



**Dealing with Feminism, according to Virginia Woolf and Elain Showalter: concerning the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Fadwa Tawqan.**

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**Abstract:**

Feminist theory is the intellectual, philosophical and sociological framework of feminism. In order to understand gender inequality, the feminist theory focuses on gender politics, power relations, and sexuality. The major goal of feminist movements is to improve women's social status. Women began their protest by claiming that they were paid less than men; since then, women have learned that the issue is far beyond poor wages, but also low social positions. One of the feminist criticism concerns is the view of women as writers and creators of literary work. In this regard, feminist critics disagree regarding how female writers handle their



writings. The applied approach in this study is the debate between Virginia Woolf and Elaine Showalter. For Woolf, androgynous thinking is normal and necessary; for Showalter, it is submissive and humiliating. Woolf seeks a fair judgment for both men and women while Showalter seeks stronger resolve and views towards feminist issues. This thesis examines how Emily Dickinson and Fadwa Tawqan alternate between employing androgynous and feminist language. Furthermore, this thesis examines whether they planned to utilize direct or indirect language in each feminist concept they sought to convey.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Women, Virginia Woolf, Elain Showalter, Emily Dickinson , Fadwa Tawqan



## Introduction

Feminist theory is an extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical fields. It focuses on gender politics, power relations, and sexuality in order to analyze gender inequalities. Much of feminist theory focuses on the promotion of women's rights and interests while presenting a critique of these social and political interactions. Books like "*A literature Of Their Own*" and "*New Feminist Criticism*" by Elaine Showalter are some of the indispensable books about feminism. According to the American feminist critic Elaine Showalter, feminist criticism is divided into two distinct lines. The first line is concerned with the view of women as readers and receivers of male-formed literature. This criticism focused how female characters are described and depicted in literary works and the stereotypical image with which women are perceived in society, such as their codes of behavior. It is also concerned with the use of women in literary works as a body symbol or as a symbol of evil, especially pointed to as a humiliating symbol by the patriarchal society. The second line is concerned with the view of women as writers and creators of literary work. In this regard, feminist critics discussed how female writers deal with their texts. One of these discussions is between Virginia Woolf: the feminist critic and writer, and Elaine Showalter: the American critic and writer. According to the intellectual difference between Showalter and Woolf, androgynous thinking is acceptable and needed for Woolf, yet submissive and degrading for Showalter. Woolf seeks fair judgment for both men and women while Showalter seeks more determination and a sharper attitude towards feminist issues. This article -in hand- shows how Emily



Dickinson and Fadwa Tawqan are teetering between using an androgynous language and a pure feminist language. One can consider the deconstructive form of language as a kind of androgynous language.

One of the feminist criticism concerns is the appreciation of women as writers and creators of literary work. In this regard, feminist critics have various discussions regarding how female writers tackle their outputs. This article's chosen approach is the argument between Virginia Woolf and Elaine Showalter. Woolf is an English writer whose most focused topics were women and their demands. "*A Room of one's Own*" is an essay through which she tackles several feminist issues. As for Showalter, she is an American writer whose literary, feminist, cultural, and social issues are her fundamental interests. According to the argument between them, Androgynous thinking is fair and required for Woolf, yet it is submissive and degrading for Showalter. Showalter believed that the patriarchal society affected and shortened the language of women writers. Woolf searches for an impartial judgment for both men and women, while Showalter pursues stronger firmness and strong visions toward feminist concerns. This thesis inspects how Emily Dickinson and Fadwa Tawqan exchanged engaging androgynous and pure feminist language. In addition, this article tests whether they intended to utilize direct or indirect speech in each feminist notion they wanted to express. This thesis also aims to trace the feminist streams in some selected poems of Dickinson and Tawqan, especially their shouts against patriarchy, and find the similarities and differences. Questions like how they could use poetry to express their inner feelings and attitudes in life and if



women face the same problems despite the different societies and times are inquiries that may find answers in this study.

To interpret some of Dickinson and Tawqan's poems: it is necessary to spot a kind of writing which is the deconstructive form of language. This kind of writing is related to a theory predicated basically on the writings of Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher. This theory believes that the text does not have one central or unified idea. It also assumes that there is no authorized catalog to interpret the literary texts. This approach can help in this thesis. Therefore, this article shows some poems of Dickinson and Tawqan related to this selected feminist approach. It is divided into three sections related to feminism. The first one is about the sense of alienation which is ubiquitous and conspicuous in their poetic production. The second is about nature as a source of inspiration and healing. The last section is about the clear feminist attitudes in their poems.

To begin with, there are two definitions of alienation. The first one, as a lexical meaning, is to withdraw from one position to another. The second definition, as a social one, means to retreat from real life, despising and antagonizing it. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was a Germanic philosopher and was one of the intellectuals of modern foreign philosophy. He believed that alienation is a part of the practice of self-creativity and self-finding. According to Hegel, initially, our consciousness is isolated from itself. It cannot



understand its true nature. To realize its real nature, consciousness needs to develop complete knowledge (qtd. in Debnath). The sense of Alienation is grown in the heart of the poets due to a fundamental reason. When imagination and expectations clash with reality, the poet resorts to shapes of isolation as means of escape. Through this escape, the poets try to draw an ideal life and build a perfect one in their poems. Regarding the personal life of Dickinson and Tawqan, they were exposed to disappointing situations that delayed their achievements in writing.

For Dickinson, few of her poems have direct speech. For instance, in a poem named "260" in which she somehow illustrates how being neglected and rejected by society affected her thoughts and pushed her to protest through writing even if this writing is for her:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?

Are you – Nobody – too?

Then there's a pair of us!

Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!

How public – like a Frog –

To tell one's name – the livelong June –

To an admiring Bog! (Dickinson 47)

"206" or "*I'm Nobody! Who Are You?*" is a suggested name of this poem by Dickinson because she did not put titles to her poems-



instead, she put numbers- so most of the critics consider the first line of her poems as their titles. The main question of this poem is self-identity. The first stanza is a declaration of being nothing or no one and involved the reader in the next line by asking "Are you – Nobody-too?" As if she knew she was not alone in this isolation, she followed the next line with an admission that the reader is also "Nobody" as she said "Then there's a pair of us!". "Don't tell!" means that it is something needed to be secret, otherwise, the society would spread it as she continued "they'd advertise– you know!" which is in another version "they'd banish us, you know". Dickinson mocks those who are "somebody" or known because in her society this is something accepted and valid, one has to be known and significant but to be an ordinary person is unusual or forbidden. Yet, the word "dreary" in the next line shows her opinion about those famous figures. They are dull, besides, they are like "a frog". Frogs are known for loud and noisy voices that indicate nonsense and uselessness. Besides, male frogs when they want to marry they make a loud voice to attract females (Bender 188). For Dickinson, it is not by accident to use this male symbol to announce her feminist thought. Dickinson not only attacked those famous ones, but also the society they live in. She described them as a "bog". As a professional poetess, who could with just a few lines direct a powerful message to a society that rejected her as a poetess, she proved that she is different with unprecedented female talent. About this poem, Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert have considerable comments as they consider this poem as a significant entrance for acknowledging Dickinson as a character and a writer as they said:



As many critics have observed, Dickinson began her poetic career by consciously enacting the part of a child- both by deliberately prolonging her own childhood and by inventing a new, alternative childhood for herself. At the same time, however, her child mask was inseparable from her even more famously self-defining role as the inoffensive and invisible soul of "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" (Gubar and M. Gilbert)

Unlike Dickinson, Tawqan could publish her poems- even later, but she could do at least- during her lifetime and achieved proper fame but not at the beginning of her poetic career either. She revealed how she was so stressed and upset with her society as she said in her poem, *Wahdy M'aa Alayam, M'aa Almrouj (lonely with the days, with meadows)*:

And here, here, in your magical world

World of romance

I tried so hard to inspire clearness for getting

Clear view

And amid vision of inspiration,

Hidden wings embrace me,

So my soul flies above the world of people



Above humanity (my trans, Tawqan; 8)<sup>(1)</sup>

وهنا، هنا في جوك المسحور، جو الشعاعية  
كم رحت أستوحي الصفاء رؤى خيالاتي النقية  
فتضمني في نشوة الالهام.. اجنحة خفية  
تسمو بروحي فوق دنيا الناس، فوق الادمية

In this poem, she considered the meadows as her sanctuary. As she repeated the word "here", she established the idea that nature is her actual home where she can find her real identity. She resorted to the meadows to get some inspiration, tranquility, and freedom. She needed to get clear thinking outside the scope of society's typical traditions. Those traditions made her life -as a female- harder and because her family knew that she had a billet-doux, as she was deprived of learning at school for good. Therefore, Tawqan restores and recreates nature in Palestine, where she finds comfort and tenderness. Her need for passion and care is apparent in the line, "hidden wings embrace me, so my soul flies above the world of people."

As for nature, as a source of inspiration and healing, each poet resorted to it as a warm embrace for their feelings and a reprieve. Nablus in the West Bank, Palestine, and Amherst in Hampshire County, Massachusetts, United States, are where Tawqan and Dickinson were born and raised. These two towns have all the most beautiful features of nature, so it was no coincidence that both poets resorted to it. For Dickinson, she was a Nature poet and an inspiring one. Her poems connected to both nature and

(<sup>1</sup>) All the Arabic texts in this article are translated by me unless otherwise noted.



society. She was a recluse from an early age but she had few people with whom she could communicate. In this regard, nature is considered a shelter. She watched, appreciated, and wrote about that magnificence of nature. Mainly, Dickinson's poems are full of elements from nature which she used to prompt symbols and direct connotations.

Dickinson's garden was her inspiration and a place of healing too. Dickinson could see drama and injustice in nature as well. The long time she spent in her garden made her personalize elements of nature as women and men. For example in her poem "*Apparently with no surprise*" she says:

Apparently with no surprise  
To any happy flower  
The frost beheads it at its play  
In accidental power  
The blonde Assassin passes on –  
The Sun proceeds unmoved  
To measure off another Day  
For an Approving God – (Dickinson 305)

In this poem, the flower can be considered as a happy girl while the frost can be considered as a man who came to stand on it as a powerful load on the girl. According to this interpretation, this image is clearly from a feminist view. The flower has to endure the



load of the frost, which is turned to "blonde" because the rays of "The Sun" imprinted on it. While "The Sun" has no role in this unfair situation but "measures" the time, "God" is just approving the day with no interference. The whole scene can be seen from a feminist attitude. As for the technique in this poem, Sharon Leiter – an American writer, commented on this poem in his book *Critical Companion to Emily Dickinson: A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work* as the following:

Thus far, the poem has been virtually absent of active verbs. In the third stanza, verbs exist, but either as the copula "is" or as denial of action, "I dare not ask." In its final two lines, however, the materialization of two active verbs, "held" and "holds" – the action that "defuses" the mortal danger- is the signal of salvation. (Leiter 42)

As for Tawqan, she was also a nature poet. She considered nature as a kind stepmother, as she lost her mother while she was still a kid. The following lines from her poem *M'aa Al Mrouj (with meadows)* confirm that thought:

I came, here I am, open your deep heart and hug me

Came to lean my head on your tender chest

And still overdo from the pureness of silence, fountainhead of  
quietness

Here I relax, faint, drowned in my yearning (8)



قد جئت، ها أنا، فافتحي القلب الرحيب وعانقيني

قد جئت أسند ههنا رأسي إلى الصدر الحنون

وأظل انهل من نقاء الصمت، من نبع السكون

فهنا بحضنك أستريح، أغيب، أغرق في حنيني

The first line stresses the place by using the word "here". Nature is her resort; Tawqan explained why as she used to resort to nature as it is a place where she can feel comfort and mercy. She searches for quiet which cannot be found except among nature where there are no judgments or limits. These lines show her happiness due to being among nature as she repeated the phrase "I came" as if she celebrates these moments. It is noticeable that Tawqan deals with nature as a female symbol by using "open" and "your hug"; since the linguistic gender of the original language of her poems is female.

As for the clear feminist attitudes in their poems, Dickinson and Tawqan have several poems discussing their views about women's issues. Both Emily Dickinson and Fadwa Tawqan wrote poems involving the expression of feminist attitudes. Both poets used the terms "women" and "girls" and were against the social rules that limit or restrict any ideas about women's issues. This section may promote Showalter's view about a clear straight feminist attitude. As for Dickinson, she has a poem (199) or '*I'm "wife" – I've finished that.*' In this poem, she explores specific themes of independence, society, and womanhood. Dickinson attracts the reader to several differences, sensitive and intellectual, between being a single, older, unmarried woman, and being a spouse. During the 19th century, when Emily Dickinson wrote this



poem, there was a huge gap between these two types of lives. She was unmarried until her death, a feature that might impact the reader's perception of this poem:

I'm wife; I've finished that;  
That other state;  
I am Czar, I am woman now:  
It's safer so  
How odd the girl's life looks  
Behind this soft eclipse!  
I think that earth seems so  
To those in heaven now  
This being comfort, then  
That other kind was pain;  
But why compare?  
I'm wife! Stop there! (Dickinson, 22)

In the first lines of the poem: she says that she is now a wife. She's alone, at least for the whole poem. From her new viewpoint, the world looks completely different. She is standing on the bright side of the obscure, looking down at the world from a place of welfare. On the other side, some remain unmarried. It is a difference as huge as that between heaven and earth. The poem concludes with the speaker saying that the life of an older single woman is "pain" and then turns a blind eye to any need for



further evaluation. As seen, Dickinson here role-plays an oppressed woman who is a wife; she sought to show the difference between being a 'Woman' and a 'Wife'. The narrator is a young girl who has contradictory feelings about becoming a woman, especially a wife, whilst continually encouraging herself that it is 'safer' and 'comfortable' to be thus. Her conflicting feelings rise when she understands that exiting girlhood, being a woman and then a wife, will spare her having a sense of place. When she is a 'Wife' she is almost dubbed as the property of her husband.

As for Tawqan, she discussed the Palestinian female experience when women in Palestine were obliged to bear the responsibility of their kids and home alone after the loss of their husbands in the war. (*Roqaya*) is a poem written by Tawqan describing this situation when a woman has to be both a mother and a father for her children as she said:

There, a cave, as huge and deep as the wound of destiny

took in Roqaya. Therein, whirl scorches of frost

Till its rocks are about to tremble

.....

Oh, Roqayah, a story of tragedies

Of whom written by the hands of others

.....

.....

Something as a broken hatch hung



On her weak and trembling chest. (114)

هنالك ضمّ (رُقِيّة) كهفٌ ... رغيّب عميق كجرح القدر

تدور به لفحات الصقيع ... فيوشك يسطك حتى الصخر

.....

(رُقِيّة)؛ يا قصة من مآسي ... الحمى سطرتهَا أكفَ الغير

.....

.....

تعلق شيءٌ كفرخ مهيبض ... على صدرها الواهن المرتعدُ

In this regard, Zahra Tawfik Abukishk's study "*Ruqaya for the Fadwa Tuqan, A Stylistics Artistic Study*" says that this poem is the symbol of Tawqan's Palestinian home. Tawqan wrote poetry full of life and action, and she wrote about various things after she used to write about her individual experience. Tawqan could escape her obstacles through her hard work. As for the Palestinian people's issue, which is about colonialization, she found nothing to do but "jihad" or resistance as women do in these conditions besides men. That is why she used women as symbols of resistance because women are pregnant with heroes, lactating them with their milk. Women's uteruses and chests are gunpowder factories where their son's hearts grow up (AbuKishk 330). There are clearer poems that are considered stark cries against patriarchy and the traditional gender roles; Dickinson showed her attitude towards her society in poem number 401. The poem showed her view of women. She sees that society imposes strict rules on women through how they dress, talk or laugh. Dickinson says that



the only wish of women in her society is to attract men, and she is ashamed of that. Dickinson's poem "What Soft- Cherubic Creatures-" is a poem that explains the universal idea of duplicity; that is, one intends to present a false face to the world to conceal one's deep desires for the external world. In other words, one should act according to the traditions, although it does not match their real desires or thoughts.

Like Dickinson, Tawqan saw women of her society as victims. In her poem *Hwa Wa Heya (He and She)*, Tawqan speaks instead of not only the Arab women, but of all women in the world. Here, she uses direct speech to all women and girls. She tries to give them the chance to express their strangled dreams in their patriarchal societies. In addition, she incites them to revolt, flee from the prison of suppression, and breathe the wafts of liberty. Although she feels inner weakness and defeat, she challenges the prisoner, mocks him, and tries to overcome the situation.

In brief, as feminist criticism is concerned with the view of women as writers and creators of literary work, Dickinson and Tawqan show their feminist attitudes in different ways. The sense of alienation was a strong feeling in their poems due to the oppression they were exposed to during their lives, especially Tawqan, in addition to their weak relationship with their parents. The poets' sense of alienation has intensified when the poets' ideas and expectations collide with reality; they turn to isolation to escape or catch their breath. The poets strive to draw an ideal life and construct a flawless one in their poetry during this interval of taking a breath. In every age and country, the natural world has been one of the most common, if not the most common topic in



poetry. Nature for Dickinson and Tawqan is a resort and a means of healing from the injustice of society as they suffered at the beginning of their careers to publish their works. In addition to the sense of alienation, and resorting to nature as an escape from the injustice of the patriarchal society, they could also declare their feminist attitudes through some of their poems with a unique style and powerful language. Dickinson and Tawqan use different ways to express their feminist attitudes. They could declare them directly and indirectly. Most of the time, Dickinson and Tawqan used androgynous thinking in their lyrics: a style of writing attached to Virginia Woolf. This style of writing is used clearly throughout their poems about nature and alienation. This chapter tried to prove that their senses of alienation and topics of nature in their poetry can be interpreted throughout the feminist frame. On the other hand, they used direct speech about feminist issues which is a tendency supported by Elaine Showalter. Noticeably, Dickinson and Tawqan did not use this direct feminist attitude of Showalter as much as they used the indirect speech of Virginia Woolf.

## **Conclusion**

As feminist criticism is concerned with the view of women as writers and creators of literary work, Dickinson and Tawqan show their feminist attitudes in different ways. The sense of alienation was a strong feeling in their poems due to the oppression they were exposed to during their lives, especially Tawqan, in addition to their weak relationship with their parents. The poets' sense of alienation has intensified when the poets' ideas and expectations collide with reality; they turn to isolation to escape or catch their breath. The poets strive to draw an ideal life and construct a



flawless one in their poetry during this interval of taking a breath. In every age and country, the natural world has been one of the most common, if not the most common topic in poetry. Nature for Dickinson and Tawqan is a resort and a means of healing from the injustice of society as they suffered at the beginning of their careers to publish their works. In addition to the sense of alienation, and resorting to nature as an escape from the injustice of the patriarchal society, they could also declare their feminist attitudes through some of their poems with a unique style and powerful language. Dickinson and Tawqan use different ways to express their feminist attitudes. They could declare them directly and indirectly. Most of the time, Dickinson and Tawqan used androgynous thinking in their lyrics: a style of writing attached to Virginia Woolf. This style of writing is used clearly throughout their poems about nature and alienation. This chapter tried to prove that their senses of alienation and topics of nature in their poetry can be interpreted throughout the feminist frame. On the other hand, they used direct speech about feminist issues which is a tendency supported by Elaine Showalter. Noticeably, Dickinson and Tawqan did not use this direct feminist attitude of Showalter as much as they used the indirect speech of Virginia Woolf.

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النظريه النسويه طبقا ل فيرجينيا وولف و الين شوالتر : مع الاشاره ل أشعار ايميلى ديكنسون و فدوى طوقان

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### المستخلص:

ان النظريه النسويه هي الاطار الفلسفي ، والفكري والاجتماعي للنسويه. و لكي نستوعب فكرة عدم المساواه على أساس الجنس ، تقوم النظريه النسويه بالتركيز على سياسة الجندر، علاقة القوى بعضها ببعض و نوع الجنس. ان الهدف الاساسي للحركات النسويه هو تحسين وضع النساء. بدأت احتجاجات النساء بالمطالبه بأجور متساويه مع أجور الرجال ومنذ ذلك الوقت وقد أدركت النساء أن القضية ليست مجرد أجور أقل و متدنيه ولكن أيضا أوضاع اجتماعيه متدنيه. إحدى تلك القضايا النسويه المثاره هو وضع المرأه ككاتبه و صاحبة أعمال أدبيه. في هذا الاطار أختلف النقاد النسويين فيما بينهم في تناول الكاتبات لاعمالهم. في هذا المقال يتم تناول واحده من أهم تلك المناقشات وهي تلك التي دارت بين الناقد والكاتبه فيرجينيا وولف و الناقد الين شوالتر حيث ترى وولف ان التفكير الثنائي الجنس طبيعي و ضروري في حين تراه شوالتر خضوعى و مهين. تسعى وولف الى حكم عادل للرجل و المرأه على حد سواء في حين تسعى شوالتر الى حلول و مواقف حاسمه و واضحة تجاه القضايا النسويه. يتطرق هذا المقال الى اشعار ايميلى ديكنسون و فدوى طوقان وكيف كانت اشعارهم تتأرجح بين مواقف نسويه بطرق مباشره وغير مباشره على طريقة وولف و شوالتر.

الكلمات الافتتاحية: النسوية، المرأة، فيرجينيا وولف، الين شوالتر، ايميلى ديكنسون، فدوى

طوقان