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# The Image of Women in Arab Theater Between Feminism and Sexuality: A Case Study of the Play "*The Mask*"

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***Abstract*—This research investigates the question of who is responsible for crafting the image of women in Arab theater. It presents a comprehensive panorama of the topic across the Arab world before delving into a case study from Jordan: the play "*The Mask*" by Jordanian playwright Nawal Al-Ali. The research also delves into the themes of sexuality and feminist creativity within Arab theater, questioning whether they represent radicalism or a necessity. It reveals, firstly, that the depiction of women from the dawn of creation has been shaped by the exegesis of sacred texts, casting her in the role of the tempter, portraying women as instruments of sexual allure in numerous works and contexts. Secondly, the study posits that the doctrines of patriarchal authority elucidate the male endeavor to dominate the sexual autonomy of women, their personal assets, and the theater of war, encompassing violence, assault, and enslavement as separate phenomena. The research sample demonstrates that, from the veil to nudity, men have dictated women's clothing and modesty (or lack thereof) throughout history. Still, Nawal Al-Ali's text does not exhibit extremism; rather, it serves as a wake-up call for women to reclaim their humanity and assert their agency in choosing their own attire, free from the dictates of men. Furthermore, the research demonstrates that globalization and the decline of modernity have reduced women to mere commodities to be exploited by large corporations for financial gain. Therefore, the researcher passionately believes that addressing these issues is not only necessary but also imperative.**

***Index Terms*—sexuality, feminism, Theories of Patriarchy, gender**

## I. Introduction

### *A. Panorama*

Deciphering the portrayal of women in Arab theater, a young art form with a history spanning only 170 years, is a monumental task that necessitates the concerted efforts of resolute researchers. Regrettably, women's contributions to playwriting in the Arab world remain notably minor compared to their male counterparts, particularly when juxtaposed against their remarkable creative achievements in other literary and artistic domains, such as short stories, novels, poetry, visual arts, and acting. Indeed, a meticulous survey of Arab playwrights throughout history reveals that the number of seasoned female dramatists can be counted on one's fingers. Among the most prominent female playwrights are Fathia Al-Assal, Awatif Naim, Latifa Al-Dulaimi, Hayat Al-Howayek, Hamda Khamis, and Haya Al-Husayni. However, their contributions did not offer an in-depth portrayal of women in theater as literary characters but rather focused on their experiences as female playwrights. Their works tackled various political and economic issues that affected Egypt and Iraq. Nevertheless, there were a few notable exceptions, such as Awatif Naim's adaptation of *Women of Lorca* and Fathia Al-Assal's *Women's Prison*. In a unique reinterpretation, Dr. Awatif Naim brought together the heroes of Lorca's four plays: *Mariana Pineda*, *Bernarda Alba*, *Blood Wedding*, and *Yerma*, for a tragic feast within the confines of Bernarda Alba's gloomy and joyless house. The atmosphere is laden with an eternal sense of mourning, not only due to the father's death but also due to the oppressive will of the matriarch, the widowed and tyrannical Bernarda Alba. She transforms the lives of her five daughters in Lorca's original play, Angustias and Magdalena, Amelia and Martirio, and Adela, into a dark prison. The windows are sealed shut, the curtains are drawn, the air is stagnant, and the color black dominates, symbolizing the eternal mourning imposed on everyone. Fadhel Thamer astutely observes:

> The artist's contributions to the original text are undoubtedly significant. Notably, the Lorquian female characters' revolt at the play's conclusion and their slaying of Bernarda, the embodiment of tyranny and oppression, constitute a powerful addition. Furthermore, the introduction of a new theme, albeit seemingly unjustified, emerges when the specter of tyranny resurfaces at the play's end, this time embodied by Yerma, who assumes the mantle of the tyrannical ruler and echoes Bernarda Alba's pronouncements from the play's opening. (2006)

The Egyptian writer Fathia Al-Assal began her writing career in 1957. Her work consistently foregrounded social issues with a particular focus on women's experiences. Al-Assal's formative years were marked by several momentous events that shaped her personality, including her own circumcision, witnessing her father's betrayal of her mother, and being denied an education. She wrote many plays, including *The Swing*, *Women Without Masks*, and the acclaimed *Women's Prison*. Her fearless exploration of women's issues led to her arrest on three separate occasions. In *Women's*

*Prison*, Al-Assal delves into the lives of female inmates, crafting a narrative that resonates with the lived experiences of those confined within its walls. The play confronts the oppressive patriarchal system, as Manar Khaled observes:

> The patriarchal system is embodied in all the men mentioned by the characters. The dialogue reveals that all the women's imprisonment stems ultimately from men. "This stark reality underscores the significant role that men play in the collective incarceration of these women, despite their diverse backgrounds and circumstances". (2021)

In her analysis of *Women's Prison*, the esteemed Egyptian critic Dr. Nihad Saliha astutely observes that the play, in both its textual and theatrical forms, eschews facile optimism. Instead, it confronts us with the stark question of survival and, through both implicit and explicit means, acknowledges that the true prison is one of the minds. This moral prison is constructed of outdated ideas, erroneous concepts, and deceptive perceptions that weigh heavily upon our collective psyche. Dismantling its walls requires a monumental and arduous struggle that shatters the veil of false consciousness, allowing for the emergence of true awareness (quoted in Alsahrif, Ahmad, 2020).

While the contributions of male Jordanian authors to the discourse on women's rights were limited, Gabriel Al-Sheikh stands out as a notable exception. His 1983 play, *The Exile of Zareef Al-Taul*, later published in a comprehensive study with analysis by Dr. Mufid Al-Huwamdeh, offers a powerful portrayal of the Palestinian struggle and the crucial role played by women in supporting it. The most striking character in the play is Dal'ona, a prostitute who defies expectations by selflessly donating all her jewelry and gold to the revolution. While some may view this function as radical, Al-Sheikh's masterful depiction reveals the complex humanity of this marginalized woman. Despite being forced into prostitution by her husband, Dal'ona retains a deep inner purity and unwavering commitment to her people, as evidenced by her unwavering support for the revolution in times of crisis (1985).

Another notable work is "The Night of the Burial of the Actress J" by Jamal Abu Hamdan. This poignant play centers on an aging actress who is forced to retire from her profession and denied the opportunity to portray the role of Zarqa Al-Yamama, a character known for her piercing vision. Through the protagonist's journey, the play delves into the lives of influential women throughout history, shedding light on their struggles and achievements. Some of the historical figures featured in the play include:

> Cleopatra (the tragic suicide), Shahrazad (the prison of narrative imagination), Desdemona (the tragedy of falsified history), Salome (the tragedy of lusts), Zenobia (the tragedy of hatred and conspiracy), Antigone (the tragedy of defiance for justice), and Juliet (the tragedy of love). (Said, 2015, p. 93)

Jamal Abu Hamdan's masterful incorporation of influential historical figures in his play *The Night of the Burial of the Actress J* echoes the ethos of feminist theater, a movement that emerged in the 1970s as part of the second wave of feminism. Considering this critical lens, *The Night of the Burial of the Actress J* can be firmly situated within this global theatrical movement.

Notably, this play marks the first time that theater has been explicitly discussed within the context of feminist movements. As Haddy Kreie astutely observes in her article "Feminism in Theater": "Feminist theater challenged both the form and content of traditional theater. In terms of content, it focused on presenting the stories of female characters who have been marginalized and overlooked throughout history, despite their undeniable personal influence" (2003-2024).

The 1970s witnessed a remarkable transformation in the portrayal of women in theater, spearheaded by leftist writers. Women were no longer confined to traditional roles but rather emerged as powerful symbols of the homeland or the land. This shift is evident in the plays of Egyptian writer Mahmoud Diab, such as *Strangers Don't Drink Coffee*, *Messenger from Tamira Village*, and *Nights of Harvest*, where women embody the resilience and spirit of the nation. Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannous further explored this symbolism in his play *The Rape*, presenting women as a metaphor for a usurped homeland. Iraqi writer Farouk Mohammed took a different approach in his play *The Straw*, delving into the complexities of marital infidelity and the potential for women to be perceived as traitors to the homeland, as she did not fight for her rights neither as a woman nor as a nation.

The third phase of Wannous's career marked a significant turning point in his depiction of women. His plays *Misery Dreams*, *A Country Narrower Than Love*, and *Drunken Days* became a clarion call for women's liberation. Wannous fearlessly tackled controversial topics such as sexual dissatisfaction and the pressure on women to conform to societal expectations, challenging the patriarchal narrative and advocating for female empowerment. In his play *The Heights of Love*, he explored the taboo subject of the socially unaccepted sexual relationships outside of the institution of marriage, highlighting the destructive consequences of societal prejudice and repression. Through his bold and insightful works, Wannous firmly established himself as a leading voice in the feminist theater movement, shedding light on the injustices and inequalities faced by women and advocating for transformative change. Still, while the playwrights made significant strides in championing women's rights, it is important to acknowledge that they represent the exception rather than the rule.

A critical examination of Arab theater over the past century reveals that most male writers have perpetuated a predominantly negative and stereotypical portrayal of women. Women are often depicted as tools of seduction, as exemplified in Ali Salem's 1973 play *School of Troublemakers*. In this play, the female teacher is objectified and reduced to a mere sexual object, serving as a source of amusement for the male characters and audience. Similarly, Alfred Farag's 1976 play *Witness Who Saw Nothing* presents a bleak and demoralizing view of women. The protagonist's descent into debauchery is justified by his encounters with women who are portrayed as either prostitutes or a lover who is kissed without any dramatic justification. Even in comedies such as Bahjat Qamar's 1979 play *The Kids Grew Up*, women are

often depicted as being intellectually inferior and emotionally unstable. The play's comedic elements rely on stereotypes and caricatures that reinforce negative perceptions of women.

### *B. Research Problem and Questions*

This research explores the problematic representation of women in Arab theater. Theater practitioners and critics alike have raised questions about the origins of this portrayal, considering whether women have played a role in shaping their own image on stage or whether it has been shaped by male writers over the past 170 years, from Marun al-Naqqash[1] to the present day. The research examines the impact of this male-dominated writing on the portrayal of women in Arab theater, both positively and negatively. It also investigates the influence of feminist and gender movements that emerged in the early 20th century on highlighting violence against women, the alienation of their rights, and their deprivation of intellectual equality with men. The research further considers the extent to which addressing gender concepts on stage is considered extremism or necessity and whether female writers and directors have approached these concepts differently from their male counterparts. Finally, the research explores the impact of this portrayal on women in everyday life and on the public's perception of them.

### *C. Study Objectives*

This study seeks to explore the representation of women in Arab theater, with a particular focus on the Jordanian play *The Mask*. The study aims to identify the factors that have shaped the image of women on stage over time and to examine the impact of this representation on Arab society. The study also investigates the role of sexuality and feminism in Arab theater and considers whether their portrayal on stage is necessary or extremist. Furthermore, the study seeks to contribute to the development of a more positive and nuanced representation of women on stage and in society.

### *D. Theoretical Part*

Returning to the second part of the research question, it is essential to establish a clear understanding of key concepts before delving into the theorization of gender. To begin, we must differentiate between the notions of sex and gender.

The term “gender” emerged in the 1980s to distinguish between the biological sexes, which are determined by physical characteristics, and social gender, which is shaped by societal norms and expectations. The concept of sex is primarily concerned with the biological differences between men and women, such as their anatomy and reproductive systems. These biological factors are considered static (AlNabaa Informatics Network, 2007), as they remain unchanged throughout a person's lifetime. In contrast, gender is a dynamic concept that encompasses the social roles, behaviors, and expressions associated with masculinity and femininity. These roles and expectations can vary significantly across cultures, communities, and even within the same society. Factors such as race, social class, economic conditions, and age play a significant role in determining what is considered appropriate behavior and activities for men and women. The introduction of the concept of “gender” as a distinct entity from “sex” serves to highlight the malleability of gender roles and expectations. While biological factors may differentiate men and women in terms of their physical functions, everything else they do and what is expected of them within society is subject to change over time and across different social and cultural contexts (AlNabaa Informatics Network, 2007). This distinction is further emphasized by feminist scholar Carol Brown, who states that feminist movements focus their analysis on gender, alongside race and class as key categories. Central to their approach is the understanding that the relationship between the sexes is primarily a social construct rather than a purely biological one (Brown, 1994).

Considering that the concept of gender has become an integral part of gender theories, Sylvia Walby defines gender feminism as “an approach that conceptualizes gender and gender relations as mutually constitutive constructs” (1990). In her book, Walby further elaborates on her theorization of patriarchy, identifying the concept of male sexual oppression of women as the subject of research and defining it through the following points:

1. Rape
2. Forced marriage
3. Women's reproductive organs
4. Ending the dowry (in the West)
5. Honor killings
6. Sexual slavery
7. Female infanticide
8. The sex of the baby before birth (1990)

Walby further defines gender patriarchy as a system of inequality in which men view women as inferior and being a man is a privilege. This system is characterized by male dominance, the definition of male identity, male centricity, and an obsession with possession.

The researcher will use these points as a reference to analyze the selected sample for the study. The researcher will examine the extent to which Nawal al-Ali's play The Mask raises issues related to gender feminism and feminism in general. The research aims to reach conclusions about the role of Nawal al-Ali's work in challenging patriarchal norms and promoting gender equality.

[1] Marun Al-Naqaash (1817-1855) was a Lebanese director and playwright and is considered the first to introduce theater to the Arab world.

## II. Discussion

### *A. Seduction*

The writer begins her play with the assumption that the image of the sexually alluring woman has been present in all Abrahamic religions since the beginning of creation, as exemplified by the story of Adam and Eve. Although the narrative may vary across different religious accounts, the image of women is shaped by men's interpretation of these texts. Some interpretations place the blame on Eve for tempting Adam to eat from the forbidden tree. In Jewish tradition, the serpent is often held responsible. Some believe that the serpent seduced Adam, while others believe that the devil entered the serpent and used it to tempt Eve, who then led Adam astray. As punishment, Eve was cursed with the pain of childbirth, while Adam was condemned to toil on the earth from which he was created: "For you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). In the Quran, the story of Adam and Eve's sin is mentioned in three suras: Al-Baqarah, Al-A'raf, and Ta-Ha. In the Quran, God tells Adam and Eve to live in Paradise and eat from wherever they please, except for one tree. Satan tempts them to eat from the forbidden tree, and they are expelled from Paradise. God then sends them to Earth, where they will face hardship but also find comfort and provision. Adam repents to God, and God forgives him (The Holy Quran, Surah Al-Baqarah, verses 33,37). This story shows that sin is not caused by women or snakes, but by Satan. Sheikh Muhammad Metwally Al-Shaarawy explains that Adam and Eve were punished for their disobedience, but they were also forgiven. Therefore, it is wrong to say that their sin was passed on to all of humanity. What happened was a sin, not a crime, and women should not be blamed for it (1991, p. 49).

In returning to the script of 'The Mask', Nawal Al-Ali tried to denounce the notion of Isra'iliyyat because, regrettably, it is the common thinking today even among Muslims. They assume that it was Eve who tempted Adam without the necessary scientific and religious examination, and even the real Islamic stance on this issue that contradicts the Isra'iliyyat in attributing the sin of temptation to women. It is written as follows:

- Woman1 : We used to be naked and feel no shame.
- Man 3: You, cut off from that tree, tempt me.
- Woman 2: Are those not your fingers that received bareness as a fruit?
- Men together: My God, the sinful one tempts, her tongue is sharp, and her heart is like a lump from sheer desire.
- Woman 3: Alas, my perishable body, how you were attached to fear, the sin stands like a scarecrow.
- Man 3: Tempt me. (Al- Ali Nawal, 2007)

In these texts, the writer points to the genesis story of Adam and Eve, and she draws a comparison with the present-day dynamics between men and women, where the men regard the women as merely a source of sexual gratification, and her essential role from the beginning of time has been seduction. The writer returns at another point to assert that men think that the women's essential role is to entertain the men in bed, where she states:

- Men: The sin stands like a scarecrow, and the woman is bound to the bed as though she is pinned, seduce us, oh sinful one.

The women attempt to refuse this age-old stereotypical image imposed on them, and they say in response to what was mentioned:

- Women: We shall not do so.

The writer stresses the man's perception of the woman as a source of seduction and suffering, where the men declare:

- Men: Seduce us, oh you who are blamed for sin, seduction, and suffering.

And the women, denying this age-old perspective, respond:

- Women: We are not to blame.

Judaism, as depicted in the Book of the Righteous, Sunnah, portrays a society where a Jewish man could purchase a woman from her father and subjugate her to his will in all matters. However, Jesus Christ abolished this oppressive practice, granting Christian women equal humanity and dignity with men (Al-Ashqer, Umar, 2008, p. 40). Despite Christ's message of equality, certain patriarchal practices and interpretations of Christian doctrine persist. For example, Saint Paul, who died in 64 AD, wrote in his letter to the Corinthians: "Woman is the glory of man, for woman is from man, and because man was not created for woman, but woman for man." This statement contradicts Christ's message of equality and reinforces the notion of female subservience (First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, Chapter 3, Verse 9).

Christianity, in this case, reverts to a paradigm that relegates women to a lower status than men, positioning them as mere creations for the service of men. This reinforces the notion of male superiority and female subservience. Nawal Al-Ali's revolutionary work challenges the conventional portrayal of women as mere objects of male desire. Her play offers a unique perspective that is deeply rooted in feminist theory, advocating for the empowerment of women in all spheres of life. As critic Awad Ali astutely observes, "Feminism theatre seeks to dismantle gender-based oppression and subvert patriarchal theatrical conventions that reduce women to decorative objects or beautiful possessions" (4/11/2016). This bold stance represents a powerful resistance against the sexual subjugation perpetuated by patriarchal ideologies of sexuality. Al-Ali's work can also be situated within the context of the second feminist movement, which, as Krele observes, "focused on equality and non-discrimination between the sexes. It sought to disrupt the male gaze and dismantle the notion that the world views women through a male lens for the gratification of desire" (Study.com, 2003-2024). Al-Ali's vision aligns with this perspective, as she endeavors to dismantle the male gaze in feminist/gender theater. Her play challenge the prevailing patriarchal view of women and offer a powerful counter-narrative that highlights the need for

gender equality and female empowerment. This clearly demonstrates her affiliation with feminist/gender theater, which the researcher believes is essential to combat the persistent sexual objectification of women.

*B. The Veil*

A second significant theme explored by Al-Ali in "*The Mask*" is the veil. This research delves into two distinct aspects: the veil of the head and the veil of the mind. This image of women is yet again imposed by men who dictate how women should dress and what they should wear on their heads, using religion as a pretext at times and the need to avoid female temptation through hair and clothing.

Al-Ali says in the play:

- Woman 1: They veiled me from myself. Perhaps I will not wear the mask. The fever rages in my head, guarded by sins.
- Woman 2: And when she stood up for her reasons, they covered her body with silk fabrics and wrapped her in a cloth of gold.

Here, Al-Ali explores the ways in which society can alienate women from themselves, impose restrictions on them, and burden them with the blame for sin. She also suggests that when women are convinced that they are the source of temptation and discord, they are veiled, and their bodies and heads are covered. The researcher believes that it is essential to engage in a critical discussion of the religious justifications for covering women, particularly the hijab (The Veil). As previously mentioned, the hijab has historically been controlled by men across different faiths, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. According to Erafat Tseelon, "A Jewish woman is obligated to cover her hair. She may do so using a jeweled net or, at a later stage, a wig" (1996, p. 23).

Yet, religious Jews view head covering as an imperative for Jewish women. Baron asserts, "It is not the custom of the daughters of Israel to walk in the streets with bare heads" (1967). Disagreements regarding head covering have persisted among Jews, sparking protracted debates to this day. One such debate centers on the permissibility of wearing a wig in lieu of a hijab. Rabbi Mayer Schiller, however, maintains that "Jewish scholars have unanimously concluded that it is forbidden for a Jewish woman to uncover all her hair" (Quoted in Kol Isha, 1980, p. 55). Nevertheless, Kol observes, "There appears to be no legislative source or accepted jurisprudential text that permits a married woman to have all her hair uncovered in public spaces" (p. 56).

The debate over female head covering and the wearing of a hijab in any form has yet to be resolved, dating back to the first divine revelation. But what about Christianity? Dr. Sharif Khoury Latif, in an article published on the website of the "Enlightened Dialogue" argues that

> head covering for women in Christianity is only required when attending church and receiving religious teachings. The Bible states, 'But any woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head.' In this context, prophecy refers to receiving religious teachings. Nuns who cover their heads always do so because they are constantly in a state of worship. (1/12/2014)

Ultimately, sin in Christianity is associated with the lust of the eye, not the woman's head. The Gospel of Matthew states, "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell" (Gospel of Matthew, 5:29).

As for the hijab in Islam, the Quran mentions it in more than one verse, and it did not mean clothing except in one verse, which will be discussed below. First, in Surat Al-A'raf, verse 46, the word hijab means a wall that separates the people of Paradise from the people of Hell. In Surat Fussilat, verse 5, the word hijab means an intellectual and ideological barrier. In Surat Al-Ahzab, verse 53, it means a wall, or a curtain made of cloth. In Surat Sad, the phrase "she hid behind the hijab" means she disappeared on the horizon, and the Prophet Solomon was talking about horses in this verse. In Surat Maryam, verse 17, it means that the Virgin Mary distanced herself from people in her society so that they would not see her at the time of childbirth. In Surat Al-Isra, verse 45, it means a hidden veil, a barrier of faith that prevents them from believing in the Quran. The verse often cited in support of wearing the jilbab[2] is from Surat Al-Ahzab, verse 59. It instructs the Prophet to tell his wives, daughters, and believing women to draw their jilbab over to their feet to avoid being harmed. A women's wearing of the jilbab is linked to harm. "If there is no fear of harm, then there is no justification for wearing it" (Hameed Toufiq, 28/2/2018). Considering the evidence, the researcher concludes that people have failed to truly immerse themselves in their beautiful religion, which upholds justice for women. Instead, they have chosen to focus on superficial interpretations to exert control over women.

Al-Ali's play "*The Mask*" introduces the concept of a second veil, one that goes beyond the physical covering of the head and extends to the mind. This veil, argues the researcher, is far more oppressive than the former.

Woman 3's words illustrate this point:

"With the mask, you walk and with its command you look at the outside daylight. You do not know any names except what he wants".

Al-Ali's message is clear: women are discouraged from independent thought and are expected to defer to men in all matters. This blind obedience, the researcher argues, contradicts the Quranic message of partnership and tranquility between spouses (Surat Al-Rum, verse 12). The current situation, the researcher laments, is characterized by a lack of

[2] Jilbab is a rational Islamic loose long dress to the feet, where the head is covered by a veil.

ijtihad[3] and a proliferation of self-proclaimed muftis who interpret religious texts to serve their own agendas, often at the expense of women's rights. Reinforcing the argument against the veil of the mind, Qasim Amin (1863-1908) in his book (Woman Liberation), states: “I did not call for women to remove the hijab, I only viewed it as a barrier to their intellect and their potential to thrive as individuals created by God with full capacity. He envisioned women collaborating with men, not isolated from them" (2012, pp. 32-35). Throughout her work, Nawal Al-Ali emerges as a champion of women's rights, urging them to reject passive submission to patriarchal norms that exploit religion to subjugate women and nullify their role as partners. Al-Ali aligns herself with the second wave of feminism, which, as Haddy Kreie elucidates, advocates for gender equality, and challenges the male gaze that objectifies women, reducing them to mere objects of desire (2003-2024). Additionally, in terms of sexuality, sexual theories have looked at patriarchy and pinpointed key concepts of women’s sexual oppression, among them “women’s reproductive organs and, secondarily, sexual servitude” (Wallby Sylvia, 1990, p. 65). Hence, the masculine perspective has focused on regulating the hijab, the dress of women, and their gender-specific functions.

### *C. Commodification of Women*

There is no doubt that women in the twentieth century were turned into commercial commodities for profit. This commodification, which relies on women's beauty and power of seduction, was presented to us by global corporations (cartels) as a product to promote commercial or artistic goods, regardless of the quality of the product or good.

In her play "*The Mask*," Nawal Al-Ali critiques the objectification of women in the entertainment industry. Through a character like Man 3, she highlights how singers are often presented as commodities, valued for their looks and sex appeal rather than their artistic merit.

- Man 3: And now, dear viewers, you have an appointment with the owner of the inflated lips and the latest additions of the wig, with the hot looks and the dancing presence, the queen of excitement in her latest song.

Al-Ali suggests that this approach prioritizes profit over artistic integrity. Production companies focus on creating a superficial image to sell more albums, exploiting the female form for commercial gain. This aligns with the views of thinker Abdel Wahab Al-Messiri, who argues that women's bodies are increasingly being used to sell products and attract viewers in television, advertising, and even artistic fields like acting and singing. He emphasizes the negative impact of this trend, where women are valued for their physical appearance rather than their talent or skills. This constant objectification can distort societal perceptions and normalize the idea that women are merely objects for male gratification (28/4/2004). Al-Ali's critique extends beyond the commodification of women in television and advertising to encompass social media platforms. She condemns the exploitation of women on these platforms, where they are reduced to commodities for selling prostitution in various forms. This is exemplified by Man 2's statement: "Call now, the price per minute is sixty cents".

Al-Ali's critique extends to the media, both television and telephonic, which portray women as commodities selling moments to men through their image or voice. Men can obtain this for a price, and it can even fulfill their desires without physical contact, through alluring images or voices. The researcher argues that this approach demeans women and condemns their acceptance of being reduced to commodities to satisfy men's needs for money. While acknowledging the historical existence of prostitution, the researcher emphasizes that it was previously condemned by society and religion, and was always conducted in secrecy. However, it has now become public and normalized through television screens and various communication channels. Despite its promise of human emancipation, modernity has fallen short in delivering happiness and well-being. It placed the human at the apex of its hierarchy, prioritizing him over both nature and material considerations. However, the demise of modernity and its attendant ideologies ushered in the era of postmodernity. As Max Weber astutely observed, postmodernity has resulted in the "decentering" of the human being. He is no longer seen as a being with a privileged position over nature and matter, but rather as an integral part of them. In this sense, he has become "another material" devoid of any transcendent reference, purpose, or humanity (2019, p. 152). Does Nawal Al-Ali's bold exploration of gender issues in her work constitute extremism? Or should we view it as a clarion call to her fellow women, a rallying cry to reject objectification and refuse to have their bodies commodified by unscrupulous profiteers who exploit them for personal gain? In this process, women are stripped of their humanity, reduced to mere objects, and subjected to the dehumanizing gaze of a patriarchal society. Al-Ali's work is not extremist; it is a necessary intervention that exposes the insidious nature of the sex trade and urges women to resist its dehumanizing effects.

In conclusion, the researcher would like to draw attention to the words of Abdel Wahab Al-Messiri in his essay "The Video Clip, the Body, and Globalization." Al-Messiri speaks of the sublime nature of Arabic singing, which has been corrupted by vulgar melodies and lyrics. These are often accompanied by video clips that are replete with sexual movements, which can have a mesmerizing effect on viewers. Al-Messiri concludes his essay by asking, "Is there any way to stop this continuous deterioration?" (28/4/2004).

Here, the researcher reinforces this argument to challenge the demeaning view of women and their exploitation in such vile ways.

### *D. Patriarchy*

[3] Ijtihad in Arabic language means independent reasoning.

Patriarchy, as defined by sociologist Manuel Castells, is a system of male authority embedded within the family and permeating all aspects of social organization. It is a society where culture dictates that power resides with the head of the household, a belief rooted in the perceived physical and social superiority of men and the inferiority of women (1997, p. 54). Patriarchy also encompasses "power dynamics that prioritize men's interests over women's. These dynamics manifest in many ways, from gender-based division of labor and social organization of reproduction to the internalized standards of femininity that shape our lives. Patriarchal authority draws its strength from the social significance attached to sexual and biological differences" (p. 55). Haris Mirkin illuminates the two foundational pillars of patriarchal theory: paternal control and the passive women (1984, p. 41). Harris further elaborates on the historical perception of men as the rightful holders of constitutional power in governance. This perception has led them to shape ideology, philosophy, and art in accordance with their own needs. Women, regardless of their economic standing, are consistently viewed as an oppressed class. This notion is further emphasized by Kate Millett in her book Sexual Politics, where she asserts that "the ministries, ethics, philosophy, art, and culture of all civilizations are the product of men" (1970, p. 25).

Considering the aforementioned information and the understanding that ideologies, both religious and political, are male constructed, it becomes evident that the writing of history throughout the ages has also been dominated by men, who have used it to serve their own interests and consolidate their power. Feminist movements have interpreted this as a "conspiratorial approach by men" (p. 25). Nawal Al-Ali alludes to this in her play through the concept of the falsification of history by men. In one scene, she says:

- Woman 1: They used to write history like sending a fake money order.

Here, Al-Ali highlights the male manipulation of history and continues:

- Woman 2: They register false titles with defiled seals.

Al-Ali asserts that the transmitted information is false and that the authors' signatures are tainted by forgery.

The researcher has previously discussed how customs, traditions, and heritage portray women as sinful and the cause of Adam's temptation and expulsion from paradise. Al-Ali further emphasizes this in her play:

- Woman 3: They catalog sins under our names, they gamble with the femininity of creation and lament their fate.

Women attempt to highlight that this falsification has been unveiled and that men can no longer distort the truth, as Woman 1 asserts:

- Woman 1: The game of records no longer deceives anyone.

Men defend themselves and revert to blaming women for the sins, as Al-Ali depicts:

- Man 1: In a swift blow, we descended, the blessing of immortality vanished.
- Man 2: Due to her lack of intelligence and patience, he descended. She was urging him to disobey and inflaming his curiosity.

Regrettably, a sizable portion of society continues to perceive women as lacking in intellect and religion. This perception has enabled men to seize power, considering themselves to be intellectually and religiously superior. Al-Ali goes further, highlighting the historical accusations against women, portraying them as the ones who deceived Adam and caused his ingratitude. She says:

- Man 3: From his haven, Adam is brought forth. From deception, the woman emerges and clothes him in the garment of ingratitude.

Given that men have been the chroniclers of history; it comes as no surprise that it is fraught with bias. Firstly, it presents a skewed perspective, and secondly, it serves to glorify the needs and supremacy of men. Across the ages, women have been relegated to the margins, awaiting justice. However, the dawn of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of feminist movements. These movements challenged the male-dominated historical narrative, and women began to claim their rightful place on the map alongside men, albeit in a limited capacity. After all, dismantling a patriarchal system that has been entrenched for over 2500 years is no easy feat. Al-Ali delves into the second facet of patriarchal theory: the passive woman. She assigns responsibility to both men and women for propagating the male agenda. Women are either complicit in their own oppression or they passively accept their subjugation without attempting to change their circumstances.

In her critique of the male agenda, Al-Ali writes:

- Woman 3: You walk veiled, and by his command you emerge into the light of day. You know only the names he allows you to know.

In this scene, Woman 3 embodies the female mouthpiece of the patriarchal agenda. She indoctrinates her fellow women into complete subservience to men, advocating for restrictions on their freedom of movement and social interaction. This total negation of women's humanity and partnership in life is echoed by the passive woman, who wholeheartedly believes in its correctness. This conviction stems from her lack of a sense of being deprived, as this mindset has been deeply embedded in her psyche and consciousness over time and through generations, further reinforced by the falsification of history. Al-Ali also explores another type of women: those who are cognizant of their oppression yet remain passive. She says:

- Woman 3: Lifeless cocoons, one after the other, trapped in the spider's web. Like me, many women here drift through life, their minds elsewhere, their gazes empty. We pass the time with embroidery, and when we cry, we blame it on the onions.

Here, Al-Ali portrays women as inert entities within the spider's web (the man). They age and endure oppression, yet they take no action to liberate themselves, resorting to embroidery as a pastime. Even their tears are veiled, disguised as the result of onion-induced tears rather than the pain of oppression. Al-Ali further exposes the patriarchal indoctrination that confines women to the roles of bedmates, mothers, and domestic servants. Their lives are deemed meaningless without a man to satisfy their physical needs, provide them with companionship, and find solace in their submissiveness, as expressed by Woman 3:

- Woman 3: Do not corrupt the girl, let her organize her days like glass vessels, let her pass the time with patience. What is her life without a man to draw her to bed, consume her food, and find contentment in her tranquility?

The subjugation of women stems not only from the distortion of history, the male monopoly on power, and the female tendency towards passivity. It is also deeply rooted in the patriarchal control over various aspects of women's lives, including modesty, as exemplified by the hijab. Religious interpretations do not solely explain this phenomenon. Rather, as Flugel posits in his psychological studies, it is rooted in the male fear of the castrating complex. The realization of the anatomical differences between the sexes triggers a subconscious fear in the male child of being castrated by the mother, leading to a loss of his masculinity and power. According to Flugel, every man harbors a fear of women, fearing that they might starve, poison, strangle, or cut him into pieces. To counter this fear, men subconsciously construct a strong defensive image of themselves. The feminine clothing that men have designed serves as a defensive strategy to protect their genitals (1924, p. 98). In "*The Mask*," Al-Ali exposes the male control over women's attire in patriarchal societies. She illustrates this through Woman 3:

- Woman 3: When she stood her ground, they draped her body in silken fabrics, swaddling her in gold... Silence is golden, they say, so let it be.

Once women became cognizant of men's fear of them, men cloaked them in silk and gold, bringing them under their control and preserving their power. This pattern has been repeated throughout history, as men have relentlessly employed various tactics, such as imposing dress codes and modesty, to quell their subconscious anxieties about the castration complex as a defensive strategy.

## III. Conclusion

The researcher concludes that women, as playwrights and critics, have been at the forefront of challenging the representation of women in Arab theater, compared to their male counterparts. Some studies and plays have presented women in a positive light, and some have shown a bias towards them. Moreover, men have predominantly shaped the stereotypical image of women in Arab theater throughout its 170-year history, with few exceptions noted in the research. The research further revealed that patriarchal masculinity has constructed an image of women in theater as frail creatures subservient to men and catering to their desires. From this patriarchal perspective, women are seen as beings created for obedience, procreation, and fulfilling men's daily and sexual requirements.

In her daring play "*The Mask*," playwright Nawal Al-Ali fearlessly exposes the roots of the marginalized image of women in Arab theater. She identifies the underlying causes with remarkable clarity, as follows: Across the ages, religious texts have been interpreted by men who have diminished women's roles from the outset of history, branding them with accusations of temptation and sin. This constitutes violence against women and sexual enslavement. In addition to that, patriarchal masculinity has exerted control over women's attire, such as the hijab, driven by the fear of the castration complex, as Flugel posits. It has also perpetuated the more insidious "hijab of the mind," which confines women's roles to gratifying and submitting to men, viewing them as their personal possessions. Moreover, the research concludes that throughout history, men have been the chroniclers of history, crafting its narrative to serve their own interests. This has led to the fabrication of a warped image of women, confining them to predetermined roles that depict them as helpless and unfit for genuine action and meaningful participation in societal development, all under the guise of their inherent weakness. It is worth noting that women themselves have played a role in perpetuating the narrative of female subjugation to men, complying with their demands without question. Consequently, women have frequently become their own adversaries, undermining the image of women in Arab theater. However, the advent of globalization in the twentieth century and the demise of modernity have conspired to transform women into commodities. This is glaringly apparent in singing, music videos, commercial advertisements, and the commodification of their voices and bodies via communication media to market themselves, thereby selling sex. As Al-Messiri posits, the woman's body has been reduced to an object, devoid of any ethical or moral worth. Finally, the researcher concludes that creative feminism and feminism are themes that must be explored boldly in the theater. They are a crucial necessity, not a form of extremism.

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