Navigating Gender Rights: An Analysis of Arabic Language and Society

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Abstract

This study examines gender rights in the Arabic language, revealing the extent to which Arabic has been unjust toward women's political and social rights through its phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. The study aims to uncover instances where the Arabic language has been biased against women, taking a hostile stance, and it also exposes the methods employed to undermine women's rights. This is accomplished by understanding the concept of gender, its relationship with language, and subsequently exploring political rights related to work, freedom, and social rights, represented by the right to visibility and dignity, which have been eroded in Arabic linguistic practices. The study concludes that the structure of the Arabic language is steeped in gender bias, reinforcing male dominance and constraining women in distinct ways. This constraint is evident in political rights such as freedom and work, as well as social rights like justice and freedom of expression. Consequently, the study recommends updating and developing the Arabic language to enable women to assert their equality with men. It also suggests the introduction of binding legislation to empower women in both language and society.

Keywords: Gender, Rights, Arabic Language, Syntax, Morphology, Vocabulary.

1. Introduction

The significance of this study lies in its examination of gender rights within the Arabic language, encompassing its phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. This study is particularly noteworthy as it addresses an exceedingly sensitive issue: the infringement upon women's linguistic rights. It is worth noting that Arabs hold the Arabic language in high regard, often asserting that it is a divine language preserved by God. Consequently, encroaching upon women's rights within their own language is viewed as an act sanctioned by God, making it

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an issue that cannot be overlooked. The central question addressed in this study revolves around the fairness of Arabic in terms of gender representation in its phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, and syntax.

This research seeks to shed light on several key questions, including: What is the concept of gender? What is the relationship between gender and language? Has the Arabic language treated women fairly in terms of their political and social rights? The study aims to elucidate the concept of gender and its connection to language while examining the political and social rights of Arab women within their language.

There are other studies that touch upon this subject, even if indirectly, such as Abdullah Al-Ghuthami's work titled "Women and Language," which was published in 2006.For this reason, this study is structured with an introduction and a series of sections. The first section delves into the concept of gender, the second section examines the relationship between language and gender, and the final section focuses on the political and social rights of women within the Arabic language.

2. Gender: Term and Concept

Literary critiques in cultural studies indicate that the term "gender" (also known as "gender identity" or "social gender") was first used by Annie Oakleyand her colleagues in the 1970s to describe culturally specific characteristics of men and women that are distinct from biological differences. In general, the term "gender" refers to the differentiation between males and females based on prevailing cultural norms, values, and roles rather than biological sex. While the term "sex" is confined to biological differences between males and females and is characterized by the belief that physical differences between men and women are fixed and immutable, the concept of "gender" is rooted in the idea that the roles played by men and women in their social lives vary from one social group to another within the same culture.

The term "gender" also transforms what are essentially social and political differences into natural and biological distinctions, thereby legitimizing differences in social roles and power dynamics. Consequently, gender becomes an institutionalized system of social stratification and power dominance, obstructing equality between the sexes (Al-Ruwaili, 2007, p. 152). Moreover, what could be portrayed as natural becomes a standard that justifies rules and practices that demand condemnation and punishment for those who deviate from them.

All these factors prompted proponents of the gender concept to transcend the barrier between men and women and strive for justice between them. They sought to transform society's attitudes and practices by establishing an analysis of social

structures in place of biological determinism in approaches to sexual differences. This involved conducting comparative studies of men and women within the same field of specialization and changing specialization models by adding gender as a new analytical factor (Al-Ruwaili, 2007, p. 152). It also emphasized the uniqueness of women and their differences from men, as well as the establishment of women's groups like men's groups (Al-Ruwaili, 2007, p. 153).

Several criticisms have been directed toward gender studies for their implications regarding male-female relationships, which some argue promote a zero-sum relationship. They advocate for the establishment of a society solely comprised of women, claiming that it is the only community where absolute equality among its members can be achieved. Additionally, gender studies often use the gap between the conditions of men and women as a basis for measuring women's progress; however, equality in many areas does not necessarily signify progress. For instance, achieving equal gender representation in legislative bodies does not guarantee the enactment of appropriate policies to empower women if female parliamentarians are not adequately aware of women's issues. Gender studies uncover these discrepancies but are unable to correct them unless they address the very mechanisms of oppression they seek to challenge. Thus, they end up reiterating the traditional discourse rather than undermining it (Al-Ruwaili, 2007, p. 152).

3. Gender and Language

Gender takes on various representations, with one of the most significant being language, which is the subject of this study. Implicitly or explicitly, all language definitions point towards its role in communication, socialization, conveying ideas and values, and expressing identity and culture. Ibn Jinni defines language as sounds used by every group to express their purposes (Ibn Jinni, 2006, p. 50). The British Encyclopedia of Knowledge similarly characterizes language as a system of arbitrary verbal symbols used for communication among members of a social group (Al-Rajhi, 1972, p. 61). Meanwhile, Ibrahim Anis argues that it is not arbitrary, but a systematic linguistic system of sound symbols employed by people to communicate with each other. This suggests that language is inseparable from human beings and the world they inhabit. The boundaries of one's language define their culture, affiliation, homeland, and personality. In the words of Heidegger, language is the air we breathe and think with. The culture of every society is embedded in its language, encompassing its phonetic, grammatical, morphological, and terminological systems. Through language, we perceive the world in an organized manner, with systems and meanings that embody our rights within language itself. Humboldt posited that language is the outward

manifestation of people's minds, it is their spirit, and they are the spirit of their language (Iwamoto, 2022. p. 61). Thana Soulas suggests that there is no language without culture, as it represents a social heritage of practices and beliefs that shape cohesion in our lives (Elmes, p. 12). Thorn borrow argues that our use of a particular language is one of the fundamental ways to define our identity and shape others' perceptions of who we are (Price, 2010, p. 7).

4. Gender Rights in the Arabic Language

Most of the world's constitutions are based on safeguarding the fundamental rights of their citizens, including the preservation of political rights such as the right to freedom and non-discrimination, as well as social rights such as the right to work and dignity, among others (Al-Armouti, 2016, p. 2).

4.1 Political Rights

In the Arabic language, there are numerous political rights that have emerged, where men have largely benefited while women have been disadvantaged. Among these rights are:

4.1.1 Freedom in Representation and Presence

The voice of women was conspicuously absent from the field of Arabic grammar, in its writing and its linguistic rules, sounds, and dictionaries. When grammarians began to document Arabic grammar, they did so predominantly in the masculine form, a reflection of their disregard for and suppression of women's voices. Consequently, most grammatical terminology is in the masculine form. In the grammar books, there are no records of female scholars discussing grammar, contributing to the development of grammatical theories, or formulating its terminology. Even if there were a single book authored by a woman, it would undoubtedly show a distinct difference in grammatical terminology between the masculine and feminine forms, with the feminine voice being more pronounced.

The masculine pronoun dominated the realm of Arabic grammar, and when challenged to include a term for the feminine pronoun, grammarians resorted to intricate arguments. At best, they placed it without specifying its gender, which is an exceptional case not subject to standard rules. This highlights the dominance of the masculine pronoun and the absence of the feminine pronoun in a crucial aspect of grammar. According to grammarians, "parts of speech are nouns, verbs, and particles," and this statement underscores the prominence of the masculine pronoun in grammatical terminology. They did not say "noun, verb, and particle categories." Therefore, male grammarians who formulated the grammatical terminology regarded the feminine pronoun as subsidiary and secondary. This can be seen in statements from grammarians such as Ibn Al-Anbari, who stated,

"Know that the masculine is the foundation, and the feminine is secondary" (Al-Anbari, 1970, p. 63). Similarly, Sībawayh stated that all things are fundamentally masculine, and then they become specific" (Sībawayh, 1988, p. 122). Abu Ali Al-Fārsī believed that the foundation of nouns is masculine, and femininity is secondary to it. Abu Hayyan held the view that every feminine noun has a masculine origin among the Arabs (Al-Tawhidi, 2001, p. 267).As a result, women were marginalized, and their freedom to appear and participate in shaping decisions that concern them and their female descendants was usurped. This linguistic bias has persisted in the Arabic language to this day and has had a direct impact on the social reality.

4.1.2   Non-Racial Discrimination

The Arabic language has decided to differentiate between males and females, with males being elevated while females are marginalized. It established males as the primary gender and females as secondary. For instance, Al-Mubarrad stated that the masculine is the basis (Al-Mubarrad, 1989, p. 108). Al-Zajaji also expressed that the foundation of nouns is masculine and feminine is secondary to it (al-Zajaji, 1984, p. 291). Ibn Ya'īsh provides two pieces of evidence for the originality of the masculine form. He says that they bring a masculine noun that encompasses both the masculine and the feminine. The second piece of evidence is that the feminine form lacks a marker. If it were originally equal, it would not lack a marker (Ibn Ya'īsh, 2001, p. 88). The absence of a marker for the feminine implies the idea of weakness and lesser value.

The Orientalist Fleisch mentioned that these special suffixes for the grammatical feminine lead us to a state of the language that dates to ancient times. These suffixes were used to differentiate between layers, and it seems that they converged in a layer that could be identified as a lower or lesser layer. This layer could explain the different types of words it encompasses, such as miniaturization, demeaning, collective nouns, and abstract nouns (Fleisch, 1997, p. 70).

Al-Razi, in his book "Mafatih al-Ghayb," stated that masculinity is primary, and femininity is secondary in both expression and meaning. In expression, you say 'standing' (qaʔim), and when you want to feminize it, you say 'standing' (qaʔima). The term denoting the masculine is the original, and the one denoting the feminine is secondary to it. As for meaning, perfection belongs to males, and deficiency to females. Therefore, when masculinity and femininity coexist, the aspect of masculinity prevails. This is why the Arab linguists unanimously agree on the predominance of males in expression.

Arabic language began to exhibit discrimination against the feminine in its words when it deemed that omitting the feminine markers was more appropriate

for the masculine. It considered heaviness to be the essence of women and their nature, which is a detestable form of discrimination. Ibn Jinni (1992, p. 27) stated that the masculine is what lacks the feminine marker both in expression and estimation, and it is the origin of the feminine because the masculine comes first, and it is more dominant. That is, femininity is derived from masculinity.

The masculine, as a representation, is inherently associated with lightness (Al-Sijistani, 1997, p. 36) and the quality of initiation (Al-Sijistani, 1997, p. 36), and he does not require an emblem or marker to establish its identity, for the masculine does not have a marker because it is the first (Al-Sijistani, 1997, p. 36). Every first has the right to distinguish itself and possess the authority and following over those who come after, regardless of their position or rank. The masculine predominates and excels because it is endowed with lightness (Al-Sijistani, 1997, p. 35).

4.1.3 Equality

The Arabic language does not adhere to a framework of equality between males and females in its interactions. It distinguishes between them in terms of status and gains. In cases of exceptions, the masculine form prevails when both masculine and feminine elements are combined, with the intention of omitting the feminine. The grammatical rules of Arabic do not permit the reverse, as grammarians argue that the feminine cannot be extracted from a masculine plural. For example, in the sentence "Teachers attended except for Hind, and the racers returned except for Su'ad," /ħadar ʔl-mʕallimo:nʔlla Hind, wa ʕd ʔl-mutasabiqo:n ʔllaSuʕad/, grammarians maintain that the feminine form cannot be omitted from the masculine plural.

In the past tense verb forms, grammarians, such as Ibn Yaʻīsh, argue that verbs like*ðahaba* (he went) are masculine forms. However, in cases like *ðahabat* (she went), they argue that the feminine marker (taʔʔttaʔni:θ) is not applicable in grammatical analysis and is only used to feminize the structure of the sentence, not the verb itself. This again highlights the suppression of the female voice in the grammatical context.

Furthermore, when multiple subjects perform a single action, such as in the sentence "Zaid, Khalid, Zuhair, Fatimah, and Su'ad came," the verb form remains masculine, i.e., *ðahaba* despite the presence of feminine subjects. This is because the masculine is considered the root, and the feminine is viewed as a branch. The bias is evident in the fact that the root takes the grammatical construction of being open (fatħa) because it is the origin, and the origin is masculine and does not require a marker or sign since it is the first (Sībawayh, 1988, p. 562).

The Arabic language also subjugated the feminine gender when it made the masculine the foundation and the feminine a subsequent branch. When the masculine and the feminine come together, and I want to describe them, the masculine prevails, etc. There is a lasting linguistic will that is unjust to the female, preventing her from any action except when she is passive, receptive, obedient, or when she is in harmony with a physical nature that defines her or a function exceptionally assigned to her based on her incomplete constitution, which disqualifies her from performing masculine actions. It is worth noting that the names of some of these actions did not escape the arbitrary imposition of the masculine form, and they were linguistically transformed into the masculine form. This has led linguists to echo Jahiz's eloquence, which governs the gender of the word and the femininity of the meaning, allowing the singular masculine form to be associated with any daughter of meaning as desired, in accordance with the principles of human interaction.

4.2 Social Rights

4.2.1 Work and Employment

The Arabic language has been marked by a bitter gender struggle when it comes to the right to work or employment. Arabic language has a male bias in its job advertisements, effectively excluding women from job opportunities. The language uses formulations that many Arab women do not identify with, making them feel marginalized and underrepresented in the discourse. Advertisements are phrased in a way that reinforces gender issues, discouraging women from applying for advertised positions. This linguistic practice has a significant impact on the current and future generations. For example, some advertisements have featured phrases like "On the road in your truck," "Your hands get dirty," and "Remember climbing an electricity pole." If these advertisements were phrased in a more neutral manner, it would open equal opportunities for women alongside men. This could be a significant step towards breaking down barriers that prevent women from even considering roles they are fully capable of performing. In job advertisements, language perpetuates a strong connection between men and the economic cycle, emphasizing men's physical strength and intellectual capacities while obscuring or diminishing women. As a result, women often cannot pursue the professional careers they aspire to, and if they do, it is framed in the masculine form, such as "member," "manager," "session chair," "assistant professor," "lecturer," or "deputy." It is her right to be a "female member," "female manager," "female session chair," "female assistant professor," "female lecturer," or "female deputy," or to have specific titles that reflect her femininity.

Some job titles were restricted to men, such as "wasi" (guardian), "kafil" (sponsor), "wali" (custodian), and "amir" (leader), but when women took on these roles, they were addressed in the masculine form. They justified this construction without the feminine marker "ya" by stating that such titles are only used with men, but when women also assumed these roles, they were used for them in most cases" (Al-Farra, 1989, p. 61). Ibn al-Anbari also emphasized this sentiment, saying, "Do you not see that leadership, guardianship, and agency are mostly considered for men, not women?" (Al-Anbari, 1970, p. 647). Perhaps, to accommodate women in these roles later, scholars coined forms that matched their gender. Al-Sajistani mentioned, "Sometimes they might say 'kafilah' (female sponsor), 'wasiyah' (female guardian), 'jariyah' (female sponsor), and similar forms using 'ha' based on analogy and the coexistence with masculine forms" . It is as if women were created with a defective and insufficient nature that prevented them from participating in these roles, which were initially designated for men (Muqaddam, 2005, p. 50). The masculine form dominates the active participle (faʕil) because there are few feminine forms for women in this regard.

4.2.2   Representation and Visibility

Arabic language has not allowed women to take the lead in public gatherings and forums or claim their right to societal representation. It has favored men with elevated derivative inflectional forms, while preventing women from attaining them. Words like *sabur* (patient), *tahur* (pure), *qateel* (killed), *jareeh* (injured), *mighsham* (aroused), *habib* (beloved), *manhar* (generous), *muhthar* (talkative), *mu'atir* (aromatic) were dominated by the masculine form, and a generic term was coined for both genders without adding the feminine marker "ha" due to their frequent usage by males. Social customs in Arab society do not permit these terms to be attributed to females. For example, "passionate" and "beloved" are qualities men take pride in, while women are criticized and exposed for them. Terms like "killed," "wounded," and "sacrificed" are associated with the aftermath of men's wars. Ibn al-Anbari noted: "In exaggerating and amplifying attributes, they attributed these masculine attributes to females, as they werenot feminized because their root is masculine. The evidence that their root is masculine is that men are described with these attributes more than females" (Al-Sajistani, 1997, p. 37).

4.2.3   Right to Equal Opportunities

Women have not been granted the same opportunities as men in Arabic. Linguists established rules in Arabic grammar that prevented women from inflectional changes, whereas men could undergo these changes arbitrarily. The

rule states that nouns ending with the extended or truncated feminine "alif,"whether they are feminine in form or meaning, and nouns on the pattern of "afʕla" with a feminine counterpart on the pattern of "fuʕla" are all prohibited from inflection (Al-Mubarrad, 1386, p. 309). Thus, all attributions and attributes given to females are barred from inflection, with no intention to do so, and the vowel is always pronounced as a "fatħa" instead of a "kasra." Consequently, these nouns are considered incomplete and constrained, as if they lack the freedom enjoyed by other nouns in terms of grammatical inflection (Ibrahim, 1970, p. 316).

Injustice has been imposed on females to the extent that even nouns shared by both genders, such as "jihad" (struggle) and "nidal" (striving), are treated differently in terms of inflection. They are allowed to be inflected when referring to males but are prohibited from inflection when referring to females. Al-Sajistani's statements reveal the suppression of feminine rights under the pretext of linguistic cases preventing inflection. He argues that masculine nouns can be inflected, while feminine nouns are left uninflected due to a supposed linguistic ailment called "taʔni:θ" that appears in both the form and meaning of the feminine noun.

Grammarians support this by placing two constraints on feminine nouns to prevent inflection, one linguistic and the other semantic. They placed two shackles on him so that he would not move or appear to have any sign of freedom, because if a sign of freedom appeared on him and he took different grammatical positions, he would be considered equivalent to the masculine form, which is not acceptable according to male grammarians. Ibn Yaʿīsh speaks about these two shackles and says, "If there is a sign of femininity in the word, like 'Ṭalḥa,' it is feminine, but it does not indicate freedom or femininity in meaning. As for the conceptual shackle, its name should be feminine, even if there is no outward sign, such as 'Suʕad' and 'Zaynab.'" (Ibn Yaʿīsh, 2001, p. 169).Thus, the feminine must remain bound by a single inflection, or to put it differently, bound by the chains of the abyssal prisons envisioned by the binary cultural framework in the mindset of males!

In the best-case scenario, if a feminine noun wishes to be inflected and liberated from the constraints of form and meaning, it must become "nakira" (indefinite). The indefinite form places the feminine/woman in the position of the unknown, devoid of identity. Ibn Yaʿīsh says, "If it is made indefinite, it departs because nothing remains in it except femininity alone" (Ibn Yaʿīsh, 2001, p. 168), and as long as femininity alone remains, there is no fear from it.

This rule only deviates when a masculine word is given a feminine form, as Sībawayh states: "If a masculine word is given a feminine form, it is declined. For example, if a man is named 'ħaʔidʕ' or 'tameθ'" (Sībawayh, 1988, p. 239). They justify the prohibition of using the dual forms (tanwi:n) for feminine nouns

derived from masculine ones. Al-Maradi explains, "Or it is derived from a masculine noun like 'Zaid' when it is given to a woman because its transfer to the feminine form has added a burden equal to the lightness of the original word."

4.2.4 Dignity

In Arabic, women were subjected to various forms of discrimination. Some grammarians closely associated feminine markers with diminutive or derogatory meanings. Henri Fleisch explained that the grammatical feminine suffixes led to the conception of a linguistic situation reminiscent of ancient times when these suffixes referred to classes, later converging into a distinct class—the minority or the lesser class. Fleisch related this to the concept of inferiority, giving rise to various linguistic aspects such as diminutives, singularization (in relation to collective nouns), and some abstract meanings. Initially, these suffixes indicated a lower value or the lesser meaning but eventually shifted to denote grammatical femininity. Fleisch also noted that the Arabic language frequently used the plural of rational nouns in a feminine form as a grammatical norm. This practice stemmed from the idea that the non-rational (the neutral) had a lower value and found its origin in the feminine form (Fleisch, 1997, p. 28).

At the same time, the Arabic language established zones inaccessible to women, as well as to the non-rational and animals. These zones were exclusively reserved for rational males. This was evident in the form of jamaʕ al-Muðakkar as-Salam"plural of rational masculine nouns." In this form, it was required that the noun be a rational, masculine, and free from any extra feminine marker, as Ibn ʿAqīl explained concerning the plural of rational masculine nouns: "In the absolute form, it is required to be a rational, masculine noun, free from any feminine marker, and free from composition..." These stringent conditions safeguarded the masculinity of these nouns against any traces of femininity or animality. Moreover, when it was stipulated that the noun be "rational," it referred to a sensitive meaning, as explained by 'Abbas Hasan: "Being 'rational' does not mean that it must be possessed of reason in action. What is meant is that it belongs to a rational category, such as humans and angels. It can include the insane who have lost their mind, as well as small children who have not yet shown signs of rationality. Even nouns categorized as non-rational can be referred to as rational when they produce an act that can only be attributed to rational beings. In this case, the plural is masculine" (Hasan, 1975, p. 140).

Here, the insane, children, and even intelligent animals have the right to enter the realm of the "plural of rational masculine nouns". However, females are prohibited from approaching this exclusive male domain, as stated by Al-Ghathami (2008, p. 26). According to Al-Ghathami, for females and anything

marked or influenced by any feminine feature, there exists another distant realm, far from the pure masculine domain.

If one ventures there, under the assumption of encountering a plural of rational masculine nouns (which signifies a unique feminine realm), 'Abbas Hasan would withdraw its ownership rights and declare, "Many earlier grammarians prefer to name it 'plural with an extra Alef and Taa'" rather than calling it 'plural of the feminine singular noun' because its singular form may be masculine. The possibility of having the plural of the feminine singular noun built upon a masculine singular requires eliminating the concept of femininity from it. Thus, the masculine intrusion occurs from within the feminine to divert the language from femininity to masculinity, given that the speech pronoun is masculine. Consequently, the feminine marker is not only opposed to eloquence, as in the case of the word 'husband' and 'wife', but it is also contrasted with animality, and madness and youth are placed ahead of it. Just as it contradicts eloquence, it is a linguistic and creative transformation; thus, it is deviant" (Al-Ghathami, 2008, p. 26).

When examining these unjust conditions, one can discern the underlying male bias. What is peculiar here is the inclusion of the feminine marker within these conditions, making it parallel to masculinity on one hand and rationality on the other. It is as if including rationality as a condition for accepting the "plural of rational masculine nouns" is an acknowledgment that females lack eligibility if they are grouped with them. This is hinted at by Ibn 'Aqīlin his analysis when he says, "If it [the noun] is of a different gender [referring to females], it is not combined with them [males]. For example, we say 'Zaynab' and 'Zaynabun.' Similarly, if it is of a different gender [referring to males] and not rational, it is not combined with them."

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that the structure of the Arabic language is filled with gender bias, which has elevated the dominance of men and placed clear limitations on women. This restriction extends to women's political rights, such as freedom and employment, as well as their social rights, including justice and freedom of expression. The study also concludes that depriving Arab women of these rights diminishes their effectiveness, activity, and ability to work in the public sphere. Therefore, there is a need to reconsider this language from this perspective.

6. Recommendations

The study recommends updating and developing the Arabic language to enable women to assert their equality with men, along with implementing binding legislation aimed at empowering women in both language and society.

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