

A Gynocritic-intersectional Reading of Raja Alem's *The Dove's Necklace*

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Abstract

When Showalter (1981) coined the term gynocriticism to undermine feminist methodicide, feminist literary criticism established a clear methodological structure for application (as cited in Barry, 2009, pp. 17-20). However, as a result of technology, globalization and political changes, women suffer not only because of their gender but also because of their class, race or religion, which Crenshaw (1989) summarizes in the term "intersectionality" (p. 538). Shedding light on women's multiple identities can help contemporary societies spot the discrimination that contemporary women suffer from; consequently, these societies can find solutions to eliminate the sources of women's double marginalization. Race, class, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation are intersecting loci of discriminations or privileges (McCall, 2005, p. 1771). Although this is a western paradigm, it can be applied to Saudi Arabian literature. The elements of gynocriticism and intersectionality are evident in the works of Raja Alem, a feminist writer from Mecca, Saudi Arabia and the first woman to win the International Prize for Arabic Fiction. Due to the dearth of structured feminist literary criticism in the Arab world, this paper traces the history of feminist literary criticism and applies a gynocritic-intersectional model to Raja Alem's novel, *The Dove's Necklace* (2012) in order to examine the projection of women and help close the research gap in Arabic feminist criticism. The researcher probes the biological, linguistic, psychoanalytical and cultural depiction of the female characters in the novel along with their intersectional identities. The findings show that women's overlapping identities influence the way they experience oppression and discrimination.

Key words: discrimination, feminist theories, gynocriticism, ideologies, methodicide

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Introduction

This paper is based on both Showalter's model (1981), which examines women's biological, linguistic, psychoanalytical and cultural features and Cochrane's (2013) intersectional model, which investigates women's racial, ethnical and sexual identities. The suggested gynocritic-intersectional model is applied to Alem's novel, *The Dove's Necklace* (2012) to facilitate the process of examining the projection of women in order to spot the influence of women's overlapping identities on the way they experience oppression and discrimination. The paper also may help close the research gap in Arabic feminist criticism by applying this structured paradigm to an Arabic novel.

A Brief about the History of Feminist Criticism

The four waves of feminism can be applied for a better understanding of women's oppression throughout history. Walder (1990) insists that all feminist theories try to "take over" the canon and rescue it from patriarchy by helping readers scan texts, genres or movements so as to relentlessly make visible the components to gender and gender-bias (p. 18). Morris (1993) states that women's experience varies from one culture to another (p. 166). The first feminist wave starts with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in which the feminist author calls for social and moral equality between women and men. Later, in *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf (1929) hypothesizes that women need economic security and privacy.

The second wave started when Simone de Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* in 1949, in which she argues that "Woman is Man's other", which is a European thought. Later on more recent feminists contend that women are subordinated to men and they based their assumption on historical rather than biological grounds. Showalter's (1981) essay, "Feminine Criticism in the Wilderness", defends the methodicide in feminist theories. According to Barry (2009), Showalter coined the term Gynocriticism, which examines the female struggle for identity and the social construct of gender. Showalter argues that there are two kinds of feminist theories: the first is concerned with women as readers, and it is called feminist critique, while the second focuses on women as writers, and it is called gynocritics.

Feminists of the third wave followed the same path of their predecessors. the third wave apparently lacked a clear unified goal; it is often seen as an extension of the second wave. Women's struggle between their work and homes created a new internal fight that obliged women to challenge each other rather than the patriarchy. The political and economic reasons changed to individual identity crises, which silences women and marginalizes them. Therefore, the third wave was a universal strong and empowered womanhood period with less focus on political changes and more on individualistic identity. Walker's article, "Becoming the Third Wave" (1992) is a response to the Anita Hill's case. In this article she expresses her offense at the silencing of women by men who commit acts of sexual harassment and other forms of oppression, and who use their privilege to escape justice for such injustices.

The fourth wave is linked to technology and social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Women use these applications to call for gender equality and social justice. Cochrane (2013) states that the fourth feminist wave puts emphasis on "intersectionality" explaining that intersectional feminist examines how women's overlapping identities influence the way they

experience “oppression and discrimination” (p.583). Feminists of the fourth wave stir issues about women’s wages, health, reproduction and abortion, and social, sexual and religious harassment. According to Dastagir (2017, January 19), intersectionality aims at raising women’s minimum wage world-widely and broadening the conversation around reproductive rights.

Applying Gynocritic-intersectional Model to Alem’s *The Dove’s Necklace*

As a Nabokov novel, Alem’s *The Dove’s Necklace* is labyrinthine. It has an experimental narrative structure. Similar to the work of Vladimir Nabokov, it revels in its chaos and refuses to provide any clear-cut answers. The novel reveals the contradictions in Mecca and its brutal customs that do not come to term with new traditions. When the body of a young woman is discovered in the lane of Many Heads, in Mecca, no one claims it as all people in the lane are ashamed of her nakedness. Detective Nasser suspects the dead woman is Aisha, one of the residents. When he investigates her emails for clues, he discovers a world of crime, religious extremism, exploitation of foreign workers and exploitation of women. A combination of Showalter’s gynocriticism with its four models and Cochrane’s intersectionality is used as a theoretical framework for a feminist reading to the novel.

Showalter’s (1981) Gynocriticism suggests reading the body of the female characters in a literary. The representation of the female bodies in Alem’s *The Dove’s Necklace* shows women as sites of alienation, domination, sexual pleasure and social neglect. Women in the novel are oppressed and squeezed in the struggle between those who are trying to maintain the historic city of Mecca and those who are trying to destroy it in the name of modernity. Through the interwoven voices narrating the story, many female characters are revealed as oppressed.

The narration begins with “the Lane of Many Heads”, the main narrator: “this is the lane itself speaking, me and my many heads” (Alem, 2012, p. 7). The Lane is a character, and it observes the humans within its borders. However, it is biased to men. The lane condemns Umm al-Sad’s whose body angers him as she is “broad shoulders, flat chest, and masculine frame” (p. 88). Her success as a stockbroker surges his anger “This fills me ... with an overpowering desire to crush that lone female head sprouting up like a parasitic weed among my male heads” (p. 85). Women are expected to have a feminine biological shape; otherwise, they are marginalized.

Marriage is seen as women’s ultimate social achievement. It is acceptable for men to do many great things and gain societal recognition, but women’s only role is to marry and get children. Even the sixty-year-old man, one of Khalil’s victims, “was thinking of getting married again and having some more children” (p. 60). Marriage has no age for men as they have power over women. This conversation enhances the idea that male characters are socially powerful.

The stories about the dominated and alienated women are told by Aisha in her emails to her German boyfriend. She tells a story about a girl whose father imprisons her in a basement and prevents her from using a single masculine object. Instead of sleeping on a bed (*sireer*), she has to sleep on a feminine chaise lounge. She can’t wear necklaces or earrings, only bracelets. When a masculine object, scissors (*a ma’as*), falls in her hands, she uses it to dig her way out (pp. 45-6).

This tale is echoed by the “real” story of Umm al-Sa’d, the milk man’s daughter, who is

imprisoned by her brothers and stripped of her inheritance. Although she is nearly starving to death, she manages to pack the family's gold jewelry within her cervical cavity, where her brothers daren't touch it. She's finally thrown out into the street, almost dead, but is revived at the hospital where medics are shocked at the treasures hidden inside her vagina (pp. 129-130). These two women reflect that the patriarchal oppression, women's alienation and social neglect are based on the women's biological difference; thus, they are silenced and objectified.

The content of language in the novel is analyzed, and the conversations of the female characters show that, unlike the traditional stereotype, they not only use language unique to women but also express their love openly. Despite being a Saudi female writer, from Mecca, where it is a shame for a girl to announce her name, Alem portrays women who express their feelings openly. The two possible victims, Aisha and Azza are open-minded, combative, and able to challenge the rules and the men around them. Their language reveals an unexpected side of Saudi women who talk about taboo subjects such as sex. In one of her emails to her boyfriend, Aisha says "Away from you, I lie alone in my bed carrying the torsos of dead bodies back and forth through the operating theater in my head" (p. 44). Aisha represents the new generation in Mecca; her relationship with the German doctor is discovered through her emails: "Did you know that you were the first person to ever pat me on the back?" (p. 51). The language that Aisha uses reveals her illegitimate love:

While your hands massage and dig into the hidden pain, I suddenly wake to find my heart halfway around the racetrack, doing eight miles a minute. It slipped away from me somehow while I was distracted, leaving my mouth dry and my lips cracked and salty. p. 52

In her rhetorical question "Does the Lane of Many Heads have a problem with girls?" (p. 53), Aisha summarizes the domination of the patriarchal society and reflects her feeling of oppression in this lane. Women in *The Lane of Many Heads* are expected to "be superwomen, a cross between [their] Bedouin grandmothers who never raised their face-veils ... and the pop stars and dancers who writhe and moan in music videos" (p. 54). This discourse reflects how women are completely deprived of freedom and their proposed role is to remain chaste and satisfy their husbands' sexual needs.

The language used in the novel confirms the idea that women are "possessions" to be passed between fathers and husbands. Aisha's description of her father reflects the ideology that women are oppressed: "I feel like there's a woman made of stone inside of me.... This reminds me of my father's cane. My father died, but the cane remained, beyond the reach of death" (p. 54). They are regarded as "property" of their fathers and are not free to marry men of their own choice. Also, the language Aisha uses in her medical trip shows that women are socially restricted and unable to move or explore the world around them without chaperones. She could not travel without her husband as she needs the consent of "any male relatives" saying "I allow this woman to travel and vouch that she will return" (p. 166). She is controlled by her father and then her husband.

The obvious imbalances between the two sexes verify that women are oppressed. Although they are represented as inferior to men, there is a tone of rebel in the dialogue between Aisha and Azaz. The former is ashamed of her body: "As soon as I reached puberty I was embarrassed to see it transforming into an adult woman"; however, the latter is proud of being a woman saying "It's weird but I was never embarrassed by my body" (p. 140). The language used stirs sympathy

to female characters and shows that some women are strong and defiant to the bequeathed ideologies.

Examining psychology and the attitude of the women in the novel can explore the struggle between men and women. Like Aza, Umm al-Sa'd is strong but egoistic. "Umm al-Sa'd is sitting on her sofa like a crowned queen looking at the screen of her computer, which is open on the page of stocks" (p. 84). she learns how to use the stock market online and increase her wealth, and she excelled the male stock brokers. She collects money from the residents of the neighborhood to increase it for them. She establishes "the box for VIPs ... to raise money, but in reality she bribes some officials to issue an identity card for the foundling, Saleh or Eunuchs' Goat, whom she adopts" (p. 125).

Marie the Lebanese woman is a symbol of modernity and development. When Mu'az discovers his talent and the artist in himself, "Marie saw all that in [him] with her trained eye. She gave [him] a professional camera, taught [him] what to see and how to see[and] how to develop [photos]" (p. 188-9). Thus, Marie is strong enough to teach Mu'as, the son of a preacher to appreciate art and photography. This character gives a light of hope that women are strong to fight oppression.

Also, analyzing the cultural values of female characters can reflect how the novel portrays women as subordinate to men. The lane and its residents consider women worthless: "I, The Lane of Many Heads, never once bothered myself with a female opponent, since I know women were created simply to submit to the status quo, my vile status quo" (p.119). Aisha is used to being submissive as she calls her boyfriend "sir". She has inherited this culture from her mother: "I never knew my own father's name; my mother always called him (sir)" (p. 120).

Another cultural feature is wearing abayas. Women in Mecca wear abayas and they are never expected to go out without them. The more women are covered, the more they are respected in their society. Police men do not check any cars whose riders are women, as if abayas are the boarding pass. When Eunuchs' Goat wants to escape the immigration police, Mushabbab wrapped him in an abaya carefully, and they passed "the checkpoint" safely. Yusuf makes a "perfect sense ... no fear was so great that a woman's abaya couldn't fix it" (p. 115).

Reading love books is culturally forbidden in the Lane of Many Heads. The book that Aisha has read since her "first year at the Teacher's College ... [is] smuggled by her friend Layla She said she'd found it waiting for her in the corridor where it had fallen out of one of her uncle's moving books He was planning to bequeath it to his male offspring" (p. 104). Women are not allowed to read books about love nor can they talk about love.

Arranged marriage is a common tradition in Mecca. Obeying her father, Aisha marries Ahmed, the son of sewage cleaner, and he divorces her after two months, and after two years he comes back trying to reconcile with her: "What incites a hunter to take back a prey he forgets for two years?! (p. 123). Aisha compares herself- on the day of her marriage- to a "doll"; "It reminded [her] of how Ahmed had carried [her] as if he were shouldering a bundle of firewood ... these mannequins are invading the neighborhood, possessing our bodies, sowing tumors in men's

imaginations" (p. 105). Thus, the perceived thought in the lane is that women are possessions.

Aisha is the victim of a motor accident, in which her whole family have been killed, and she ends up with a broken hip. When a kind prince sends her to Germany for medical treatment, she falls in love with a German doctor to whom she sends love e-mails. The death of her fathers frees and unleashes her emotions. She remembers her childhood and the strict rules against love "At our house, love used to pause at the front door to stick out its spines like a hedgehog before crossing the threshold. Love could only be found in my father's pockets and my mother's pots and pans" (p. 77). The roles of women and men are fixed: men work to bring money and women stay home to serve them. However, contemporary women in the novel are stronger by keeping relation with other people on and offline.

Gender, sexuality, class, disability and race are portrayed throughout the novel. These characteristics make the theory of intersectional feminism useful to be applied to examine their effect on women's marginalization. The projection of women in the novel reflects their oppression because of their gender. Men in the novel have a masculine and misogynistic value system. They expect women to accept their culture's dictum; they marginalize women and expect them to be obedient. An example of women's neglect is Nora's relationship with her father who "doesn't look at her ... and when he sees [her] he sees the masculine child that he does not have" (p. 367). Another example is her relationship with Alsheikh whose "kiss penetrated her skull, burrowing down to her spine. When he pulled back, he could taste her blood on his lips. He licked them as he stared at her". He deals with her as a "hunter" who catches his prey by bait, and his is money. "It was absolutely vital for him that he remains exactly where he wanted her, when he wanted her, and how he wanted her.... Her silence awoke the hunter inside of him" (p. 372). It is clear that he deals with her as an object.

Another example of a "powerless" woman is Yusria, Khalil's sister. In a society which considers marriage the only purpose for women, Yusria suffers from the fact that she is old but unmarried. She is isolated and shunned; she lives in "Hajj Silahdar's home for destitute, [where she] look[s] after the aged and sick ... [she knows her path]: it's with [her] isolated sisters" (pp. 175-180). Like other unmarried women in her society, she loses the purpose to live:

Khalil used to terrorize me by saying, 'I can picture you as a silent bride in one of those cages for dead women!' And here I am, a spinster. I never married and never even went out into the world, and I'm waiting here in my cage for my funeral procession to set off. Death and I know each other pretty well after all this time. p.181.

There are a multitude of sexual relationships explored in Alem's *The Dove's Necklace*. Kathy Davis (2008) state that applying feminist intersectionality to a novel necessitates examining the characters describing how their bodies are sites for reproduction and sexual pleasure.

The awakening to adult sexuality can be seen not only in Aisha but also in Ramzia and the Turkish seamstress. Aisha is sexually attracted to the German doctor; she is sexually explicit. Ramzia's sexuality is interwoven with racism, so she is not only an excessively sexual woman but

also an over-sexualized Other in the narrative based on her dark skin color. Khalil learns of her excessive sensuality after their marriage; he describes her saying "There is something invisible in Ramzeia's body Something that ... refuses to behave itself. A base demon Her body is a storehouse of desire, driven not by passion but by disgusting appetite and excess" (p. 251). Ramzeia is double marginalized because of being a woman and erotic. Khalil tells her that she is "only a toy [he] plays with" and she has to be submissive and obedient (p. 294).

Also, Jamila, a fifteen-year-old Yemeni girl, marries Mzahim, Aza's father. He, first, looks at her as a sexual device that would give him a "male heir" p. 270. He looks at her as an inferior creature and he sends her to her family after days of her marriage. "He put a shelf of sweet in a rough bag and gave it to her" (p. 340). He deals with her as an object to satisfy his sexual needs. The male characters talk about the female characters as devices to satisfy their sexual desires.

In one of Aisha's e-mails, she criticizes *The Lane of Many Heads*: "Does The Lane of Many Heads have a problem with women? With one head he thinks of us as virgins untouchable and with the other head he imagines us sex dolls" (p. 53). Aisha shows the hypocrisy of the society and its contradiction in dealing with women; it wants them to be modest and sexually attractive at the same time. Aisha's marriage to Ahmed, the son of the sewage cleaner, shows the male oppression of women as he divorces her after two months for no reason and after two years he wants her again as if she were an object. Aisha gets a baby and it dies: "Help me No body should know I put my hands to relieve the child.... [but] he sensed [her fear] and fell definitively, finally, silent" (p. 484). The death of the baby boy reflects nature's objection to male oppression.

Women's oppression is clear when Aisha's father visits her on the morning after her wedding with a knife in his pocket aiming to kill her for the lack of sign that she is virgin. Her mother gets a sealed certificate that she has a rubber hymen. The sealed certificate "seems like a border between life and death" (p. 174). Aisha's rejection to continue her relationship with the German doctor reflects her refusal to be a mistress and approval of moral relationships. She conforms to the female model expected by the patriarchal society that identifies women as either chaste or immoral, virgin and whore. Also, Khalil's "stomach would be whisked away and turned upside down in disgust ... and become violent" when he sees promiscuous women. Similarly, his sister describes her father 's "severity [as] the language handed down from the time of Ottoman rule in Mecca, to [her] grandfather Ateeq, then Sulayman and from him to [her] father Nuri, and now it had reached Khalil" (p. 179). All these stories show the harsh way that men used to deal with women who do not conform to the ideologies of the patriarchal society.

In addition to gender and sexuality, class can be a source of women's oppression. Alem's novel is full of class issues, it proves that women's voices are so frequently excluded in economic debates. The most highlighted message is the exploitation of women in middle class to those in working class. As few professions are available for women in Mecca, needy girls have to do menial jobs. The Turkish seamstress, who is a middle class, is money-hungry, and she exploits the poor girls. Most of the poor girls in the lane are uneducated, so they they have to work with her, but she betrays them for her own economic privileges.

Economic inequality is clear in Aza's relationship with Alsheikh who imprisons her for his sexual enjoyment and the reward is beating her. As a working class woman, she suffers from the low wage and obliged by her father and the Turkish seamstress to live with Alsheikh, so she is not different from the other prostitutes. She starts sewing, but she falls under the oppression of the middle-class owner of the work besides the pressure from her father, and she becomes a new type of prostitute.

Despite the lack of the economic context in the novel, the economic pressures on women is clear. Although Aisha explores feminist issues like love, marriage, reproduction and puberty in details, she only mentions her financial situation as an announcement. In her dialogue with the German doctor, the reader understands that after the accident she is not able to receive medical care. A benevolent prince donate money for her treatment. After becoming crippled, she is not able to keep her job as a teacher. Another example is Halima, a single mother, who supports her son.

The feeling of superiority that high-class and middle-class women have over the working class complicates the process of social change; on the contrary, it makes the matter worse. Acknowledging the truths of lack of medical care and jobs for working-class women sheds light on their impersonal barriers to their progress. Lack of solidarity among women of different classes can be a reason for their oppression.

Aisha's position is ambiguous and raises some questions. She comes from a poor family background and becomes a teacher. One problem is whether she is still a member of the working class and another problem is whether she has the same status of middle-class teachers. It is clear from her financial status that her education and career have not changed her working class identity, which is based on her experience in childhood. Aisha still lives in a very small "cubbyhole", a room "between two floors, carved out like a tomb cut into the space of the dark room below. It weighs down on [her] chest" p. (109). The house is two rooms; the whole family sleeps in one room and the father gives private lessons in the other room. Although her work as a teacher is not physically demanding, it is repetitive and lacks autonomy. It does not eradicate the class identity formed in her "family class".

Ethnicity and race are examined to have a clear image of the projection of women in the novel. Kivisto and Croll (2012) state that race is related to the biological realm, while ethnicity lies within the cultural realm (pp. 1-5). In other words, race refers to features of genetic ancestry such as skin color, hair type, face and skull shape, but ethnicity refers to religion, language, and nationality. The novel shows that ethnicity, race, and disabilities increase women's oppression and men's domination. Aisha's emails reveal that she is unable to thrive in the Lane of Many Heads not only because of the cruelty of its people and their ideologies but also because she is crippled. She is double marginalized for being a woman and "crippled". She is called "the crippled" by both men and women in the lane; they ignore her job as a teacher and call her with her disability. She is shunned and ignored. Because of her disability, Aisha does not fit in the role of the delightful young girl she is expected to fill.

In addition to disabilities, race interferes in the degree of women's oppression. Saleh or Eunuchs' Goat sees women by their color: "yellow, black, or brown" (p. 118). Throughout the

story women are described by their colors. The “African woman who’d been sitting at the side of the road with her goods had leapt to her feet and shot away down the street [when] a truck emblazoned with the logo of the runs from the Market Inspection Service” (p. 123). Nonetheless, Halima, the poor Saudi, sells tea freely. Also, the “Philippino maid” is projected in a higher position than the Pakistani one who is depicted as a prostitute who “hosted all The Lane of Many Heads secret desires, with her famous saying that the upper part of her body is for her god and the lower part is for her lover” (p. 202). Women of color are depicted as inferior to their counterparts.

Ethnicity also interferes in the degree of women’s oppression since in the novel. Violating the customs and traditions of a conservative community like Mecca is a taboo that results in women’s double marginalization. In old Mecca smoking was forbidden; men who broke this custom deserved whipping. Religious men once “whipped the smokers and beat them harshly with sticks”, but the Lebanese woman is respected in this patriarchal society despite of being a smoker. Being a Lebanese puts her in higher status than women of other nationalities such as Pakistanis or Africans. Mua’z thinks that the Lebanese woman “was so unlike the black-cloaked woman of the neighborhood and his skinny cinnamon-sick sisters; no houri, certainly, but enchanting nonetheless with her thick cigars and smoke rings” (p. 150). Mua’z accepts what the Lebanese woman does but condemns the same deeds if they are done by African, Yemeni, Saudi or Pakistani women.

The Turkish seamstress is not as oppressed as the other women because of her ethnicity. Khalil expresses his enjoyment in making love with her despite her open language and rudeness. She is called “the empress of fashion”. On the other hand, he describes his wife Ramzeia, Alnazah’s daughter, as an inferior creature because of her class and race. Both Ramzeia and the Turkish seamstress are erotic but Khalil looks down at Ramzeia because of her ethnicity, and race. Also, the Turkish seamstress is strong enough to talk to Detective Naser aggressively “staring impudently back” at him (p. 171), whereas all men in the lane fear and respect him. When Al-labban’s four sons order “the eviction of seven [Saudi and Yemeni] families [the judges] had pretended not to notice that the Turkish seamstress was still there” (p. 348). It is obvious that the Turkish woman’s nationality, color and class give her privilege above other women in the lane.

Conclusion

To conclude, women are deprived of their social role of power in patriarchal societies. Throughout history, they are submissive, marginalized and obedient; however, their oppression varies in relation to their time. The four waves of feminism address different sources of oppression. The researcher combines two different feminist models: the second wave Gynocriticism and the fourth wave Intersectionality to examine the projection of women in a contemporary novel by a Saudi writer. The novel received the international prize for Arabic fiction and was translated into English. The findings show that contemporary women are identified by their race, ethnicity, class and sexual orientations. They are oppressed because they are women, but oppressed more if they are black, workers, or disabled. Another finding is that women’s struggle between their work and home created a new internal fight; they are obliged to challenge each other rather than the patriarchy. Therefore, some women gain some advantages because of their race, intellect, education or class. A third finding is that a decent education does not offer women job opportunities. The findings indicate that women’s solidarity is required for social reformation. All women should unite to stand against any kind of oppression, and advantageous women should

support the poor disadvantageous ones, particularly in Arab countries where economic security is an urgent need.

About the Autor

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