



Contemporary Arabic Literature as a Medium of Resistance and Social Transformation: A Qualitative Study of the Palestinian Issue and Arab Feminism

Saripa Balqis Alqadri¹, Haniah², Muhsin³

Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar, Indonesia^{1,2,3}

balqisalqadri9@gmail.com¹ haniah@uin-alauddin.ac.id² Muhsin.muhsin@uin-alauddin.ac.id³

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Arabic literature has evolved into a medium that is not only aesthetically valuable, but also loaded with ideological, social, and political dimensions. This article aims to examine two of the most dominant global issues in contemporary Arabic literature, namely the Palestinian conflict and the Arab feminist movement. The research uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with the methods of literary criticism and literature review, as well as applying the conceptual framework of adab al-muqāwamah and postcolonial feminism. The results of the study show that Palestinian resistance literature functions as a documentation of collective memory, a tool for shaping political consciousness, and a space for psychological recovery. The works of Mahmoud Darwish and Ghassan Kanafani are the main representations of this tradition. Meanwhile, Arab feminist literature represented by Nawal El Saadawi and Hanan Al-Shaykh marks the transformation of women from objects of representation to subjects who voice their own life experiences. These two literary currents have a common point in the concept of intersectionality, which is a combination of the struggle for national liberation and gender equality. This study confirms that contemporary Arabic literature functions as a medium of resistance and social transformation that brings together the struggle for national liberation with the struggle for gender equality.



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Corresponding Author:

Saripa Balqis Alqadri

Email: balqisalqadri9@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature is a form of expression in the humanities that carries out a dual function, on the one hand as a work of aesthetic value, and on the other hand as a reflection on the social, cultural, and political conditions of a society. Along with its development, literature plays a strategic role as a strategic means to represent the dynamics of reality, both at the local and global levels. Through the treasures of literary traditions, various humanitarian problems can be studied more holistically and critically [1]. Arabic literature is an important part of the world literary tradition that has a long history and continues to develop from generation to generation [2]. These developments resulted in contemporary Arabic literature, which emerged in response to social, cultural, and intellectual changes in the Arab world [3]. Since the 19th century, Arab society has faced a paradigmatic shift triggered by a wave of modernization and cultural contact with the Western world, which essentially changed the thinking frame of its society and triggered the emergence of literary expressions and subject matter that have a more pluralistic character and are open to diversity [4].

Contemporary Arabic literature, which develops in the context of modernity and various post-colonial socio-political pressures, not only responds to local and national issues, but also reflects and helps shape the discourse on issues that are cross-border: political conflicts, identity crises, migration, and gender equality. As Roger Allen points out, modern Arabic literature is the result of a meeting between the rich tradition of Arabic literature and the reality of the ever-changing world, so that it becomes a medium that not only reflects social change, but also plays an active role in driving that transformation [5]. One of the most dominant global issues in contemporary Arabic literature is the Palestinian conflict since the 1948 Nakba that led to the expulsion of more than 700,000 Palestinians from their homeland [6], this conflict has become a symbol of suffering and struggle that many Arab writers have raised. In the context of literary works, the phenomenon of exile, loss of ancestral land, and efforts to preserve identity are visualized comprehensively. This condition then produced a literary tradition known as *adab al-muqāwamah* or resistance literature.

In addition to the Palestinian issue, women's issues also occupy an important position in contemporary Arabic literature. For centuries, Arab women were placed within the framework of patriarchal subordination, both in the dimensions of social life and in the representation of literary works. [7] But since the mid-20th century, there has been a wave of Arab women writers who have explicitly challenged the prevailing dominant discourse and advocated for gender equality through their works [8]. This phenomenon makes contemporary Arabic literature an arena of semantic battle between the values of tradition and modernity, between patriarchal domination and the demands of justice.

Based on this, this article aims to examine contemporary Arabic literature in relation to the two most dominant global issues, namely the Palestinian conflict and the feminist movement. This study aims to explain how literature plays a role not only as a medium of reflection and social criticism, but also as an active force that shapes awareness and encourages a more just and humanist social transformation.

2. METHOD

This research uses a qualitative-descriptive approach through library research and literary criticism. This approach was chosen because the subject of study is textual

and interpretative, so it requires an in-depth reading of literary works in their socio-historical context, rather than statistical measurement.

2.1 Data Sources and Sample Selection

The primary data of this study consists of four literary works chosen to represent the two main issues discussed: the resistance poems of Mahmoud Darwish, particularly the poem "Biṭāqat Huwiyya" (Identity Card) published in 1964, the novels and short stories of Ghassan Kanafani, including *Mā Tabaqā Lakum* (1966) and *ʿĀ'id ilā Ḥayfā* (1969), the novel *Imra'a ʿinda Nuqṭat al-Ṣifr* (Woman at Point Zero) by Nawal El Saadawi, written in 1975 and first published in Arabic in 1977, and the novel *Ḥikāyat Zahra* (The Story of Zahra) by Hanan Al-Shaykh, first published in Beirut in 1980.

The four works were selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) representativeness, meaning that each author is widely recognized in academic studies as a foundational figure in their respective literary tradition Darwish and Kanafani in the *adab al-muqāwamah* tradition, and El Saadawi and Al-Shaykh in the Arab feminist literary tradition; [13] (2) thematic relevance; (3) scholarly traceability; and (4) text accessibility. Other authors mentioned in this study, such as Samih al-Qasim, Fadwa Tuqan, Emile Habibi, Mourid Barghouti, Layla Ba'labakki, and Assia Djebar, were used as supporting data to strengthen contextual interpretation, but they were not treated as primary units of analysis.

2.2 Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis in this study is a text segment, such as a quote, stanza, or snippet of narrative in primary literary works that explicitly represents one or more of the following categories: (1) themes of homeland, exile, and national identity; (2) representations of women's bodies, voices, and agency; and (3) points where national struggle and gender awareness appear simultaneously in the same text unit, which is the main object of intersectionality analysis in this study.

2.3 Data Collection Technique

Data collection was done through documentation studies and careful text review. [14] Each text was read repeatedly to identify text segments corresponding to the unit of analysis defined above, which were then recorded and coded according to their thematic categories (resistance, exile, gender, intersection) to facilitate systematic interpretation in the subsequent analysis stage.

2.4 Data Validity Procedure

To ensure the validity of the interpretations, this study applies three common validity procedures used in qualitative literary research: (1) source triangulation; (2) contextual verification, which involves linking the text interpretation with documented socio-historical facts (for example, the Nakba of 1948, the al-Nahḍah movement); and (3) peer debriefing. [15] in which preliminary interpretations were discussed and reviewed to identify potential bias in the reading process before being finalized into research findings.

2.5 Data Analysis Procedure

The data were analyzed using a literary hermeneutic technique that combines close reading of internal textual elements with external socio-historical

contextualization. This analysis is guided by the conceptual framework of *adab al-muqāwamah* [15] to examine representations of Palestinian resistance, as well as a postcolonial feminist framework [16] to explore representations of gender struggle, with the concept of intersectionality [12] applied specifically to identify points of convergence between the two.

The analysis was carried out through four systematic stages: (1) identification and classification, in which coded text segments were grouped according to the thematic categories established in the unit of analysis; (2) textual interpretation, in which each segment was interpreted to uncover its representation of resistance, identity, or gender relations; (3) contextual association, in which interpreted findings were related to the socio-historical background of the Arab world to determine whether and how national struggle and gender struggle intersect within a given text segment; and (4) conclusion drawing, in which patterns of meaning identified across the four primary works were synthesized to formulate the study's overall findings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Definition and Periodization of Contemporary Arabic Literature

The term Contemporary in the treasures of Arabic literature came about after going beyond several stages of literary evolution, covering the classical period (*al-'asr al-jahili*), the early Islamic period, the era of the Abbasid Dynasty, to the modern phase. Al-Iskandari named this period *al-'Aṣr al-Ḥadīth*, which marked the birth of a new phase in the history of Arabic literature, marked by an openness to various developments of thought and an increasing responsiveness to changing social realities. Based on this, contemporary Arabic literature is the product of a long evolutionary process, shaped by social, cultural, and intellectual transformations.

The phenomenon of the emergence of contemporary Arabic literature has a close correlation with the evolution of modern literature since the 19th century, which is a phase characterized by intensive contact between the Arab world and Western civilization. As Badawi (1992) points out, modern Arabic literature underwent a development driven by two main forces operating synergistically: the assimilation of Western influence and the participation of the internal renewal movement (*Nahḍah*). If in the classical era Arabic literature tended to be bound by strict prosody rules and conventional themes such as praise (*madh*), lamentation (*ritha'*), and love (*ghazal*), then in the contemporary period Arabic literature experienced greater freedom, both in the form and structure of its writing as well as in the themes and content raised.

Scholars engaged in the field of Arabic Literature classify the development of contemporary Arabic literature into several interrelated stages. The first period, which lasted from the late 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, was marked by a revival phase (*Nahḍah*) as well as the emergence of various early efforts in the development of the modern literary genre. The second stage, around the decade of the 1920s to the 1950s, showed the strengthening of the spirit of Arab nationalism which gave birth to various literary works with the theme of resistance and liberation. Furthermore, the period of the 1950s to the 1970s is considered the golden age of modern Arabic literature, marked by the emergence of great figures such as Naguib Mahfouz, Taha Hussein, and Tawfiq al-Hakim. The period from the 1970s to the present is marked by an increasingly diverse range of themes and forms of literary expression,

including the emergence of feminist literature, diaspora literature, and various responses to contemporary global issues.[12]

Arabic Literature and Political Conflict (Palestine Issue)

Contemporary Arabic literature is inseparable from the political realities that surround the Arab world. One of the most dominant themes in the development of contemporary Arabic literature is the Palestinian conflict, in which resistance to the occupation is carried out not only physically and diplomatically, but also through literary works.[13] This shows that literature has the ability to function as a medium of resistance and social transformation[14]

The Palestinian conflict has actually become a symbol of the suffering and resistance of the Arab people, especially after the Nakba (النكبة, the catastrophe) in 1948 that triggered the massive expulsion of the Palestinian population from their ancestral land as well as created a deep wound in the collective memory that is still felt today.[15] This tragedy encouraged the birth of literary works that have a narrative as well as an ideological dimension, playing a role in preserving the identity and collective memory of the Palestinian nation who face the threat of disappearing due to occupation.[13] The failure of the Arab coalition in the 1967 Six-Day War (Naksa) further crystallized and strengthened the literary characteristics of the resistance.[16] resulting in what is called *adab al-muqāwamah* (literature of resistance).[14]

Ghassan Kanafani was the first and most systematic figure to articulate the concept of *adab al-muqāwamah* through two important works: *Adab al-Muqāwamah fi Filastīn al-Muhtalla, 1948–1966* (1966) and *Al-Adab al-Filastīnī al-Muqāwim taht al-Ihtilāl, 1948–1968* (1968). According to Kanafani, resistance literature is not only literature that raises the theme of conflict, but literature that consciously positions itself as an instrument of liberation where cultural resistance is considered to have an equivalent significance to armed resistance.[17] Barbara Harlow (1987) then expanded the concept of Kanafani to a more global scope in her book *Resistance Literature*. Borrowing the term directly from Kanafani, Harlow applied it to a variety of liberation struggle texts from the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.[18] shows that Palestinian resistance literature is part of a broader global anti-colonial literary tradition, in which literary texts function not merely as aesthetic artifacts, but as active agents of resistance to colonial rule.[19]

The *adab al-muqāwamah* has various main dimensions that characterize the literary character of the Palestinian resistance. Thematically, these works raise fundamental issues such as homeland, exile, prisons, martyrdom, national identity, and longing. In her study, Kamala revealed that the symbols of resistance in Palestinian literary works depict portraits of the lives of Palestinian women and children and the conditions of the colonized nation's homeland and can trigger the spirit of the struggle of the Palestinian people to reclaim the rights to their homeland. From a functional perspective, *adab al-muqāwamah* aims to excite the consciousness of resistance while documenting the collective memory of the Palestinian nation. Kanafani emphasized that resistance literature is not just a mirror of reality, but an active instrument that invites readers to participate in resistance in the most basic sense that being human itself is a noble struggle.

Hafidzulloh and Salam in their study of poetry *Bithoqoh Hawiyah* Mahmoud Darwish's work reveals that the potential of literature is transformed in actual works

of literature as a depiction of human life with a motive to dialogue with reality, proving that aesthetics and politics in Palestinian literature are not two opposites, but two breaths of the same body.[20] The political dimension in this literature is manifested in its attitude that rejects the normalization of occupation and affirms the rights that have been taken away. Darwish's poems not only articulate a personal longing for a lost home, but also express resistance to the ideology that normalizes the expulsion and exile of the Palestinian people and affirms that Palestinian identity and homeland are inseparable entities. In the end, the diasporic dimension becomes a marker of the works created by writers in exile but still connected to the land of Palestine. Kanafani classifies between literature that emerged under direct domination and exile literature (*Adab al-Manfa*) as two distinct but complementary responses to similar colonial realities, the literature under occupation reflects a direct and concrete struggle, while the literature of exile expresses a deep longing and an unresolved identity crisis. Gian Habib Syah in his study of the novel *Mā Ṭabaqa Lakum* Kanafani's work reveals that linguistic-symbolic expressions in the works of the Palestinian diaspora are able to trigger and ignite the spirit of resistance even though the author lives far from the land that was fought, proving that exile does not decide, but rather strengthens the literary bond with his national identity.[21]

The tradition of *adab al-muqāwamah* gave birth to a number of writers who made literary works as instruments of cultural struggle. Mahmoud Darwish represents the poetic dimension of resistance through the construction of Palestinian national identity that continues to be maintained in the midst of the experience of exile and loss of homeland. Ghassan Kanafani articulates the plight of Palestinian refugees and the identity crisis caused by colonialism through his prose works. In addition, Samih al-Qasim, Fadwa Tuqan, Emile Habibi, and Mourid Barghouti enrich this tradition through diverse approaches, ranging from political satire, diaspora memoirs, to a blend of gender consciousness and nationalism. This diversity shows that the literature of Palestinian resistance does not develop in a single form of expression but rather exists as a field of discourse that brings together the collective experiences of the Palestinian people.

Feminist Movements in Contemporary Arabic Literature

Arabic literature is one of the greatest cultural heritages in the world that has played an important role in shaping the mindset, values, and identity of Arab society for centuries.[22] In classical Arabic literature, the representation of women in general is divided into two main patterns: women as aesthetic objects that accentuate physical beauty, and women as symbols of social roles. This picture shows the dominance of a patriarchal perspective that positions women as the object of male views (*Male Gaze*). Nevertheless, Husein's study reveals that literature also serves as a medium for women to express their life experiences and show a more active role.[23]

The Arab feminist movement has a long history of intertwining with the Arab intellectual revival (*al-Nahdhah*) at the end of the 19th century. The emergence of reformist thinkers such as Rifa'ah at-Tahtawi, Muhammad Abduh, and Qasim Amin marked the beginning of a new wave of thought that positioned women as subjects of social change.[24] The milestone was marked by the publication of Qasim Amin's work, *Tahrir al-Mar'ah* (1899), which openly discussed women's rights in modern Arab society, including criticism of the practice of polygamy, limited access to women's

education, and a divorce system that harmed women.[25] The work, together with *Mar'ah al-Jadidah* (1900), sparked widespread public debate throughout the Arab world about the role and position of women.[26] It is worth noting that a number of academics, including Leila Ahmed, view Qasim Amin's ideas as a reflection of acceptance of the narrative of European colonialism, rather than as a pure expression of the struggle for Arab women's rights.[27]

Thereafter, Huda Sha'rawi's symbolic act of removing her veil in public in 1923, after returning from the 9th Conference of the *International Woman Suffrage Alliance* in Rome, marked the birth of a new phase of the struggle of Arab women, as well as prompted the establishment of the *Egyptian Feminist Union* which fought for suffrage, family law reform, and access to education for women. It should be noted that Arab feminism has special characteristics that are not always parallel to Western feminism. According to Ahmed (1992), discussions about women in Islam and Arab society are often caught in the dichotomy between Islamic values and Western modernity. Many contemporary Arab feminists are trying to find a middle way, namely fighting for gender equality without giving up their cultural and Islamic identity.

In contemporary Arabic literature, criticism of patriarchal structures takes on a more assertive form through the works of women writers. One of the important representations is seen in the novel *Women at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi. Through the character of Paradise, this novel not only depicts the suffering of women in the patriarchal system, but also shows how power relations work through family, educational, legal, and cultural institutions. From the perspective of postcolonial feminism, Firdaus' experience shows that the oppression of women does not solely stem from gender factors but is also related to broader social structures. Thus, the work serves not only as a social critique, but also as an attempt to reclaim women's authority to define their own life experiences. These findings suggest that Arab feminist literature has shifted the position of women from objects of representation to subjects who actively interpret and voice their life experiences.

Meanwhile, Hanan Al-Shaykh in the novel "*Hikayat Zahrah*" (1980) features female characters who are caught between war violence and domestic violence. This novel depicts how the female body becomes a battleground for two forces: by the state and by patriarchy in the family. Layla Ba'labakki (Lebanon) through *Ana Ahya* (I Live, 1958) describes the revolt of young women against family authority and the shackles of tradition in modern Arab society. Assia Djebar (Algeria) in *L'Amour, la Fantasia* (1985) explores the identity of Algerian women divided between the French colonial heritage and the Arab-Berber patriarchal tradition. Fadwa Tuqan (Palestine) through her poems of resistance and poetry collection unites the Palestinian national resistance and women's gender consciousness in one poetic voice.

On closer inspection, contemporary Arab feminist works show that women's bodies are often a meeting place for various forms of power. State power, social norms, political conflicts, and patriarchal culture work simultaneously in shaping women's experiences. Therefore, the struggle shown in Arab feminist literature is not only related to gender equality, but also concerns issues of freedom, identity, and the right to determine the future independently. In this context, literature functions as a space for articulating experiences that have been marginalized from public discourse.

Based on the results of the study, it was found that contemporary Arabic literature operates as a space for the production of social consciousness that brings together

issues of identity, power, and human struggle. In the Palestinian context, literature functions as a mechanism for preserving collective memory as well as a means of resistance to colonial narratives that seek to erase the identity of the Palestinian nation. The works of Mahmoud Darwish and Ghassan Kanafani show that resistance is not only manifested through physical actions, but also through the production of narratives that maintain the historical existence and identity of a nation. Meanwhile, in the context of Arab feminism, literature became a medium that allowed women to reclaim the authority to interpret their own life experiences. These findings suggest that contemporary Arabic literature serves as an arena for the formation of collective consciousness that also influences the way societies interpret issues of identity, power, and social justice.

From a hermeneutic perspective, there are a number of fundamental similarities between Palestinian resistance literature and Arab feminist literature. These two literary currents seek to make room for voices that are often overlooked, while at the same time utilizing symbolism as a medium to express ideas that are difficult to convey directly due to various forms of restrictions and taboos. Through this approach, readers are invited to be actively involved in the process of interpretation so that they are able to see the problem more critically. Therefore, literature is not only a medium of representation of reality, but also an instrument that helps shape human understanding of reality.

On the other hand, the development of feminist movements in contemporary Arabic literature shows that resistance to various forms of injustice is not always manifested through physical conflict. Through their works, Arab women writers present previously hidden experiences, question established social norms and reconstruct the meaning of women's identity. These efforts have had a significant impact on social change. The transformation of women from objects of representation into subjects who are able to voice their own life experiences reflects the growth of a new socio-cultural consciousness in Arab society. This change shows the increasingly strong role of literature as a space for articulating women's identities and struggles in the midst of ongoing social changes. In classical Arabic literature, women are generally portrayed through the point of view of male characters or authors. In contemporary Arabic literature, women appear as storytellers who interpret and express their own life experiences. Arab feminist literature has also expanded the space for public dialogue in discussing issues of equality and women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa.

In social and cultural studies, the confluence of various forms of oppression experienced by a person is often explained through the concept of intersectionality. Crenshaw explains that social identities such as gender, ethnicity, and nationality do not work separately, but rather intersect so that they can result in multiple experiences of oppression.[28] This perspective is relevant to understanding contemporary Arabic literary works that display the relationship between national struggles, cultural identity, and gender equality.

One of the important findings in this study is the intersection between Palestinian resistance literature and Arab feminist literature that can be explained through the concept of intersectionality. This perspective helps to understand how colonialism, occupation, and patriarchy do not always work separately, but are often intertwined in shaping the social experience of Arab people, especially Palestinian women. Both

literary currents were born in response to the domination structures that limited human freedom, albeit in different forms. In Palestinian literature, dominance is present in the form of colonialism and occupation, while in Arab feminist literature dominance arises through a patriarchal system that limits women's space for movement. Fadwa Tuqan's works show that both forms of oppression are often experienced simultaneously by Palestinian women. Therefore, the struggle for national liberation and the struggle for gender equality cannot be understood as two separate agendas, but rather as part of an interrelated liberation process.

The results of this study show the importance of applying a comprehensive perspective in the study of Arabic literature in Indonesia, especially in Islamic higher education institutions. Contemporary Arabic literary works need to be understood through readings that not only focus on the structure and meaning of the text, but also consider the social, political, and historical factors that are the context in which they appear. In this case, the hermeneutic approach can be used as one of the effective methodological alternatives, especially at the postgraduate education level. Through this approach, the aesthetic aspects and socio-political dimensions of the text can be analyzed in an integrated manner so as to produce a more comprehensive understanding of literary works.

4. CONCLUSION

Contemporary Arabic literature is a medium that not only serves as an aesthetic expression, but also as a means of resistance and social transformation. In the Palestinian context, literature developed into the *adab al-muqāwamah* which played a role in maintaining collective identity, building political consciousness, and recording the experience of exile and national struggle. Meanwhile, in the context of Arab feminism, literature became a space for women to voice their life experiences, criticize patriarchal structures, and fight for gender equality.

This study found that Palestinian resistance literature and Arab feminist literature have a common point through the concept of intersectionality, which is the link between the struggle for national liberation and the struggle for gender equality. These findings show that contemporary Arabic literature plays a role as an arena for the formation of social consciousness that is able to bring together various forms of humanitarian struggle in one discourse space.

Thus, contemporary Arabic literature can be understood as a cultural instrument that not only reflects social reality but also contributes to shaping more just and humane social change. Further research can be directed at the study of Arab diaspora literature and the response of Arab writers to contemporary global issues such as migration, climate change, and the development of digital technology.

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