

Reflections of Gender and Identity in Faleeha Hassan and Alicia Ostriker's Poetry

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The present paper examines selected poems written by Faleeha Hassan and Alicia Ostriker. The researcher attempts to shed light on the crucial relationship between gender and identity in self-construction as portrayed in the Iraqi and American poetry produced by female writers. The study offers a feminist analysis through which the identity construction in relation to gender will be investigated under scrutiny. The study will present a comparative study between Faleeha Hassan as an Iraqi poetess and Alicia Ostriker as an American poetess with reference to the social and cultural practices linked to women. The study will at the end reveal some concrete conclusions that the researcher has come up with.

Keywords: gender, identity, self-construction

Introduction

Gender identity points out a personal identification with a particular gender and gender role in society. The term "gender" makes the reader in front of a gender separation process. This term has been and continues to be a strong point of contention. In addition, the points of argument expand over time and are also complicated. Gender discrimination appears over time and in all societies in different proportions. Individuals differ in gender identity within each sex, and men and women differ on the average. Gender identity is only one of many possible social identities. In this research, we address the issue of gender and its impact on identity, especially women's identity. Identity may be defined as the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or group. Identity is divided into basic sections: gender identity, social identity, collective identity, and ethnic or cultural identity. Recent studies confirm the introduction of female identity and address all aspects affecting the formation of this identity. Also, many studies are looking for differences between Eastern and Western societies and their reflection on the identity of women and their reflection on literary writing. This research highlights the writing of the poets Faleeha Hassan and Alicia Ostriker and addresses the gender and identity in their poems and the impact of different identity. The lack of feminist studies on the writings of the two poets is the main objective of this research, in addition to highlighting their writing.

Faleeha Hassan

Faleeha Hassan is a poet, teacher, editor, writer, and playwright born in Najaf, Iraq in 1967, who now lives in the United States. She is the first woman to write poetry for children in Iraq. Faleeha has earned her Master's

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degree in Arabic Literature and has published 20 books. Her poems have been translated into English, Turkmen, Bosevih, Indian, French, Italian, German, Kurdish, Spain, Korean, Greek, and Albanian. She has received many awards in Iraq and throughout the Middle East for her poetry and short stories. Ms. Hassan has also had her poems and short stories published in a variety of American magazines, such as “Philadelphia Poets 22”, “Harbinger Asylum”, “Brooklyn Rail April 2016”, and many other works.

Alicia Ostriker¹

Ostriker was born in Brooklyn, New York to David Suskin and Beatrice Linnick Suskin. Her father worked for New York City Parks Department. Her mother read her Shakespeare and Browning, and Alicia began writing poems, as well as drawing, from an early age. Initially, she had hoped to be an artist and studied art as a teenager. Her books, *Songs* (1969) and *A Dream of Springtime* (1979), spotlight her own illustrations. Ostriker went to high school at Ethical Culture Fieldston School in 1955.

She holds a Bachelor’s degree from Brandeis University (1959), and an M.A. (1961) and Ph.D. (1964) from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Her doctoral dissertation, *On the Work of William Blake*, became her first book, *Vision and Verse in William Blake* (1965) later, she edited and annotated Blake’s complete poems for Penguin Press. Alicia is married to the noted astronomer Jeremiah Ostriker who taught at Princeton University (1971-2001). Based in New York City, she currently teaches poetry at Drew University’s Low-Residency MFA Program in poetry and poetry in translation.

Theories of Identity

We begin with the observation that every theory is capable of evolution and growth and until change. This is confirmed by most researchers and thinkers. According to Erikson (1959), inner conflicts are what make up personality. But too, it is important to that in the sequence of his most personal experiences, the healthy child will give some guidance, in addition to that such interaction varies from culture to culture. In the spatial and social environment, we can say it is the fundamental influences. On the other hand, he focuses on trust, and he characterizes individuals who withdraw into themselves in particular ways when at odds with themselves and with others. He is meant that these are things that make personal identity (Erikson, 1959, p. 45) where clearly on the above in the Page 88. Based on theories, social reality is very complex, and the role of mother and father is vague in that period from childhood to adulthood which is a difficult phase filled with psychological stress.

He also stressed that at the end of each crisis, there is a significant change: develop the personality of the individual within his/her community. On the other hand, he explains that depriving the child of all forms of expression allows him/her to develop, and he/she creates a kind of nervousness. This is in terms of childhood, where the American child is taken as an example, especially the trouble of all those who cannot just be “nice” boys and girls, but are desperately seeking for a satisfactory sense (p. 96). So, we will look for gender identity and cultural identity because they are more important to our main theme.

Gender Identity

According to Susan E. Cross and Laura Madson (1997, p. 9), different basic structure of self not only influences self-representations but also affects the perception and interpretation of social information and social interactions. In the same source (p. 14), it confirms that the rise of emotion has an impact on the formation of

¹ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alicia_Ostriker.

the identity of women more than men. It tends to report experiencing negative affect more intensely than do men, such as sadness, fear, and nervousness, and perceives affiliation as more emotionally salient than do men. Furthermore, men are less willing than women to express feelings about a same-gender friend or relationship. In contrast, women may not hesitate to disclose their emotions because to share one's feelings, particularly one's negative emotions, is a particularly effective means to foster intimacy in relationships (p. 15). Supreme difference between man and woman, through they described men as agent, which point to self-assertion, instrumentality, and a sense of separateness from others. He described women as social, which point to relatedness and a desire for union with others.

Research shows that girls are more in tune with male emotions. That is why we find that parents discuss emotions with their daughters more than sons. It is from this logic that some prove that the emotional relationship seems more important to girls (Cross & Laura Madson, 1997, p. 14). From this, we conclude that gender has a significant impact on identity.

Culture of Identity

Research has shown that people in different societies seek to achieve the same goals with different strategies. For example, people may seek to enhance their self-image by rating themselves on attributes that are highly valued in their cultural context. Americans and Europeans are more prone to self-esteem and describe them as above average on personal traits. The Orientals are also strengthening themselves, but to a lesser extent than the Europeans. That is because they appraise themselves on communal traits and collectivistic attributes (Chiu & Hong, 2005, p. 11).

It suggests that the difference between East and West necessarily leads to different cultures. Culture cannot be reduced to knowledge represented in the mind of individual members of a cultural group. Instead, culture is "out there" in the state of external realities and collective method of behavior, which include verbal and non-verbal symbols (e.g., language and media), daily use and routines (e.g., gossips and behavioral scripts), tools (e.g., mobile phones and the Internet), and social institutions and structures (p. 16).

In the same page, research shows exposure to diverse cultural experiences restrictions on traditional socialization are lifted on creative awareness.

Reflection of Identity in Poetry

Faleeha Hassan

In her poem *Black Iraqi Woman*, there are clear reflections of the self for all its kinds. With the opening line, she focuses on the one's collective identity through what her father told her shortly before his death. She says

Shortly before my father died, he whispered to me longingly: "Daughter, treasure this, because it authenticates your heritage to our kinsfolk!" When I accepted this object, I discovered it was a stone with inscriptions I did not understand and delicate, mysterious lines.

The self emanates from the basic common characteristics of a group of human beings. It also glorifies this participation which signifies participation in the land, language, history, civilization, culture, ambition, and others. In addition, she points out that in subsequent lines, she wrote this poem because of her loss of that inheritance.

She later confirms her sad self, the ones she gained from the place of her ancient city, where she says “that I am a native of alNajaf, Iraq—spiritually, mournfully, and poetically! My father said”. So, the self is made of things surrounding. The question is whether a person is aware of the general and the poet in particular for this composition. If the poetess was aware of what is being imposed on her, which then becomes part of her self-construction, so to what extent she can show objection and if there are aware of any extent can object? It can be argued whether poetry is an objection to that imposed self or it is bowing and accepting reality. There are many of difficult questions to answer especially in poetry. Here, the poetess also refers to three ancient names of her city, as if to confirm that all things have the sense of self even cities. And as the city gained itself from its dry sea and its ancient names, part of the poetess’ self is inherited from her father’s worries and confusion and all that surrounds it. Not only in these lines she referred to the self, but she continues

There’s no one I care about! The trees tremble sometimes, and we don’t ask why. My life surrounds me the way prison walls surround suspects; I am the victim of a building erected by a frightened man. With its talons time scratches its tales on me, And I transform them into a silent song Or, occasionally, a psalm of sobs. Father, do you believe that—the roots have been torn asunder?

After the poetic references shown above, the poetess again refers to the labyrinth. She presents her inquires about her father. If he believes that the roots have been torn asunder, as if she refers to her old self and she is separated from it. She wonders if there is separation from the basic components of the self makes a disorder of self. She wonders about happiness and its achievement, and how these relate herself, its composition, and its fragmentation. All these questions emerge from the concluding lines of the poem

I need you. I ask you: Has my Lord forbidden me to be happy? Am I forbidden to preserve What I have left And sit some warm evening Averting my ear from a voice that doesn’t interest me? Answer me, Father! Or change the face of our garden So it changes...to what they believe. (Hassan, 2016, pp. 23-24)

In Faleeha’s poem *I Whisper in My Room*, the researcher observes that the poet speaks about her present and her past where she was in her country. The reference to a different world is a different culture that does not resemble her primordial culture. The poem contains significant implications for the culture and said difference. The poet was not convinced of the excuses that her parents had given her. So, this is evidence of the hidden sense of self and the extent of its impact on the apparent self where she says or rather she wonder “Why, my father, Every time I asked you to buy me a bicycle, You argued the streets are too narrow?” Obviously, they do not wait an answer; it is worth mentioning that she refers to the issue of women in her country. She is certainly aware of the magnitude of the difference in all aspects and thus their reflection on the self. Therefore, she asks her father to come, where she is to see the women there as if she was saying it with a sense of the customs (Hassan, 2018, p. 26).

Look at the women from my window!
They are riding horses, piloting airplanes, skating, Dancing on
water, sailing boats, and ...
They are laughing.
Laughing and laughing.
But, whenever I try to smile, I get slapped by a war!

Then, the poetess moves to ask her mother “Why, my mother”, who is also doing things as she found her community and culture. In this poem, she refers to the self-limiting that the poetess did not recognize things as

they are because of the customs, traditions, and cultures that often victimize women.

Alicia Suskin Ostriker

In *In Every Life*², the poetess opens her poem by talking about moments where the self disappears. She refers to the loss of identity when the wound is deep and cruel. Also, she speaks in the language of the group and this means that she circulates the issue .she says:

at times we are filled with sky
or with birds or
simply with the sugary tea on the table
said the old woman

She seems to be looking for what fills herself at those moments. In addition, she points out that these words are said by an old woman. This makes the reader realize that what she has said has come from the long experience of a woman who has lived enough of a curse. Then, the poetess emphasizes her knowledge of the deep things, such as the tulip about epiphanies, and the approach of a butterfly; those things are hard to understand, but she does not realize the hidden self. She wonders if the individual possess apparent self. In the third and last passage, the poet points out the difference between “self” and “not-self”, stressing that it cannot be isolated from each other like salt in the ocean which cannot be see it is mixed with it, or like “cloud in sky”, “oxygen in fire” all these things are inextricably intertwined. This is evidence that there is a harmony between the person and his/her self indivisibility completing each other.

Insomnia³

The title of the poem reflects a similar sense to the reader, anyone who reads a word of *Insomnia* leaks into those feelings consciously or unconsciously. Anxiety starts from the first word, and comes from the poet herself. But when researcher skips the title lies in confusion, where the poet herself falls into this confusion because she cannot find words expressing her insomnia, confusion, and anxiety that make her angry to the extent that she calls herself the coward “buzzing away on your mattress with two pillows and a quilt, they call them comforters, which implies that comfort can be bought”.

Here, she suggests that comfort cannot be bought; she is covered with a luxurious type of quilt but cannot sleep, in addition to all the things you remember and which indicate the richness of the situation, on the other hand, her discomfort and concern. Either in the sixth section, her fears develop to find herself facing the idea of death, and realize that everything else is ridiculous and meaningless where she says:

what a liar you are—
all the other fears, of rejection, of physical pain,
of losing your mind, of losing your eyes

Then, she concludes her poem pointing to the only light in the room and the glowing clock, as if returning to the reality of boredom and loneliness, although she pointed to someone sleeping by her side.

Conclusion

Through the research, we dedicated to the texts of both of the Iraqi poetess Faleeha Hassan and the

² See <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/in-every-life/>.

³ See <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/insomnia-190/>.

American poetess Alicia Ostriker; the researcher noticed that the sense of self varies according to spatial and cultural influences. If we go back to the beginning of Alicia's poem when she says there is a moment or two of werriness, this is a difference text of the Iraqi poet Faleeha Hassan, as she describes the entire life away from the self. This could be an evidence of the cultural difference between of each poet, or perhaps this refers to the different self-constituent effects of the different social environment. Alicia's text entitled "*Insomnia*" refers to the well-being of the poet's life with her sense of the futility of things and her search for the truth. While in Faleeha's poem entitled "*I Whisper in My Room*", a clear reference to the denial of simple things which could physical or cultural reasons but one result. Hence, it is clear that the self is affected by everything that surrounds it. There may be things that we are still unable to distinguish and that these things necessarily have a reflection in writing especially poetry.

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