. They used poetry to empower women and challenge societal norms. This research used literary qualitative content analysis. Fifteen (15) of their poems were analyzed in the paper, looking into common themes, content structure, and the overall message about women's experiences in Arab society. The study found various perceptions, such as expressing female desire, sexuality, love, and pain. Souad Al-Sabah tackled gender roles and societal expectations. Ghada Al-Samman merged love, agony, and the reality of war. Fadwa Tuqan's poems utilized representation and symbols to express the deep suffering of women. While Arab feminist writing has been a safe space for contemporary resistance against patriarchy, looking into the multicultural aspect of women's experiences through their work can guide the future of Arab literary research.

Keywords: Feminist Writing, Arab Women, Poetry, Content Analysis, Empowerment

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Arabic poetry has been evolving in recent years; in the past, most of the published poems highlight love, hope, and longing. Nowadays, many poets use their voices to touch on social movements and political discussions. Poetry has been linked to art, which can transmit a powerful message to society. Elgebily (2017) said that the concept of revolutionary poetry promotes opposition or rebellion. They argue that a true revolutionary poet must not only challenge the ruling authority but also break free from stagnant literary traditions. The innovative use of prose poetry is praised for its ability to challenge societal norms and address deeper issues of tyranny and oppression. Darwish (2010) explained that using the unique cultural perspective of Arabs, they are incorporating their distinct experience and cultural knowledge to the global audience. New techniques emerged as a helpful tool to add innovation to their writing. One of the developments of poetry is the power to include women and know their experiences through their text.

The Arab world has been a patriarchal society, and any space for women to participate and be empowered is an essential aspect of changing norms. Al-Matrafi (2023) said that women's own ideals of progress and freedom will often be represented in literature. The negative and stereotypical portrayals of veiled women as oppressed victims create a false narrative, ignoring the diversity of Muslim/Arab experiences and beliefs. Literature covers reduce Muslim/Arab women to a single, suffering group defined by their race and culture. Furthermore, the lack of critical thinking by the public allows these inaccurate portrayals to shape their worldviews. Feminist writing explores, understands, and provides space for women to pursue gender equality. It varies from all literary genres, such as fiction, non-fiction, poetry, drama, etc. Women produced pieces to share their voices with people by reading their stories in a literary way.

Hooks (1989) further argues that writing can be an unstoppable tool for women writers to challenge the status quo and be a catalyst for social movement. It can raise awareness, call to action, and even advocate for women's liberation. The unique discussion of women's struggles signifies the importance of the literary piece to propagate.

The development of feminist writing in the Arab world is a complex phase that transcends the various challenges Arab women face. Though no single story can capture the multitude of narratives and diversity of the region, the keys and themes are essential to identify and understand the perspective of women writers in the Arab world. Zaynab Fawwaz of Lebanon (1846) and Fatima Mirat of Algeria (1877) are among the first women feminist writers in the Arab region. In the 19th to early 20th century, educated women pushed for change through journals and daily news commentaries. They often address the issues of education, political involvement, and marriage. Now, women are using social media to spread their work. There is a constant development for feminist writing that is integral to women's empowerment.

Thus, this paper aimed at understanding and exploring women's voices in the Arab world by using their poetry as data. Their writing style, content, and background were triangulated to provide a strong interpretation of their feminist writing and how it can play a vital role in empowerment and liberation.

Research Problem

1. What are the common themes of Souad Al-Sabah, Ghada Al-Samman, and Fadwa Tuqan?
2. What are the implications of women's poetry in Arab society?

Review of Literature

Life around us is crowded with signs and symbols. However, symbols have a broader, more comprehensive, and deeper scope than signs because they call for our impressions, whether from ideas, imaginations, or dreams. In women's poetry, according to Sattar et al. (2021) there's a diverse range of strategies employed by women poets to challenge patriarchal norms. While some, exclude the male presence, others engage with patriarchal discourse to subvert its meanings. Women poets often use language to redirect masculine aggression, invert male positions, or erase male presence. They create space for their own individuality and challenge the male-as-norm. Though, the patriarchal language they use can also introduce insidious connotations, limiting the malleability of their meanings. On the other hand, metaphors, similes, and personifications are employed to create vivid imagery and convey complex ideas. It demonstrates how poets use figurative language to explore themes of womanhood, identity, and societal expectations. As language can shape perception and evoke emotional responses, deepening the reader's understanding of the poems' messages (Firmansyah et al. 2013).

Meanwhile, Irmawati (2014) said that language is a powerful tool for conveying social reality, patterns of behavior, and personal feelings. Effective language use is crucial for clear communication. Poetry analysis can be a valuable tool for language learning, as it allows people to explore language, culture, and personal emotions. Analyzing poetry can develop critical thinking skills, appreciate literary devices, and gain a deeper understanding of the world around them.

In connection with the premise of the study, the distinctive features of feminist discourse, if we mean that what is linked to feminism is the voice that expresses in writing about women, their social experience, and their relationship with others, in which they reflect their human identity, their vision of the world, their awareness of reality, and their struggle with social and cultural forces. Poetry, a cornerstone of expression, gave way to Western literary forms like short stories and novels, influenced by European translations and colonial discourse. While this period led to a culture of mimicry, it also opened doors for Arab voices to be heard globally. However, the Arabic literature must be approached thoughtfully, avoiding stereotypes and ensuring a diverse representation of Arab experiences and aspirations (Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016).

According to Boezar et al. (2017) poems can shape the idea of emotional and idealistic landscapes. Poets can use a symbol of peace and comfort that contrasts with the materialistic city. Time, too, holds symbolic significance. While the day, with its cyclical rhythm, represents worldly pleasures and heavenly constraints, the morning, particularly in contemporary poetry, symbolizes change and renewal. Arab poetry can also tackle romantic genre, explore themes of love and longing. Sometimes using a persona of a real woman as a symbol of homeland, becomes a focal point poetic expression.

Arab writing employs a unique miniscule form that can be applied to various word types, including verbs. This diminutive is formed through infixation of -(a)y-, and its position varies

based on the word's structure. It can have both positive and negative connotations, depending on the context. This flexibility allows for expression of emotions and attitudes, making the morphology a significant aspect of the language's expressive power (Taine-Cheikh, 2018).

Historically, Arabic literary criticism and theory, dating back to the 8th century CE, has been influenced by various factors, including the evaluation of poetry, the beauty of the Quran, and the translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Early critics focused on the truthfulness and naturalness of poetry, contrasting the "ancients" with the more ornate "moderns." However, by the 10th century, the emphasis shifted to the aesthetic of wonder, valuing strangeness, the unexpected, and the ability of language to evoke surprise and discovery. This shift marked a significant development in Arabic literary theory (Harb, 2020).

According to Curry (2021) women's literature emphasize the resilience and agency in the face of oppression. It offers a powerful insight into the lives of Arab women, showcasing their strength and determination to resist and rebuild. Through their feminist lens, these writers contribute to a broader understanding of the conflict, giving voice to the marginalized and empowering women in the struggle for liberation. Mocabil (2022) said that Arab women's feminist discourse has focused on critical issues such as education, employment, and marriage rights. Yet, they have also faced significant challenges in breaking down gender barriers, particularly in rural areas undergoing rapid urbanization and societies where religion plays a dominant role. Arab women's feminist struggles are uniquely complex due to historical and cultural factors.

However, there is an apparent conflict in studying and writing about feminism and feminist discourse in the region. Common themes of silenced voices, suppressed desires, and the complex interplay between religious adherence and sexuality. The relevance of Muslim feminism in understanding women's literature, which, though written in Arabic, resonates with universal themes of female identity and agency (El Miniawi, 2013). Furthermore, the emergence of women writers in Arab region is a promising development, largely driven by increased access to education. As more girls pursue education, they are gaining the skills and confidence to express themselves creatively. While societal challenges and conservative attitudes persist, the growing number of women writers is a testament to their determination and the shift in patriarchal norms. As education continues to expand and support systems for women writers strengthen, Arab society can expect to see a flourishing literary scene that reflects the diverse voices and perspectives of its female population (Al-Mutawakel, 2005).

The changing landscape of feminism in the Arab world has been very progressive in challenging societal norms. When looking at feminist theory in the Arab context, there is a clear movement that aims for equality and empowerment. While tradition still upholds the reality of the Arab region, women's leadership has been useful in the past decades, providing spaces, rights, and opportunities.

Based on the above literature, there is a link between feminist writing and empowerment. There is also a distinct voice for women to share their stories and struggles. Poetry allows women to participate and share their emotions that are otherwise oppressed. There is still a need to write case studies and research papers regarding this topic to enhance the understanding of feminist writing. The stylistics, symbols, and implications of empowerment can be a profound combination of variables to shed light on women's voices. The Arab literary scene has been very complex yet beautiful because it allows women to share a part of themselves.

Methodology

This literary qualitative content analysis features three women poets whose poems revolve around activism, social participation, and gender. Souad Al-Sabah, Ghada Al-Samman, and Fadwa Tuqan are the leading poets of their time in the Arab region. The analysis explored their themes, styles, symbols, and implications for empowerment and liberation.

Poet's Biography and Reason of Selection

Souad Al-Sabah

She was born in 1942, a Kuwaiti poet, writer and a doctor of economics and political science. She founded the Souad Al-Sabah Publishing and Distribution House in 1985. She speaks English and French, and her mother tongue is Arabic. Her poetry and literary collections have won many awards and honors, a prominent scholar in Arabic literature. She is considered the mouthpiece of the Arab woman (*Souad Al-Sabah | Arab Women's Writing*, 2023).

Selected Poems:

1. Remains of a Woman
2. Papers from a Gulf Woman's Notebook
3. They Say
4. Exceptional Wishes for an Exceptional Man
5. Man Below Zero

Ghada Al-Samman

She was born in Damascus, Syria. Her father is Dr. Ahmed Al-Samman, who was the president of Syria University and served as the Minister of Education in Syria for some time. She was greatly influenced by her father because her mother died when she was young. She presented different and distinct literature that took her out of the narrow framework of women's problems and feminist movements to social, psychological, and humanitarian horizons (Ismat & Ismat, 2019).

Selected Poems:

1. I bear witness to the night of stations
2. Princes in your snow palace
3. I bear witness that your time will come
4. I bear witness to my madness
5. I bear witness to the seven pillars of forgetfulness.

Fadwa Tuqan

She was born in Nablus in 1917. She received her primary education in a public school. Her conservative family considered female participation in public life unacceptable, so Fadwa left school and continued to educate herself on her own, with the help of her brother, the poet Ibrahim Tuqan, who developed her talents (Hejleh & Ismail, 2013).

Selected Poems:

1. Escape
2. Life

3. The Time
4. Fire and Fire
5. I'm Alone with the Night.

Literary Qualitative Content Analysis

The collected fifteen (15) poems from three (3) poets were analyzed in three categories:

1. Themes: Using the five poems of each artist that represent women's empowerment and their view of Arab society, the common themes will be interpreted and evaluated to understand the literary style of each poet.
2. Stylistics: This part will mainly focus on the use of literary devices, particularly of the figure of speech. Most styles used might indicate their writing culture and their perception of poetry and Arab society.
3. Implications: The content analysis of their poems depicting society, culture, and history will play an important role in addressing the voices of women in their time and their feminist view of Arab society in general.

Discussion

The Arab poet has broken many of the barriers set by men through poetry until it has become a tool for defending women's rights in all forums. Perhaps the shared characteristics between the three poets and those I chose for research are defending women's rights, explaining their suffering, breaking the barrier of fear, and demonstrating women's strength and will. Arab-women poets use their work as a tool for resistance and social change. They have sought to dismantle stereotypes, connect with other marginalized groups, and reclaim their identities. By exploring themes of identity, belonging, and social justice, these poets have contributed to a better understanding of the Arab experience (Abdulrahim, 2013).

Also, the wide spread of the poetry of the three poets in the Arab world and the presence of a large audience for them encouraged me to research their poetry and analyze it in depth. The different countries (Syria, Kuwait, Palestine) showed that there is a great similarity in Arab customs and that women were oppressed in some aspects of life and needed a woman like her to carry the banner of her rights and defend the "she" everywhere. Contemporary Arab women writers draw inspiration from a rich historical and cultural tradition, including strong, independent women and the storytelling prowess of (Ashour et. al. 2009). Moreover, female literacy studies confirmed that gender differences in language use can convey various messages. Contemporary feminist linguistics emphasizes the diversity of women's language use, considering factors like region and social context (Ghasemi Arani et. al. 2020).

Table 1: Souad Al-Sabah's Poem Themes and Analysis

Poem	Themes	Excerpt from the poem	Qualitative Analysis
1	Desire, Dependence, Longing	<i>"You clothed me with a garment of fire"</i> (Al-Sabah, 1986, p. 35)	The womanhood of Arabian poets and their love.
2	Identity, Independence	<i>"I am Gulf...I am the Arabian Palm Tree"</i> (Al-Sabah, 1986, p. 47)	Provides the idea that women are needed in Arab society.
3	Culture, and Expectations.	<i>"I was not poisoned by the ink on my desk"</i> (Al-Sabah, 1986, p. 13)	Provides the idea that living in society requires no gender.
4	Love, strong will	<i>"Love is greater than all times"</i> (Al-Sabah, 1986, p. 66)	Her love as a woman can defy expectations.
5	Love, sexuality, desire	<i>"Your lips are like thorns"</i> (Al-Sabah, 1986, p. 80)	The desire to have a man in her life.

Souad's voice is intertwined with the need to be independent. Although sexuality and gender are not common topics in Arab society, she challenged the limiting beliefs. Her works commonly feature a combination of metaphor, hyperbole, and simile. The theme of her writing revolves around femininity, sexuality, and gender roles. The awareness of women's experience in the region where there is a rampant arranged marriage and the traditional boundary between the love of men and women, her works feature a strong message. Her ideas should never be dictated, from gender roles to love and relationships.

"Praying in front of letters is forbidden. Don't come close.
 The ink of poems is poison.
 Don't drink
 And here I am
 I drank too much
 I was not poisoned by the ink on my desk."
 (Al-Sabah, 1986, p. 13)

"They Say" is a poem that directly challenges men, a confrontation. It is essential to note that the poet used terms related to writing and literature to show her attachment to poetry and her love for writing as she commonly uses objects around her writing corner like ink, pen, paper, etc. Here, the poet expresses the women's desire to have a voice, and a space to write. In a time when it is not permitted for women to express their feelings.

Table 2: Ghada Al-Samman's Poem Themes and Analysis

Poem	Themes	Excerpt from the poem	Qualitative Analysis
1	Society, Cultural Barriers	"My love for you was as sincere as death" (Al-Saman, 1995, p. 99)	It showcases the idea of a society that forbids us to move.
2	Pain, suffering	"Where are you, my dear fool?" (Al-Saman, 1995, p. 114)	Shows the sufferings of a woman falling in love in the Arab world.
3	War, Chaos, Panic	"the gunman was met by a terrifying hyena...they hugged warmly" (Al-Saman, 1995, p. 122)	Provides the fear of war and the experiences of fear and chaos.
4	Love, strong will, the scene of terror in the country	"And my blood circulation goes in reverse" (Al-Saman, 1995, p. 133)	Her intense love can defy the current situation.
5	Love, sexuality, desire	"It filled my burning throat with love" (Al-Saman, 1995, p. 141)	The woman's desire is a strong power.

Ghada's voice is characterized by a unique interpretation of her experience and expression. The combination of love, gender, pain, and even the state of war and chaos were captured in her poems. While many techniques are reflected in her poetry, the most common figure of speech to imply her style is accompanied by simile, rhetoric, personification, hyperbole, and metaphor. Her symbolism is mainly situated with war or a harsh environment. Her interesting view of Arab women implies her experiences as a Syrian woman. The voice during war and chaos adds a layer to the idea that women can go beyond societal problems. It embodies the nature of the poet, as she frequently mentions the night in her poems, and the reason for this is that the night suggests revelation, calm, and tranquility.

"I was thinking about a real human
 relationship. We live it together
 in the corridors of our sorrows and
 disappointments, we face death, sadness, and
 the unknown...
 We take off our masks and love
 each other on the rainy, lonely
 nights of the stations."
 (Al-Saman, 1995, p. 99)

It is known about women that they are very emotional, but at the beginning of her poem, the poet tries to show that she loves with her mind and heart and to show that she is right in her vision, as she says, 'I was thinking of a real human relationship'. In this sentence, we find the poet's sincerity as she speaks in the mouths of all disappointed women. In it, at the beginning of love is a real human relationship. A relationship that can challenge war and conflict.

Table 3: Fadwa Tuqan's Poem Themes and Analysis

Poem	Themes	Excerpt from the poem	Qualitative Analysis
1	Pain, Hate	"Safe from the swirling cries of heart" (Tuqan, 1997, p.16)	The poem talks about the misery and suffering of humans.
2	Sorrow, Longing	"My life is torn" (Tuqan, 1997, p.76)	Shows the sufferings of a woman living in the Arab World.
3	Hate, Pain	"Time did me a lot of harm" (Tuqan, 1997, p.32)	Endurance of pain when suffering for too long.
4	Suffering, searching for love	"You are my storm" (Tuqan, 1997, p.51)	This signifies a complete search for love.
5	Mystery, Longing	"My eyelids embrace him" (Tuqan, 1997, p.23)	There is an intense desire to know the truth.

Fadwa's voice talks about the pain and suffering of a woman. The suffering from man and society is a reflection of her life as an oppressed Palestinian woman who devoted her time to using poetry as a tool. Her common themes revolve around pain, hatred, and longing for something. Her usual literary style includes personification and metaphor. A literary device that is appropriate to give life to something inanimate and provide a direct comparison.

My life is tears and a passionate heart longing,
a collection of poetry,
and promises my life, my whole life is sorrow
if its shadow disappears tomorrow.
(Tuqan, 1997, p. 76)

This poem embodies the poet's life path, especially since she was exposed to many calamities and loss, as her father died, and then her brother and teacher, Ibrahim, died. Here, the poet detailed the degrees of sadness that she experienced and experienced greatly. She began her poem by saying, "My life is torn and a passionate heart." Here is the beginning of the sadness and oppression that the poet experiences. She used many terms related to sadness in her poem, as she said (tears, sorrow, grief, faded, grief, ashes, graves, and the departed). The multitude of sadness expresses the great sorrow that she had experienced. The poet resorts to poetry to express her experiences, especially the experiences of loss in her life.

Conclusion

Writing is an inspiring and effective tool to enable women to triumph for themselves, their abilities, their status, and their opinions by expressing all of this in a literary way. Women are no longer just readers of what is imposed on them but they have become writers that has a space in society, a space of freedom they enjoy. Feminist discourse in Arab societies is grounded in Islamic principles. It emphasizes the need for a gradual approach, aligning with societal norms to empower women without isolating them. Sharing personal experiences is seen as a crucial step towards social change (Gallant, 2008). In the time of global feminist

awakening and women can be published in local media there is a movement to challenge the norm. They not only highlight the oppression faced by women but also emphasize the importance of women taking charge of their own liberation, individually and collectively, to overcome patriarchal control (Tijani, 2019).

Writing has become a successful tool for women to reach their goals without obstacles, especially since we live in a reality that urges us to listen to women's voices and give them all attention and appreciation. Poetry can be used to challenge traditional gender roles, religious dogma, and other oppressive social and cultural norms. By questioning and critiquing these norms, poetry can help to create a more open and inclusive society.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia (RILCA), Mahidol University, Thailand. I am deeply indebted to my advisor, Ajarn Sirijit Sunanta, for her invaluable guidance and support. Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Ali and Maryam, for their unwavering encouragement.

References

- Abdulrahim, S. (2013). Between Empire and Diaspora: Identity Poetics in Contemporary Arab-American Women's Poetry.
- Al-Matrafi, H. (2023). The Image of Muslim/Arab Women on the Front Covers of Literary Works. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 5(1), 52-67.
- Al-Mutawakel, A. M. A. (2005). Gender and the writing of Yemeni women writers.
- Al-Sabah, S. (1986). *Fragments of a Woman*. Souad Al-Sabah Publishing and Distribution House.
- Alsaif, O. A. (2014). Desire for Freedom in Modern Women's Poetry from the Arabian Gulf Area.
- Al-Samman, G. (1995). *Lover in an inkwell*. Ghada Al-Samman Publications.
- Ashour, R., Berrada, M., Ghazoul, F. J., Rachid, A., & McClure, M. (2009). Arab women writers. *Southwest Review*, 94(1), 9-18.
- Boezar, R., Mehr, M. S., & Husseinjanzadeh, F. (2017). Semiotic Analysis of Place and Time in Poems of Badr Shakir al-Sayyab. *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, 5(4), 655-665.
- Curry, B. N. (2021). *Nationalism and Postcolonial Feminism: A Literary Approach to Palestinian Women's Resistance* (Doctoral dissertation, Wichita State University).
- Darwish, A. (2010). *Translation and news making in contemporary Arabic television*. Writescop Publishers.
- El Miniawi, N. (2013). Religion and Feminism in the Short Story of Alifa Rifaat—The Voice of the “Voiceless”. *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, 3(7), 402-414.
- Elgebily, S. (2017). The word against the sword: Arabic Poetry in the face of despotism. *Linguistics and Literature Studies*, 5(1), 51-60.
- Firmansyah, A., Ardian, S. Y., & SS, M. P. (2013). Figurative Language and Symbol In Poems “She Dwelt among the untrodden ways”, “women”, “homage to my hips”.
- Gallant, M. (2008). The application of feminism in the Arab world: Research perspectives. *Education, business and society: Contemporary Middle Eastern issues*, 1(3), 193-199.
- Ghasemi Arani, A., Marouf, Y., Salimi, A., & Hemati, S. (2020). Analysis of the language of women in the poems of. *Journal of Lyrical Literature Researches*, 18(34), 165-184.
- Harb, L. (2020). Arabic literary theory. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of literature*.

- Hejleh, A., & Ismail, N. (2013). *Fadwa Tuqan. A poetisa palestina* (Doctoral dissertation, Dissertação de Mestrado).
- Hooks, B. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*. South End Press.
- Irmawati, N. D. (2014). Understanding how to analyze poetry and its implication to language teaching. *Internasional Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature*, 2(1), 35-45.
- Ismat, R., & Ismat, R. (2019). Ghada Samman: Mosaic of Memory. *Artists, Writers and The Arab Spring*, 45-51.
- Mahrooqi, R., & Denman, C. (2016). Arab identity and literature in translation: The politics of selection and representation. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Special Issue on Translation*, (5).
- Mocbil, A. S. A. (2022). The History of Feminism in the Arab World. *Journal of Social Studies*, 28(4), 82-91.
- Sattar, G., Afzal, H., Zafran, F., & Riaz, N. (2021). DICHOTOMOUS IPSEITY: MULTIVALENT TRANSGRESSIONS IN WOMENS'POETRY ACROSS TIME AND CULTURES. *Elementary Education Online*, 20(5), 4351-4351.
- Souad al-Sabah | Arab Women's Writing. (2023, December 8). Utoronto.ca. <https://arabww.digital.utoronto.ca/000a388>
- Taine-Cheikh, C. (2018). Expressiveness and evaluation in Arabic: the singular development of the diminutive in Ḥassāniyya Arabic. *Studies in Language*, 42(1), 81-113.
- Tijani, O. I. (2019). Raising Feminist Consciousness through Literature: Two Women's Texts from the Arabian Gulf. *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 9(2), 145-163.
- Tuqan, F. (1997). *Diwan Fawda Tuqan*. Dar Al-Awda.