

Gender, Language and Culture in the Yemeni Society

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Abstract:

The issue of language and gender has become one of the most important issues among the modern cultural studies. This issue is multidisciplinary in scope and of deep cultural background. This paper aims at focusing and analyzing the study from different spectrum. The issue of gender and its relation with culture is a sophisticated matter that needs to be discussed carefully taking into consideration the social as well as the religious norms. Surely, it is an issue that intervenes with some so-called religious legislation of the society. It is due to this overlap and complexity between culture and religion from one side and between sex and gender from the other side that this paper tries to investigate the issue of gender in Arabic society, especially Yemeni. Almost all Arab countries find it difficult to accept the concept of gender in its broad meaning as the West does. It is due to the social norms and religious restrictions that people may interpret the word gender differently or wrongly. Based on their social as well as religious inherited, Arabs with their culture look at the issue of gender as the nightmare that will undermine their moralities and Islamic personality.

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الجنـدر واللغة والثقافة في المجتمع اليميني

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ملخص:

أصبحت صناعة اللغة والنوع الاجتماعي واحدة من أهم القضايا المعاصرة في الدراسات الثقافية الحديثة، فهي قضية متعددة الأوجه والأبعاد؛ نظرا إلى التنوع الثقافي واستخدام اللغة. إذ تقودنا علاقة اللغة بالنوع الاجتماعي (الجنـدر) إلى دراسة الجانب النسوي (Feminism) واستخدام اللغة. فعندما نركز على استخدام الجانب النسوي للغة نخرج قليلا لنعرف المساحة التي مُنحت للمرأة في التشريعات الدينية والسياسية لتلعب دورا في المجتمع العربي بشكل عام، وفي المجتمع اليميني بشكل خاص، وسيحاول الباحث في هذا البحث الغوص والتحقيق في هذه المسألة باعتبارها ظاهرة اجتماعية في المجتمع العربي عامة، واليميني خاصة. ففي جميع الدول العربية توجد صعوبة في قبول مفهوم النوع الاجتماعي بمعناه الواسع كما يفعل الغرب؛ نتيجة للأعراف الاجتماعية والقيود الدينية. وقد يخطئ البعض في تفسير كلمة الجنـدر ليفهمها بشكل مغاير أو خاطئ بناءً على ثقافة مغلوبة في استيعاب المفهوم. وهو ما يجعل العرب ينظرون -بثقافتهم وتفسيراتهم الدينية- إلى مسألة النوع الاجتماعي بوصفها كابوسا سيقفون أخلاقهم وشخصيتهم الإسلامية.

1. Introduction

By gender we refer to the socially and culturally constructed differences between femininity and masculinity, shaped by countless factors including language, jobs and different social norms. Though the matter of gender is controversial among scholars, many approaches are followed to make a line demarcation between the two terms; femininity and masculinity. Potentially differentiation can be regarded to distinguish between gender and sex. While the sex is physiology, gender is a socially and culturally term. With highly motivation and enthusiasm, this paper endeavors to explore the term gender and examine the influences that social and cultural norms have had upon gender relations, use of language, gendered norms and identities in

Arab countries. The Yemeni society has been taken as a study sample for different considerations. Firstly, it is the native place of the researcher. Secondly, the researcher could collect data, especially the primary data, from different direct resources which are supposed to be both reliable and relevant. The paper will go beyond this scope to investigate the position of women in a patriarchal society like of the Arabic one. Explicitly feminist in focus are explorations of gender positioning in representations in cultural space, and in interaction of some institutions, including the family.

2. Gender and Sex:

Talking about gender and language, it is remarkably important to pass through the distinctive difference between sex and gender. Though many researches and studies have been carried out trying to make the notion of sex and gender clear, the line demarcation between the two terms still hazy and fuzzy. For better clarification, both *Sex* and *Gender* can be analyzed under two heads;

2-1- Sex-related Variability

Differentiation of speech behavior between males and females related to physiological, neurological and biological factor.

2-2- Gender Variability:

Differentiation of speech behavior between males and females related to socially constructed gender roles.

In their book, *Language and Gender*, Penelope Eckert and Sally Mcconnell-Ginet state: “Gender is not something we are born with, and not something we have, but something we do (West and Zimmerman 1987) – something we perform (Butler 1990)”¹

¹ Eckert, Penelope and sally Mcconnell-Ginet. *Language and Gender*. Cambridge University Press: Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet 2003

In his paper, *Shall we Teach Gender?* L. A. Phillips states:

the first thing to bear in mind is, of course, the distinction between gender and sex. Gender is grammatical; sex, biological. ... We shall know, during our lucid intervals, that gender and sex are not the same thing; that sex is a natural distinction belonging to living objects, while gender is a grammatical distinction, a symbol, an artificial device²

The above quotes present clearly the difference between sex and gender. They suggest that while the sex is a biologically born, gender is a cultural and social made.

2-2-3 Gender, Identity and Society

As of native Arabic people, we live in a society which is described to be a male-dominated society in which female is always disdained, looked down upon and scorned. There is a big gap between the term masculinity and femininity. It is in this regard that women feel disappointed and lose their social role as human beings. It is under these circumstances that men practice their discrimination in its worst form against women. People use their social set of rules and social norms to impose women to practice their life according to the space given to them by their men. Men always feel arrogant, strong and heroes, however; women, as so called the fare sex, feel weak and marginalized. This ego and man-made rules are the big obstacles in the progress and development of our society, therefore; we lag much

² L.A. Phillips. " Shall we teach Gender?". *The English Journal*. Ed: (11.1) 1922,23-7.

behind the developed nations and it will take years to be at equal footings with them.

Many workshops, seminars and TV or radio episodes are held across the country to discuss human rights and gender discrimination, especially to locate women in a right social position, but their efforts go in vain all the time. The social and welfare organizations and other non-governmental organizations spend much money as well as valuable time on programs to make people aware of the women's right and encourage them to involve women in social affairs for better life and prosperity, but no positive results gained. Not only they failed to resolve this issue but also play a strong role behind the screen in driving the female folk to the wrong direction in order to win fame and popularity. The concept of women in Arab countries, especially in Yemen, is deep rooted and goes back to the pre-Islamic era. Woman to them are only container or vessel for sex no more. They maintain that her job is confined only to look after children, doing the washing, cooking and taking care of house pets and work in the land belongs to her family or her husband.

Those who hold discussions and seminars and processions about gender inequality must think seriously that their struggle for gender equality has already destroyed the delicate and sensitive gender (woman). Their sole purpose is to achieve popularity but truly they

have spoiled the society. Women are not safe in their homes now. Struggles must be made to compel men to give their daughters, mothers, wives and sisters their due rights, to look after them and to take due care of them instead of to ask women to fight for their rights.

As Islam is the religion of rights, purity and peace, women still suffer from social discriminative attitude. The woman's rights are restricted and totally under abortion. Islam supports and provides women with all rights and has established gender discrimination in the worldly matters only, for the sake of women's protection. Allah is the creator of both genders and he is the most merciful to both of them. It is the human beings who are the enemies of each other. Both, men and women are born responsible, indeed. But as the worldly matters are concerned, man has greater responsibilities than woman. Certainly, it is the man's duty to protect the woman in the form of daughter, sister, mother and wife.

As the religion of all mankind, Islam is a perfect system of life; it has set perfect rules of life for both man and woman. Islam has provided shelter and canvass to the woman. The rights which the west fights for, has been given to women fourteen hundred years ago. Before Islam, women were considered the worst creation on the face of the earth; they were the greatest sufferers and victims. In order to provide

them with absolute protection and defense in the society, Islam for the first time established women right law.

In addition, verses regarding women rights were revealed and thus this delicate and weak gender will remain till dooms day. Allah says in the Quran, chapter 2 verse 228:

"And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them kindness, and men are a degree above them. Allah is Mighty, Wise."³

As the worldly matters are concerned, man and woman are two different genders but as righteousness regards, there is no discrimination between them. If Quran is studied and interpreted well, there will be no biasness in consulting woman and forbid her from her simple rights. Allah, in the Holy Quran says in Sura al-ahzab chapter 33 verse 34

"Lo! men who surrender unto Allah, and women who surrender, and men who believe and women who believe, and men who obey and women who obey, and men who speak the truth and women who speak the truth, and men who persevere (in righteousness) and women who persevere, and men who are humble and women who are humble, and men who give alms and women who give alms, and men who fast and women who fast, and men who guard their modesty and women who

³ Mary. Wollstonecraft,. *A Vindication of the Rights of Men and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Hints*. Cambridge University Press. {Wollstonecraft, 1995 #34}

guard (their modesty), and men who remember Allah much and women who remember - Allah hath prepared for them forgiveness and a vast reward."⁴

3. Gender in Yemen

The concept of *gender* in Yemen began for the first time in 1994 during the foundation of 'Center of Practical Research and Feminist Studies' at Sana'a University, Sana'a. This center was supported financially by the Dutch embassy in Sana'a. Due to the rabid spread of the governmental and non-governmental organizations that champion woman's affairs, the term *gender* widely spread. These organizations are formed to protect woman's rights and appealing for equality and justice. These organizations were rejected and were refused to continue their legal requests as they are accused by the regime of exploiting foreign donor organizations to collect money and destroy the morality of the society. It was from 12- 14 September 1999, the center of Feminist Studies held its conference entitles '*Challenges of the Feminists Studies in the 21st c*'. It is during this time in which a committee was formed from parliament, academicians and presidential side to visit the center and take a suitable decision. The committee issued its decision that the center should be closed as it will destroy the morality of the society and cause the family dissociation. Under this conservative claim the 'Center of Practical Research and Feminist Studies' was closed and the director of that center accused of being expiation escaped to Netherlands after she was threatened by extremists.⁵

⁴ Karlyn, Campbell, Kohrs. *Man Cannot Speak for Her: Volume II; Key Texts of the Early Feminists*. ABC-CLIO. 1989.

⁵ <http://arabi.assafir.com/Article/2687>.

Consequently, the first Yemeni conference on gender, prepared by the Yemeni Women union, was conducted in Sana'a in the period 4-6 of March 2013. Only one week after this conference has been conducted, the league of Yemeni clergy issued a statement against the outputs of the said conference claiming that these recommendations go against the Islamic morality and legislations. The Yemeni clergy commission maintained that this conference opens door to homosexuality, adultery, pederast and family rebellion.

Apart of my data collection, I presented this question to a group of my Facebook (FB) female friends from Yemen, "Do you think the Yemeni woman has got some of her rights under the shadow of globalization and Internet? Or do you think the society is still patriarchy?" The answers varied and gave different reviews as follows: The first answer was from Sann'a, 28 year-old, Thamar. She is a university student. She said, "The society still has a despised attitude towards a woman and this is what is called backwardness. Though woman represents half of the society, she cannot develop the man's passive view against her". She seems to one of the victims of wrong beliefs rooted in the min of her contemporaries. On the contrary, Hifa Hassan, 39 year-old, university teacher from Taiz has a different point of view. She said, "the social position of the woman has developed to some extent and even the patriarchal society itself has become aware

that woman's role in the society cannot be ignored". She adds, "At present time, major societies look at both sex; men and women in some equality. It could not be denied that the male-dominant society has decayed, but has become more hospitable to women than before in all fields of life".

Amani Alhemyari, a Ph.D scholar from Yemen in India, says "in my opinion, though the world witnesses great development in information technology, woman still suffers from the male-dominant society. The patriarchy hegemony is still common and the society looks at woman in inferiority. The situation of male-dominance has reflected negatively on woman's way of thinking. She feels that woman has lost her freedom which is resulted from misunderstanding of the Islamic texts related to woman.

Consequently, Amal Alghabery from Al-Mahweet, 40 year-old, computer programmer, has a different point of view, she said "Yemeni society is still backward so that woman is still trapped and restricted. A woman cannot use her mobile freely; her brother, father and husband asks her whom she writes to and what she writes. So if she cannot have her ultimately freedom to use her mobile, how she can have it in the society as whole?" she adds "the society considers her as a mindless being, and not qualified enough to decide or control her life, relation, her writing and even if she wants to use Facebook, she uses a nickname

and block all her relatives from her FB page. Then, if she wants to get marriage, she has to remove all male friends from her Whatsapp or FB page. In my opinion, Yemeni woman up to the moment has no power in her hand and if it happens that some women have some freedom and rights, they have snatched them by force, but that not exceed more than %10. We deliberately use the word **snatch** to show the way that women get their rights; it happens by force”. Ashgan Al-qubati, 29 year-old, Taiz, has stated that “in fact, Woman in all Arab countries, especially in Yemeni society suffers from the inferiority look which is a racism look that makes woman disable to achieve her goals and objectives. That is because the backward thinking by the society that woman whatever she learns, her fortune is only the kitchen. This concept comes from the Yemeni proverb, education is the light, but the end of the educated girl is the oven”. This metaphorical proverb suggests that woman is fit for the kitchen even if she is well educated.

In fact, the simple sampling given above supplies and reflects the real situation that Yemeni woman lives in. The Yemeni feminine informants above, from different governorates of different ages, maintain that they still suffer from the deficient and inferior look of the society. Thus the source of the women’s oppression and injustice does not lie in religion and the legislative principles, instead; it lies in the complex and sophisticated mentality of the society that prevent them from their identity and simple rights.

4. Gender and Language

Language and Gender is a new introduction to the study of the relation between gender and language use, written by two of the leading experts in this field. It covers the main topics, beginning with a clear discussion of gender and of the resources that the linguistic system offers for the construction of social meaning. Gender performances through language are linked to the choices available to particular women; these choices not only empower women but 'widen' the spectrum of the concept of gender, and make it flexible. The interaction of gender and language cannot be treated as *sui-generis* in a small work, instead; it needs to be grounded in relation to experience and conditionings. For the last decades, many studies carried out on this area to investigate the core of this bilaterally relation (i.e. gender and language).⁶

The theoretical spectrum of this paper is that an understanding of gender perception and women's agency can be achieved only within the structures of power in a specific culture and that language is deemed as an important tool of this power. In the case of Yemeni society, there exist cultural components that interact and constitute superstructures of power. When a Yemeni woman takes part in a conversation, she feels

⁶ Seale, Clive Gobo, *etl. Qualitative research practice*. Sage. 2004.

that she has no enough power and her participation in a conversation makes her speech trivial and tentative.

From my own experience in Yemen, once upon a time there was a program entitled “Health and Society” exposed every Friday on Al-Saidah channel. Every Friday, the program is devoted to discuss one issue related to the health care. One Friday, the topic of the program was “the weakness of sexuality among some Yemeni men” in which a doctor who is specialized in the area of sexual organism was invited as a guest to deliver episode and answer the audience’s questions and give some general advice related to the real cause of the sexual weakness and gave some directions and solutions. The person who introduced the program was a Yemeni lady. After the doctor finished his speech to watchers, time was given to receive questions from the audience through telephone call to the program. The first call was received by the lady was from a man who started his question as “the topic of the program was really good and useful, but, as a lady, you should not be allowed to introduce this program, you are a lady, weak. Before let him finishes his comment and question, the lady’s face had redden and then she disconnected his interference. Thus, Yemeni woman feel that they are victims of the social fanaticism, lack of egalitarianism and narrow mindedness.

In their book, Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet stats that:

“Lakoff’s article argued that women have a different way of speaking from men--a way of speaking that both reflects and produces a subordinate position in society. Women’s language, according to Lakoff, is rife with such devices as mitigators (sort of, I think) and inessential qualifiers (really happy, so beautiful). This language, she went on to argue, renders women’s speech tentative, powerless, and trivial; and as such, it disqualifies them from positions of power and authority. In this way, language itself is a tool of oppression--it is learned as part of learning to be a woman, imposed on women by societal norms, and in turn it keeps women in their place.⁷

From my own experience, when Yemeni woman is involved in a conversation, she uses a language that is described to be verbose. It can be understood in term of man’s dominance and woman’s subordination. According to Robin Lakoff, because of their subordinate position women use hedges and tag questions more often than men. By the term hedges, we mean expressions like, *I mean, you know, I think, I was wondering, often, usually, sometimes, people say*, etc. These expressions express uncertainty and lack of confidence. On the other hand, tag questions indicate tentativeness; it is used to save one’s speech from being faced threatening. Tag question are also affective, they invite the addressee to confirm the speaker’s ideas. In the case of Yes/No question as they are open ended, they are to force the addressee to take a position. In their book, *Sociolinguistics and Language Education*, Nancy H. Hornberger and Sandra Lee McKay state that:

Lakoff (1975) is well known for her work on ‘women’s language’, which she describes as characterized by features such as greater usage of modals such as should, could and might, more negative politeness (e.g. You wouldn’t mind, would you?) and

⁷ Eckert, Penelope and Sally Mcconnell-Ginet. *Language and Gender*. Cambridge university press. 2003. P14.

different vocabulary such as more color terms (e.g. mauve, taupe, ivory) and a distinct set of adjectives (e.g. exquisite, lovely, divine). Taking a feminist perspective, Lakoff argues that women's language is a result of patriarchal social relations and hence is a language that reflects powerlessness and subordination.⁸

Though English has common nouns gender like, *doctor, lawyer, teacher, student, professor, minister, baker, shoemaker, dressmaker, tailor, driver, conductor, stranger, neighbor, inhabitant, fool, liar, aristocrat, poor, worker*, etc. in Arabic the situation is different. In Arabic, the word *doctor* refers to a male doctor, however; the Arabic word *doctorah* is a feminine form and thus refers to a female doctor. Similarly, words like, *mohami* 'lawyer', *modares* 'teacher', *taleb* 'student', *khaiat* 'tailor', *khabez* 'baker', *wazeer* 'minister', are all masculine noun in Arabic but, their feminine forma are *mohamiah* 'female lawyer', *modarsah* 'female teacher', *talebah* 'female student', *khayah* 'female tailor', *khabezah* 'female baker', *wazeerah* 'female minister' respectively. The Arabic female prefix *-h* is always added to make masculine nouns feminine.

5. Conclusion

The two terms; sex and gender are different while the first is biological and physiological; the second is social and cultural

⁸ Nancy H. Hornberger and Sandra Lee McKay. *Sociolinguistics and Language Education*. British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library, 2010. p 372.

formed. In some Arabic societies like Yemeni one cannot assimilate the term gender. They claim the term gender contradicts with their moralities and social as well as religious traditions. Though Yemeni women's rights are guaranteed and assigned by Shari'a and stipulated by law, they still suffer from man's dominance. The social norms that are called in Arabic *Adat wa takaleed* are difficult to be broken even through educational and rightful institutions. Many activists sought to break these social barriers, but their efforts went in vain.

In discussing gender and language in Yemeni case, of course, there are many factors that can be taken into consideration to shed light on this point. These factors are social, economic, political and religious. For example, Yemeni people who live in rural areas always use very poor and trivial language in their everyday conversation. The scope of their interest is very limited and restricted. Men and women discuss issues related to agriculture, family affairs, and home problems. Political and technological issues are rarely discussed except by a very limited educational group like teachers and other employees.

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