

The Language of the Self and the Fragments of Identity Using Fadila Al-Farouq's "Ta'a Al-Khajal" (The Letter of Shame) as a Model

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Abstract:

For the novelist Fadila Al-Farouq, language has become a fertile ground for the multiplicity of languages, discourses, and the multiplicity of selves and voices that express them. Language has not only embodied the reality it represents, but it has also collected the shattered fragments of identity and the features of broken selves on the facets of reality, society and outdated customs. Al-Farouq's novelistic language seeks a particular reality and a different entity, which allows it to convey the topography of painful reality through an honest, descriptive language that does not let the pain of oppression and deprivation fall from the wounds of the image, but rather conveys it according to a special poetics, turning its ugliness into a beauty that comes from this linguistic technique used in the contemporary novel. How did the novelist's language of the self manifest itself in the expression of broken selves? And how did the novelist represent female identity in "Ta'a Al-Khajal"?

Keywords: Language, Self, Identity, "Ta'a Al-Khajal" (The Letter T of Shame), Fragmentation

Introduction:

The multiplicity of selves present in the novel “Ta’a Al-Khajal” (The Letter T of Shame) is not primarily associated with the cultural domain carried by the self, but rather with the theme of the female, where the novelist Fadhila Al-Farouq evoked in the narrative text a set of selves united by the issue of exclusion from society, customs, traditions and circumstances. The multiplicity of selves in the novelist’s work stems from a general intellectual and epistemological frame of reference with a human dimension, saturated with the dialectic of lived experiences marked by diversity and difference. Linguistic plurality is not only expressed through the speech of the characters, what Bakhtin calls “the speech of the other in the novel”, but also through the speech of the narrator, who, according to the linguistic patterns of the novel, imitates the speech of present or absent characters. “It is a stylistic technique that uses languages, voices, utterances and contradictory positions, whereby language is liberated from the fixed system to become the utterance of discourse, charged with intentionality and consciousness, reflecting the author’s intentionality, the patterns of character relationships and the discourses of others, from which the writer benefits by absorbing their nuclei and making their expression an indirect expression”¹.

The language in the novel “Ta’a Al-Khajal” carried the concerns of the female and her frustrations, which were witnessed by the law, society, customs and traditions that collectively contributed to the oppression, suppression and exclusion of women, leaving them without an identity or a frame of reference to rely on, but rather as scattered remnants on the battlefields of life. Here we follow the question of identity and search for the knot of self in the shards of narrative

¹- Amine Belaala, *The Narrative Imaginary in the Algerian Novel*, Dar Al-Amal Publishing, Algeria, 2006, p. 89.

language that conveyed the details of fragmentation and breakdown through the theme of oppression, the theme of love and the theme of self in between.

1- The Language of the Oppressed Self:

The theme of oppression emerged as a prominent theme in the novel “The Taa of Shyness” by Fadhila al-Farouq, where she expressed its various forms through the voices of multiple selves, including the voice of the mother, the voice of the grandmother, the voice of Khalida, and the voice of Yamina. The novelist says:

- “Since the frown that greets us at birth, even before that.
- Since my mother, who remained suspended in a marriage that was not quite complete, since all that I saw died in her in silence.
- Since my grandmother, who remained paralysed for half a century after the beating she suffered at the hands of her husband’s brother, while the tribe applauded him and the law closed its eyes to him.
- Since the old ones, since the slaves and the harem, since the wars for more booty.
- From all of them to me, nothing has changed except the variety of means of oppression and the violation of the dignity of women”¹.

In this passage, the narrator presents a series of oppressed selves, with temporal and spatial diversity, and a multiplicity of means of oppression, where the first oppression suffered by the woman was the frown that greeted her at the moment of birth, and the rejection she faced from the family and society as a whole, as some remained dark-faced and gloomy when a woman was born.

The oppression whose contours were etched in the narrator’s memory as she witnessed her mother’s marriage, which was not really a marriage at all, but rather a mere transaction for the purpose of bearing sons. She was powerless to alleviate this oppression, except through patience in the face of the law of the man, which does not recognise the right of this partner to bear him.

¹- Fadhila Al-Farouk, The Letter of Shyness, p. 12.

Then there was the oppression caused by the physical violence inflicted on the grandmother, first by the brother-in-law, then by the tribe that had mediated this act, and finally by the law that had turned a blind eye to it. This psychological and physical oppression was also evident in Yamine, who suffered rape and physical violence at the hands of her abductors, as well as rejection from her family: “It is the only day I tasted the bitterness of honesty... The officer told me that my family refused to receive me... They even denied at first that they had a daughter”¹. For a sin in which she had no hand, but which was forced upon her in the presence of a family that could not lift a finger and was incapable of recognising Yamine’s innocence and lack of responsibility.

All this accumulation of oppression and repression led the narrator to flee from her femininity, which she could not defend against this injustice. She often fled from her femininity and from the other who is synonymous with femininity: “That’s why I often fled from my femininity, and I often fled from you, because you are synonymous with that femininity”. The narrator is looking for an identity and the existence of the other, far from the feminine “ta” that plunges her into shame.

2- The language of love tainted with hate

The theme of love in the novel *Taa’ al-Khajal* (The Ta’ of Shyness) is linked in a different way to the poetic language used to express it. In this novel, love is shyness, it is guilt and it is shame. The language of the loving self here carries feelings of love and hatred at the same time, and this reflects the conflict suffered by the self, its fragmentation between feelings towards the other at times and the escape from them at others, because the other here is equivalent to the female who is the subject of the search for identity.

¹- Fadhila Al-Farouk, *The Letter of Shyness*, p. 74.

Language here defines two different relationships for the character of Khalida. The first is evident in her relationship with herself, and the second is related to Khalida's relationship with Nacereddine, where the narrator says: "I lived the most beautiful love story in those early times, and with you I often forgot the cruelty of men, but it is the orchard of thorns that surrounds you... Do you remember the flood that engulfs us, you and me? Do you remember the crucifixion of our madness? Do you remember the best years of our lives that we spent together?"¹ Here is the self declaring its noble feelings, defying outdated rituals, customs and traditions, reconciling with itself and its feelings, and recounting the memories of the beautiful time it shared with Nacereddine.

Perhaps the writer's boldness in declaring love and attempting to affirm its presence in the novel represents an emancipation from the conditions of society, resulting from an attempt to break the barriers of silence associated with the self.² Here, the novelist presents us with an image of true feelings that reflect the relationship of reconciliation with the self and with the other.

An intriguing and surprising linguistic paradox then takes the narrator to the dark side of love when she says: "In Constantine, everything is beautiful except love, which is painful. It was summer when we parted; in summer people always meet and then part"³.

Through this binary opposition (arrived-we parted) (meet-part), the linguistic paradox represents two different sides of love - between distance and proximity, between rejection and acceptance, and between attraction and aversion to love, all within the framework of outdated traditions and customs. Here the self is in conflict between its internal belief in love and the external world that considers it

¹- Fadhila Al-Farouk, *The Letter of Shyness*, p. 12.

²- Tibremasin et al, *Narrative and the Obsession of Rebellion in the Novels of Fadhila Al-Farouk*, Arab Scientific Publishers, Lebanon, 1st edition, 2012, p. 31.

³- Fadhila Al-Farouk, *The Letter of Shyness*, p. 13.

a crime; between the internal and the external, the self is shattered and identity dissolves.

Another paradox used to describe the language of love is the duality of (generosity-miserliness) in the passage where the narrator says: “We should have confronted each other when I suddenly decided to leave you. You should have asked me, pursued me, demanded an explanation, apologised for a mistake you felt you had not made. But you are a Taurus, generous in love but stingy in apology¹.

This narrative passage is based on the dialectic of generosity and avarice, which describes the psychological conflict that manifests the contradiction between the self and its emotions. This is represented by the protagonist’s anticipation of the return of his beloved and his apology for a sin he did not commit. The self in question was the one that rejected the relationship and hastened to end it by abandoning it, because on the one hand this relationship was a source of shame for the family. On the other hand, we find this self broken and anxious because it was unable to express its true feelings and so decided to withdraw.

The poetics of irony in its general content is based on the contrast between the surface meaning that seems obvious and the deep meaning that is not yet explicit or implicit. This opens the way for the reader to delve into the meanings of the text, to penetrate its depths in search of a meaning that touches on the author’s intention. The linguistic irony here allows us two levels of meaning: the surface meaning, which portrays Khalida’s desire to separate from Nasr al-Din in order to live up to her family’s reputation and the traditions of her society; and the deep meaning, which portrays Khalida as being forced to separate against her will, without having a choice in the matter.

¹- Fadhila Al-Farouk, The Letter of Shyness, p. [page number not given].

Another factor that made the love so painful was the terrible period that Algeria was going through, a time when funerals were incessant, as the narrator says: “Perhaps you are wondering what has brought me back today, and I will tell you, perhaps it is faith, because I am ashamed to open a conversation about love and the homeland that buries its sons every day. Love is very painful when it is crossed by funerals”¹, where the abundance of funerals diminishes the ecstasy of love and plunges the individual into a whirlwind of grief.

3- The Fragmentation of Identity in the Fetters of Traditions and Customs

If identity in its simplest conceptualisation means absolute resemblance and complete equivalence, as it derives from the Latin root *idem*, which produced the adjectival form *identicus*, meaning that which is similar and equivalent, as opposed to that which is different and diverse², then the fragmentation of identity and the internal psychological conflict of the self reflect a state of absence of identity under the conditions of obsolete traditions and customs. Consequently, “the question of identity becomes an inquiry into the variables that destroy equivalence and similarity and reconciliation with the self, and destabilise the enduring identity”³.

The novel “The Ta’a of Shyness” has reflected a detailed image of the fragmented identity of present selves within the narrative structure whose characters represent a collective of selves bound by oppression, violence and exclusion. The narrator says: “I was a female project and I did not fully become a woman, I was a writer’s project and I only became one when I lost my humanity forever, I was a life project and I only realised ten percent of that project”⁴.

¹ The same reference, p. 14.

² Fathi El-Tariki, *Identity and Its Challenges*, translated by Nouredine Al-Safi and Zouhair Al-Madani, Al-Kawthar series, Dar Al-Mutawassitah for Publishing, Tunisia, 1st edition, p. 11.

³ Fatima Mokhtari, *The Problem of Identity and the Conflict of the Self and the Other in Arab Women’s Novels*, *Al-Bahith Journal*, vol. 11, issue 1, 2019, p. 53.

⁴ The same reference, p.

The novelist stands before the remains of a woman, before the pitiful attempts of a writer threatened with the loss of her humanity. Even life has given her little in the face of the dominant patriarchal society. She is there to put the question of identity to rest, to search for relationships and paths, and “the links that protect identity through a general awareness of the self and its social and cultural dimensions”¹. The writer is looking for the missing thread, for the pact of reconciliation with her inner self, which will allow her to gather the fragments of her shattered identity through her full consciousness and self-awareness.

The novelist has oscillated between the language of multiple selves that the thread of oppression and deprivation has collected and the fragments of suppressed identity - the engineering of the “ta’ of shame” - to collect in its folds the remnants of the remains that testify to the unwanted femininity. “I have often fled from my femininity, and I have often fled from you, because you are synonymous with this femininity”². Here, femininity is associated with rejection and reduction because it is a trait of shame and embarrassment. It is the grandmother who endured the severe beating and did not move a muscle, and the steadfastness of that body in the face of the act of beating, in the face of the silence of the law, and within earshot of the tribe’s applause. And it is the mother who was a transaction for the birth of males, and not a female body whose feelings were cared for, but a body that burned in the darkness of oppression to preserve the extension of the male lineage.

Femininity was also associated in the novel “ta’ of shame” with the easy prey of the Black Decade, who screamed, cried and suffered to the point of death when she tried to free herself. “We were eight, one was killed, slaughtered in front of us because she refused to submit”³.

¹- Mohammad Nouredine Affaya, *Identity and Difference in Women, Writing and the Margin, Africa East*, Casablanca, 1988, p. 21.

²- The previous reference, p. 12.

³- Fadhila Al-Farouk, *The Letter t of Shyness*, p. 48.

The writer portrays the savage woman who has violated the identity of femininity and reduced it to scattered remnants on the arena of traditions, customs and circumstances. She embodied the details of suffering and oppression through the act of narrative representation. “There is no doubt that every novelist must depict human beings and embody their actions in his novel. This requires a conception of the nature of human action, of the justifications and motivations that drive people to act. This conception not only forms the basis of the writer’s vision, but also determines the nature of the subject matter he chooses for his novel and its content. It also controls the technical means they use to express this content¹.

The novelist has used the technique of narrative representation to recount the details of the painful events through expressions such as “beasts of the forest”, “they tied me up with wire” and “the whole homeland is a graveyard.

Conclusion:

At the end of this study, we reached the following conclusions:

In the novel Taa’ al-Khajal (The Taa of Shame), language was the connecting bridge between the novel’s theme and the visual scene reflecting the events. Poetic language conveyed the details of the novelist’s life experiences in Taa’ al-Khajal, and it was the unifying knot between the multiple selves whose theme was oppression in its various forms as represented by the novel’s characters. Here, language conveyed the suffering of the selves and raised the question of identity, which was fragmented by the life, social and political experiences that the selves encountered, leading them to shed their female existence and search for an alternative, as their identity here, the Taa’, is associated with shame, brokenness, oppression and deprivation. They went on to search for another identity that would free them from the attribute of femininity and find another existence that would restore their usurped dignity.

¹- Abdel-Mohcen Taha Badr, Nadjib Mahfoudh: The Vision and the Tool, Dar Al-Ma’arif, Cairo, 3rd edition, 1984, p. 17.

The theme of oppression formed a unique architectural structure in the language, oscillating between the journalistic language of reportage at times and the poetic language at others, in describing the scenes of oppression, violence and torture experienced by a series of selves - the grandmother, the mother, Yamina... - who narrate their novelistic experiences with ink of pain and sorrow, in the absence of identity and the usurpation of rights.

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