

## **The Image of the Man in the Feminist Novel: The Silence of the Butterflies as an example**

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### **Abstract.**

The current study investigates the image of the man in the feminist novel through *Silence of the Butterflies* by Kuwaiti author, Layla Uthman. Thus, the study shall focus on difference between the Gulf women's demands and those of the Arab women's in Egypt and the Levant.

The novel depicts the man in a negative light, as is the case with Arabic novels in all of the Arabic countries.

Layla Uthman attempts to depict various types of men in her novel in order to emphasize and illustrate that the man, in all his various types and culture, is basically the same negative character who looks at women as a sexual subject; he only respects women in as far as they answer his desires.

The various types of men are: the educated religious man/the doctor; the opportunist wealthy man; the educated secular; the slave; the worker and the employee; the family man. All of these types suffer from double standards in their lives, especially in their attitudes towards women. These are attitudes that are highly unjust and violent: physically and verbally. The author managed to capture these attitudes in an artistic manner by using certain narrative techniques that capture these attitudes and the conflict between the man and the woman. For example: breaking the narrative timeline; the intensity of internal events for women vis-à-vis external events for men; the signifying themes; the antihero characteristic for women.

The author managed to create equilibrium between content and form. We may consider this novel to be a par excellence model of the feminist novel, especially in the Gulf.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Novel, The Image of man

### **Introduction**

Women's perspective of men in the feminist novel varies according to novelist and area. However, there is a semi-consensus in feminist novels, especially in the Arab Gulf, depicting a negative image of the man who exploits the woman and treats her as a mere object that satisfies his sexual needs. He enlarges his ego by imposing and exploiting his patriarchal authority to practice violence against her. Consequently, the woman's aspirations in the Arab Gulf differ from her aspirations in the Levant, for instance, or in North Africa. In the Levant, women have come a long way in achieving their rights, while women in the Arab Gulf still suffer from resounding discrimination based on the social and cultural backwardness of society. In addition, the religious factor plays a major role in this resounding discrimination against women. As a result, the aspirations of the Arab Gulf women are modest compared to those of Arab women in relatively more developed areas. Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that the feminist Gulf novels are more reformist than revolutionary; they demand the reformation of the status of women while preserving religious conventions and traditions, as will be argued here in reference to *The Silence of the Butterflies* (*Ṣamt al-Farāshāt*) by Kuwaiti novelist, Laylā 'Uthmān. This negative image of the man appears in various genres of Gulf literature. It has been strongly influenced by novels that were written in cultural centers – Egypt and the Levant – by Nawāl Al-Sa'dāwī, Hayfā' Bīṭār and others. This image of the man is not exclusive to feminist novels. It also appears in the writings of leftist authors who

deal with the cause of women.<sup>1</sup> Laylā ‘Uthmān depicts men of various types in stories about women’s relationships with different types of men. Othman also resorts to a second-class narrative to draw the image of other types of men, as will be later discussed.

*The Silence of the Butterflies* offers 4 main stories united in the universe of the narrator, Nādyā, who is the main character. However, these stories will be approached as a single narrative line comprised of 4 interconnected stories through the main character. The story seems particularly special since its events revolve around Nādyā, the female, along with certain types of men. These stories are presented as follows: two stories are narrated in a fictional presence: the story of her vocal cord disorder and the surgery; her love story with ‘Aṭīyya and their marriage attempt; in addition to two stories told in flashback: the story of her marriage to old Nāyif and her miserable life in his palace; and the story of her relationship with Dr. Jawād, her college professor. These stories are interwoven with each other through the use of alternation, that is, by telling two stories simultaneously while pausing the narration in one story and resuming the narration in the other once the first narration is paused.<sup>2</sup>

There are different types of men:

### 1. The learned religious man/ physician: double standards

The character of the physician ‘Abd al-Raḥmān is an example of the religious businessman who uses a double standard in dealing with his patients. When Nādyā goes to see him in the public hospital wearing shorts, he refuses to meet her. Nevertheless, when she goes to see him in his clinic wearing the same shorts, he receives her warmly:

“She knocked on the door and entered. He stood up and said in a most eloquent and soft voice:

– Welcome... come in.

He pointed at the opposite chair.

She sat down trying to make sense of this! It is he himself; the same height, the same drooping beard that covers his entire neck, welcoming me, asking me to sit down [...] it is clear. There, he is a public physician with a paycheck and therefore has the right to say yes or no. Here, he is a businessman; he has his own private clinic that feeds him from the pains of the others; he is ready to accept people like me; people who do not conform to the type of clothes that conform with his beliefs” (71).

### 2. The opportunistic wealthy man

What distinguishes the wealthy characters in the Gulf is that they use their filthy wealth to enslave others, marry young girls, employ maids and exploit them sexually. In *The Silence of the Butterflies*, Nāyif is a rich businessman who marries the narrator, Nadia, who is only 17, while he is 60. He cruelly abuses her to the extent of adopting a bizarre sexual act, where he orders his slave ‘Aṭīyya to rape Nadia on their wedding night and then sleep with a maid (Jurjet) on Nādyā’s bed as she watches. He orders his slave to whip Nādyā because she asks him to visit her parents. Four years later, Nādyā runs away from misery, imprisonment and silence.

### 3. The learned/ secular who suffers from double standards

Generally, the learned Arab seems to employ double standards, i.e. one for himself and one for his wife or for women. In *The Silence of the Butterflies*, Nadia the narrator, studies at a college. During her third year, she falls in love with Dr. Jawād who wants to use her to satisfy his needs. What he accepts for himself he does not accept for his wife. Here, his double standard rises to the surface despite the notion that being a learned man, his knowledge should lead him to act fairly to women and not exploit them:

“- Your wife there is alone like a widow. Does she have the right to enjoy herself with people other than you?

He flounced as if I had hurt one of his sacred beliefs:

– My wife loves me, and she would never do such a thing.

[...]

– If she did, I would kill her.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, *The Gypsies’ Suns* by Ḥaydar Ḥaydar. The novel is told from the perspective of a woman (the narrator) who is beaten by her officer brother. The brother shoots her for falling in love with her Palestinian colleague in college. Her father, who grows religious after being secular, imprisons his daughter in the house and forbids her to practice a normal life. Another example is *Two Women on the Seashore* by Ḥanān al-Shaykh (p.31). The protagonist’s father beats her for wearing shorts. See: Ḥaydar Ḥaydar, *Shumūs al-Ghajar*, (1<sup>st</sup> ed.) (Damascus, Ward lil-Ṭibā‘a wa-al-Nashr, 1997); Ḥanān al-Shaykh, *Imra’atān ‘alā Shāṭi’ al-Baḥr*, (Beirut, Dār al-Ādāb, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, “Maqūlāt al-Sard al-Adabī”, in: *Ṭarā’iq Taḥlīl al-Sard al-Adabī*, (trans. Al-Ḥusayn Ṣubḥān & Fu’ād Ṣafā), (Ribāṭ, Itihād Kuttāb al-Maghrib, 1992), pp. 56-57.

I winced... his contradiction frightened me” (142).

#### 4. The slave

What is left of slavery can still be found in the Gulf. The novel presents this through the character of ‘Aṭīyya, who was Nāyif’s slave. Following the order of Nāyif, he rapes Nādyā on their wedding night. Then he whips her when she asks her husband, Nāyif, to visit her parents. After her husband’s death, she employs ‘Aṭīyya in her company and sends him to learn to read and write. She then falls in love with him, but he cannot marry her because of her parents’ disapproval, on the one hand, and for psychological reasons, on the other.

#### 5. The young worker/ employee

The male application of double standards appears again in the story of Nādyā’s friend, Ṣafā’, who falls in love with her family’s driver and marries him despite their disapproval. The narrative, from Ṣafā’s perspective, tells us how her husband changes and begins to abuse her:

“Can you imagine? Instead of whispering words of love, he used to bite my earlobe, blowing the words: *say my master... my prince*. He used to run around trying to do what I say. Today, he makes me crawl to do what he says.

One time, he threw the car keys in my face, ordering me to clean them [...] He told me to bow before his feet and give them a massage every night before he goes to sleep” (273).

#### 6. The family man: the father/ brother

The father of the family uses his patriarchal authority to impose his beliefs on his wife and daughter. For instance, he beats his daughter, Nādyā, and forces her to marry Nayef, the old man. In addition, the authority of the brother appears when Fayṣal hits Nādyā for wanting to marry ‘Aṭīyya.

Nādyā also introduces the subject of incest through the story of ‘Ā’isha, Nādyā’s student. Her brother rapes her and forces her to remain silent about it. Eventually, ‘Ā’isha commits suicide.

There is an opposing duality in feminist literature and in *The Silence of the Butterflies*: the vulnerable/victim woman – the powerful/exploiting man.

#### How does this position express itself stylistically?

##### In terms of time structure:<sup>3</sup>

The time structure of the novel is fractured by many flashbacks (19 external flashbacks as opposed to 9 segments from the fictional presence).<sup>4</sup> This appears in the lines and tables. Foreshadowing is completely absent from the novel. What does this signify? The novel chooses to fracture time in terms of writing in addition to fracturing time on the level of reality. However, the past controls the present,<sup>5</sup> since the external flashbacks are dominant in terms of number and size. They control the present, which means that the past traditions and time – which is patriarchal time – still control the present, especially on the level of the relationships between man and woman. The Arab woman, in general, and the Gulf woman, in particular, does not own her freedom, and she cannot achieve self-realization. She is forced to remain silent and agree to the decisions of the man who may be her father, brother, physician, or lover etc.

The complete absence of foreshadowing is noticeable through the time structure. This suggests that the horizon of freedom and self-realization is unavailable to the Gulf woman. The Gulf woman still waits for a man to take her by hand and help her in everything. The narrator ends the novel by saying: “Oh, ‘Aṭīyya! How I envy you despite my suffering, for now you are a free man who can make his own decision with the valor of knights, whereas I, the weak slave, remain in my prison, waiting for someone to set me free” (286).

##### In terms of events

##### The woman/ internal events – the man/ external events

What should probably be noticed in the novel is the extent to which external and dynamic events are dominant in the lives of the male characters as well as the rarity of internal events. Conversely, the internal events dominate the character of Nādyā in line with their significance and with the message communicated by the author to the reader. *The Silence of the Butterflies* is generally notable for rendering the man as the one who

<sup>3</sup> See: Fuad Azzam “Time Structure in *The Silence of the Butterflies* by Laila Othman”, *Al-Carmel – Research in Language and Literature* 34-35 (2013-2014), 145-174.

<sup>4</sup> There are three very short internal flashbacks. Since each one is merely two lines and is insignificant, I did not include them in the tables which appear on pages: 38, 188, 220.

<sup>5</sup> In this regard, scholar Sa’īd Yaqīn says: “Through discourse time, the time of the story is “stolen” as a raw material. Therefore, when moving from the time of the story to the time of discourse, we basically move from the mentally real-life experience (of common nature) to the subjective experience (the author’s) which seeks to embody a special perspective on time illustrating the aspect of “discoursing” the mentally real-life in order to materialize as a perceptual “psychological reality” through the self’s relationship with time [...] thus, the subjective experience is rendered through the perception of time. This is reflected in writing on the aesthetic and indicative levels. In the former, the common mental aspect is “fractured” in the receiver, through which the indicative aspect of this “fracturing” is produced by the very act of reading.

See: Sa’īd Yaqīn, *Infiṭāḥ al-Naṣṣ al-Riwā’ī*, (Beirut, al-Markaz al-Thaqafī al-‘Arabī, 1989), p. 47.

initiates external dynamic actions, whereas the actions of the narrator/woman are mainly *reactions*; principally in the form of internal events expressing the injustice that she experiences and the lack of independence. Consequently, her situation imposes upon her a state of silence where she can only express her suffering through internal events: interior dialogue, stream of consciousness, dreams and feelings. The external events are expressed through dialogues between characters as well as in narrative scenes mirrored in the external events. Most of these events are characterized by physical, verbal or mental violence; or by the attempt to impose the will and desires of men upon the narrator, who represents women: “Since the first night, he wanted to teach me the first lesson. I was still cozily sitting in the comfortable couch inside the marvelous bedroom in his palace. He took off his ‘iqāl and ‘Antara. His head appeared as shiny as a bowl of stainless steel. He turned to me [the narrator] with a voice stripped of any tenderness:

“Listen. From now on, you will have to get used to silence. The secrets of this palace must never go out - not even through the eye of a needle” (13). The novel also addresses the issue of severe beatings ordered by the old husband when he commands his slave, ‘Aṭiyya, to whip the narrator. The narrator’s brother also beats her when he finds out that she is in love with ‘Aṭiyya and wishes to marry him.

#### **Internal dialogue/ woman – dialogue/ man**

The novel is notable for its intensive inner dialogue by the narrator/woman when the male characters are absent. It should be noted that the over-use of questions in the inner dialogues signifies the confusion and crisis endured by the narrator. Moreover, the frequent use of inner dialogue signifies the unity and stability of the characters’ movement in time and space. However, the man does not need inner dialogue because he can express his mind and desires freely.

#### **Dreams and nightmares**

Dreams give rise to the repressed elements that received no attention, or were unknown. All dreams have a compensatory relationship with the content of consciousness. What is noted in the this novel is that it describes nine dreams; three of which are the narrator’s daydreams about her beloved, ‘Aṭiyya, who embraces her: “I see myself imprisoned between his arms, gazing at the sky of his dark face, seeing the moon in his eyes, smelling the odor of his body as if he has just gotten out of the juices of a multi-fruit garden” (210-2011, 218,230). In addition, there are three dreams, also about ‘Aṭiyya, in one of which the narrator sees herself dead and being laid into a tomb. Her husband ‘Aṭiyya brings her out of the tomb and back to life: “he carried me in his strong arms; he flew with me while my shroud falls from me flying to the horizon” (218-219). There are also three nightmares, in one of which she sees the scene of the first night of her marriage to the old man and the rape committed by ‘Aṭiyya (168-170). The narrator also states that she has many daydreams about ‘Aṭiyya.

Most of the dreams seem to be a form of fulfillment of Nāḍya’s overwhelming desire for self-realization and of her love for ‘Aṭiyya. Such a desire cannot be fulfilled in the real world, because of the narrator’s parent’s disapproval of her marriage to ‘Aṭiyya, a former slave. The woman in the Gulf society, in particular, and in Arab society, in general, can only fulfill her desires and aspirations through the will of the man. Therefore, she finds refuge in dreams. Because the male characters, in contrast, can fulfill their desires in the real world, they do not dream.

#### **Leitmotifs**

In *The Silence of the Butterflies*, many themes recur, such as the word “silence” in various contexts and phrases, which appears 268 times. “Silence” has very negative connotations. Its significance is not derived from its repetitiveness alone, but also from the title of the novel, for the title is of great symbolic importance,<sup>6</sup> since it is the key-phrase that mirrors the symbolic aspects of the entire novel. The title is “*The Silence of the Butterflies*”. “Silence” signifies “Butterflies” which is also repeated more than 10 times in the novel in different forms that convey vulnerability. Vulnerability is a fundamental trait of women, who are as weak and fragile as butterflies; they have no voice. Silence is imposed upon the narrator/woman in her childhood; when she gets married challenging her father’s decision; in the old man’s palace; and when she visits the in the physician’s office. Silence is imposed upon the Arab woman from birth till death; while the man is the one who speaks and who has the final word.

#### **In terms of character structure**

<sup>6</sup>The scholar Gerard Genette has studied the structure and functions of titles. He argues that a title has 4 basic functions: 1. Specification, i.e. naming the work in order to distinguish it from other acts; he considers it the most important function since it can work independent from the other functions. 2. Description: it relates to describing the work from various angles, such as: thematic titles which are dominant nowadays; formative titles that describe the form of the work and its literary genre. 3. Inspiration, which is related to the descriptive function. 4. Solicitation which goal is to solicit people to buy and read the work. See: Gerard Genette, “Structure and Function of the Title in Literature”, translated by Bernard Crampe, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 14 (1988), pp. 711-719; Maḥmūd Ghanāyim, “Faḍīḥa” wa-“‘Iqāb” bi- Ṣīgha Falastīniyya: al-Lahja al-Maḥkiyya wa-Sīmyā’ al-‘Unwān fī al-Qiṣṣa al-Falastīniyya fī Isrā’īl”, *Al-Majalla* (Haifa, Majma’ al-Lugha al-‘Arabiyya no. 3 (2012), pp. 110-114.

**Woman as antihero – man as hero**

The woman belongs to the category of the antihero, the man to that of the hero.<sup>7</sup> The Arab woman, in general, and the Gulf woman, in particular, can achieve her goals only insofar as the man allows her to. The man, in contrast, can achieve his goals thanks to the patriarchal authority that he inherits and is given by society. Thus, Nādyā fails to achieve her dream of freedom and love and is properly identified as an antihero. In contrast, since the male characters achieve their goals, they are in effect ‘heroes’.

Hence, the woman as antihero in in this novel is employed to provoke the reader’s conscience, to confront the reader, male and female, with the status of the Arab woman, who is subject to the harshest kinds of exploitation, oppression, suppression and the denial of her most basic human rights.

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<sup>7</sup> I have adopted Ibrahim Taha’s five-part schema, situating characters in categories of hero/antihero. See: Ibrahim Taha: “The Image of the Modern Hero in Muhammad Ali Taha”, 301-330. See also :Ibrahim Taha, «Heroism in Literature: A Semiotic Model», *The American Journal of Semiotics* 18 (2006), 110.

Some scholars distinguish between the hero and the antihero on the moral un-aesthetic level, since in many works, the main character is not morally noble; he disappoints us. So, we would consider him an antihero. See” Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 98.

Salma Khadra Jayyusi discusses the concept of the hero in modern Arabic literature. She maintains that the word “hero” covers a wide space, stretching from the “heroic” hero to the antihero, including the tragic, revolutionary, historic, expatriate and victim hero. However, in her study, she focuses on the heroic hero and the victim hero. See: Salma Khadra Jayyusi, “Two Types of Hero in Contemporary Arabic Literature”, *Mundus Artium* 10/1 (1977), 35-49.

Nawfal divides heroism into four types: 1. the positive hero. 2. The negative hero. 3. The failed hero. 4. The oppressed hero. He draws on the main theme or content of the text. See: Yūsuf Nawfal, *Qaḍāyā al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī*, (Cairo, al-Maṭba’a al-‘Arabiyya al-Ḥadītha, 1977), pp. 52-64. In addition, Ibrahim Taha addresses these types by saying that “there is an indicative, logical and substantial contradiction between the words “hero” and “failed?”/“victim”. How can a failed character be a hero? Words such as “positive” and “negative” are mere adjectives that do not relate to the real and substantial meaning of heroism. See: Ibrahim Taha, “Heroism in Literature”, p. 123.

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