PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

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Anonymity in Virtual Space: Exploring the Representation of the Female Body through Virtual Identities in Contemporary Saudi Women's Writing

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Abstract

Since its emergence over a quarter of a century ago, cyberspace has played a transformative role in Arab societies, serving as a powerful tool for dissemination of knowledge and enlightenment. Its revolutionary nature carried the potential to catalyze profound changes across the Arab world, extending beyond social and political spheres to influence literature, the publishing industry, and the marketing, distribution, and translation of books into various languages. While the sociopolitical implications of cyberspace have been widely studied, its impact on literature—particularly on the Arabic literary movement and the female literary scene—has received scant attention. This gap in scholarship is significant, as the internet has not only created new spaces for writing but has also fundamentally altered the form, language, and reception of literary texts, giving rise to what is now known as hypertext literature. These changes have reshaped both the perspectives of writers and the expectations of readers, fostering the emergence of a new kind of reader attuned to this new kind of text. Additionally, the processes of promoting and distributing literary works have been revolutionized, introducing marketing concepts previously unfamiliar in Arab culture, such as "best-seller lists," "most popular fiction," and "celebrity authors."

Cyberspace has also given birth to new platforms for writing, including blogs, forums, and online literary clubs, which have evolved into distinct literary genres in their own right. The literary texts emerging from these digital spaces have not only influenced the form and language of contemporary Arabic literature but have also demonstrated their potential to reach vast audiences, encouraging writers to serialize their works—novels, short stories, and poetry—online. This practice has enabled writers to engage directly with readers, cultivate new audiences, and explore innovative markets.

Keywords: Female body, women's writing, sexual explicitness, female sexuality, censorship, taboos, nakedness writing.

Anonymity in Virtual Space

I examine the phenomenon of explicit or sexual writing under pseudonyms or virtual identities by analyzing a number of works by female writers in Saudi Arabia, focusing particularly on those with direct sexual and erotic connotations published under virtual identities where the author remains anonymous. Further, I investigate how pseudonym techniques (referred to as the "electronic veil") enable female writers to create multiple identities, using online spaces to symbolically expose the body while maintaining a virtual persona that allows them to practice explicit writing and avoid social and religious restrictions in their offline lives.

This study argues that the internet, particularly in the Arab Gulf region, has created new literary public spheres that are reshaping the tastes and expectations of mainstream readership. It further contends that cyberspace has been especially empowering for young female writers, providing them with unprecedented opportunities to participate in the literary field and challenging the long-standing male dominance of the publishing industry. The freedom provided by cyberspace has undermined one of the most enduring symbols of patriarchal society: censorship. By breaking down social restrictions and taboos, the internet has enabled women to express themselves in ways that were previously unimaginable, dismantling the "walls of silence" that have constrained Arab women for generations.

The study focuses on a selection of novels by a new generation of female writers from the Arab Gulf region who first gained recognition through cyberspace. It examines how the internet has provided a liberating platform for expression, particularly for women, and how this has allowed female writers to defy social, political, and religious taboos. Emphasis is placed on the interplay between traditional forms of censorship and the newfound ability of female writers to challenge these constraints through digital technology. The study also explores the evolution of literary themes and styles, reflecting broader socio-political changes, while shedding light on the creative dynamics of producing and receiving texts in this new digital space. Finally, it highlights the cultural shifts of the past three decades, driven by technological advancements and the rise of female-authored literature, which have collectively redefined the landscape of Arab literary expression.

I argue that the electronic veil, or "cloak of anonymity," is a new mechanism that extends the historical model of women hiding under a mask, transforming their technique of concealment from a metaphorical practice to a digital one. Both approaches are deeply rooted in Arab women's tradition of physical veiling and are intricately tied to socio-political contexts and the dynamics of power and sexuality in these cultures. The electronic veil enables women to escape

social censorship and covertly expose their sexual identities in a symbolic manner, affirming a new female discourse that reframes traditional perspectives on women's sexuality.

I further argue that writing behind the electronic veil is a phenomenon that not only connects to women's traditional use of pseudonyms to obscure their gender identity but also responds to modern global issues, linking the internet to the globalization of female sexuality and the creation of underground digital communities. In conclusion, cyberspace has helped create alternative forms of self-expression, enabling female narratives to break boundaries between public and private spheres. It has allowed women to explore and expose their sexuality through multiple identities, creating a new forum for liberating female literary production. Pseudonyms have become a defining feature of the electronic publishing phenomenon, offering women a means to bypass social censorship and reshape the narrative of women's sexuality in modern Arabic literature. Ultimately, the electronic veil has empowered women to renew and redefine their voices in a rapidly evolving literary and cultural landscape.

Key Points

Cyberspace as a Transformative Tool

The internet has revolutionized the literary landscape in the Arab world, creating new spaces for writing and altering the form, language, and reception of literary texts. It has introduced new marketing concepts and platforms, such as blogs and online literary clubs, which have become distinct genres.

Empowerment of Female Writers

Cyberspace has been particularly empowering for young female writers in the Arab Gulf region, providing them with unprecedented opportunities to participate in the literary field and challenge the long-standing male dominance of the publishing industry. The freedom afforded by the internet has enabled women to express themselves in ways that were previously unimaginable, breaking down social restrictions and taboos.

The Electronic Veil

The use of pseudonyms or virtual identities, referred to as the "electronic veil," allows female writers to create multiple identities and engage in explicit writing while remaining shielded from offline repercussions. This practice is deeply rooted in the cultural tradition of physical veiling and reflects broader socio-political dynamics.

Globalization of Female Sexuality

Writing behind the electronic veil is not merely a continuation of historical practices of pseudonymity but also a response to contemporary global issues. It highlights the intersection of the internet, the globalization of female sexuality, and the formation of underground digital communities.

Cultural Shifts

The study highlights the cultural shifts of the past three decades, driven by technological advancements and the rise of female-authored literature, which have collectively redefined the landscape of Arab literary expression.

Conclusion

In conclusion, cyberspace has played a pivotal role in transforming the literary landscape in the Arab world, particularly for female writers. The electronic veil has empowered women to navigate and subvert societal and religious restrictions, enabling them to express their sexual identities and participate in a global dialogue on gender and sexuality. This phenomenon not only challenges traditional perspectives on women's sexuality but also redefines the narrative of women's voices in modern Arabic literature. The internet has created a new forum for liberating female literary production, allowing women to bypass social censorship and reshape the narrative of their sexuality in a rapidly evolving cultural and literary landscape.