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## The Ferocity of Feminist Critical Writing by Raja Ben Salama

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### Abstract

Amid the male biases that permeate the fabric of cultural institutions, an anti-violence discourse challenging patriarchal structures has emerged. This discourse seeks to lift the veil of male dominance by exposing its exploitation of various cultural issues, in addition to dismantling the traditional intellectual framework built on hierarchical foundations. This is particularly evident in how the feminist pen has undermined the linguistic policies that enforce masculinity, infiltrated paternalistic political systems, and eradicated every self-centered thought. It aims to foster a discourse that engages with the margins, reacts against linguistic rigidity, detects the failures of patriarchal dogmas, shakes their foundations, and transcends them toward horizons of renewal and openness. Furthermore, it leaps beyond patriarchal axioms and all elements associated with the falsity of sexist discourses and the institutionalization of gender.

Through this study, we aim to reveal the practices of patriarchal dominance in Arab culture as addressed in the writings of the Tunisian Researcher Raja Ben Salama, while gaining insight into their revolutionary trajectories. This includes examining the rhetorical, grammatical, and critical institutions, as well as monitoring certain elements of religious fundamentalism that have been exploited by political discourses and social laws to suppress the feminine. Additionally, it points to the pervasive culture of violence within Arab societies.

**Keywords :** Male dominance, sexism, rhetorical institution, religious fundamentalism, gender institutionalization, culture of violence.

### Introduction

The feminist movement has successfully infiltrated cultural discourses that, over time, evolved from patriarchal dominance in earlier eras into widely accepted axioms. These axioms have subjected women to patriarchal laws and regulations, confining the feminine presence in Arab societies to discourses marked by guilt, exclusion, and patriarchal mandates. This reality has spurred Arab feminist movements to critically re-examine Arab cultural discourses to counter the pervasive spread of patriarchal systems.

Raja Ben Salama's book, *The Structure of Virility: Studies in the Masculine and Feminine*, which forms the basis of this study, exposes the fissures within the framework of Arab masculinity. It examines the critical gaps in Arab culture that have underpinned the intellectual visions of the

patriarchal system, rooted primarily in hierarchical relationships and the binary distinctions between genders.

This study explores the key intellectual premises and methodologies employed in Ben Salama's critical writings, guided by the following questions: How do relations of domination, entrenched as recognized axioms in legal frameworks, manifest? What are the most significant flaws inherent in the established male hierarchy? What mechanisms has Ben Salama utilized to challenge patriarchal constructs and trace the dissemination of cultural violence discourses in the Arab world?

These questions guide an exploration of Raja Ben Salama's bold reinterpretation of Arab heritage and its sacred texts, informed by her extensive engagement with Arab intellectual traditions and critical reading practices. Her work reveals the discourses of violence and marginalization directed against women. Furthermore, it examines her incisive and dynamic critique of the constraints imposed by religious and political fundamentalism. Ben Salama expands her analysis beyond merely identifying the fractures within Arab culture to embracing the interdisciplinary rifts across various fields of knowledge. Her scholarship does not adhere to a singular, isolated perspective but delves into the depths of Arab culture, from its historical roots to its contemporary manifestations. This approach exposes the enduring masculine framework, the exclusionary discourses that have accumulated around it, and the epistemic stagnation that has characterized it in the modern era.

It is important to clarify that this study does not seek to engage in a meta-critique of Ben Salama's work. Instead, it aims to elucidate the content and mechanisms of her critical discourse, her perspective on traditional knowledge, and the robust conceptual framework she employs to destabilize the structure of masculinity and uncover the intellectual domains complicit with it.

## **1. Discourse of Displacement: From Critical Excavation of the Theological System to Deconstructing Phallocentrism:**

Raja Bin Salama, in her book, *"The Structure of Virility" – Research on the Masculine and Feminine*, aims to uncover the cultural discourses inhabited by the pervasive male voices within modern Arab culture. This culture had, in the past, witnessed various sexual transformations and documented these erotic practices. It even went so far as to celebrate in its poetry the coexistence of the deviant and the strange in a tolerant atmosphere, devoid of the contemporary hostility, hatred, and contempt, as the critic notes: "Sexual inclinations of male homosexuality and female lesbianism were relatively overt and enjoyed clear tolerance (...) We can, in fact, easily speak of an aesthetic and erotic turning point that led Arab culture, since the second half of the eighth century, to celebrate and sing about homosexuality. The art of 'flirting with the male' (mu'ākhāt) emerged and flourished, and poets like Abu Nuwas rose to prominence, advocating for debauchery, and eulogizing wine and the love of boys. For this, they were favored by both the public and the elite."(1)

However, this somewhat tolerant image, along with the movement toward recognizing a third gender, has been uprooted from the deep roots of Arab cultural memory. In its place, the seeds of a more violent hatred have been sown against any situation that raises suspicion of sexual difference. As the researcher perceives it, any attempt to breach the moral-sexual order or violate the authority of gender generates penalties that exceed the gravity of mixing the sacred with the profane. In this regard, she draws on evidence from both traditional knowledge and modern statistics and studies.

Furthermore, Raja Ben Salama reflects on the rampant intellectual dysfunction of modern times and the petrification of the sterile jurisprudential establishment. This establishment no longer generates new discourses that consider contemporary environmental issues, relying instead on the

freezing cold of silence for fear of falling into sin. Its discourses still play to the tune of the dreaded duality of analysis and prohibition (ḥalāl and ḥarām), and its adherents simply regurgitate arbitrary rulings without examining and scrutinizing the subtleties of jurisprudential, scientific, and psychological knowledge. Indeed, it hasn't yet absorbed the temporal changes occurring in the life of modern man, despite the fact that the texts of the first Hijri centuries were dedicated to diversity and difference, as they "open wide scope for dreams, laughter, and mockery of everything, indicating the existence of a 'secularized' social space and the existence of a culture that celebrates diversity, ambiguity, and the third gender". (2)

This is why the researcher attributes the transformations of the sexual moral system—from the "old pleasure of gender ambiguity, which was replaced by the dread of sin and the terror of sanctity" (3) —to the waves of the Islamic awakening and the reception of Western disciplinary mechanisms that are imposed on Arab culture. This is despite the procedures implemented toward various sexual orientations or gender ambiguities (in the case of intersex individuals, for example) being marked by "an absence of knowledge of jurisprudence with its ancient details and a reluctance at the same time to refer to the modern human rights reference." (4)

Hence, Raja Ben Slama, with her radical feminist sensibility, works to monitor and undermine the cunning of male-dominated discourse embedded within the folds of Islamic Sharia and jurisprudence. Utilizing an archaeological approach, she delves into the Arab intellectual fabric to uncover the origins of male dominance and how it transitioned from jurisprudential laws to political paradigms, ultimately becoming controlled by social engineering.

Consequently, the author points to the political exploitation of the sacred text through the fragmentation of the hierarchical relationships of legal statuses that grant males the authority to manage the family institution and impose laws of deterrence and prohibition. The critic then directs our attention to the "principle of marital guardianship" (al-qawāmah). Raja Ben Slama engages with this Islamic concept to dismantle its structure, which carries the poisons of male dominance. The researcher presents the concept of the guardianship principle as it appears in the sacred text, followed by its practice within the family unit to dominate and integrate into political systems. From there, systems are established to deter women from engaging in political life, based on the mirror relationship that reflects the private family system in the mirrors of public social life, after "the traditional religious texts codified the role of women and worked to legitimize the distinction and hierarchy between the sexes in the social sphere and in rights, based on a narrow and intentional interpretation of religious texts." (5)

Women are thus deprived of their effective political rights in society, given that, in Islamic jurisprudence, the male is deemed the guardian (qawwām) of the female. This status carries connotations of (Man/Father/Ruler), which establishes a patriarchal centrality. Because Eve was created from Adam, women are relegated to a secondary ontological status compared to the male origin. Therefore, Ben Salama contends that the superiority of men over women, as stated in some Qur'anic verses, is an ontological superiority that has cast its shadows on women's cultural environment, thereby legitimizing the political superiority of men.

Regarding this, she states: "The legal status of slaves and female slaves disappeared without much fanfare, and the legal rulings related to criminal law disappeared in most Arab countries, despite the Qur'an's codification of them in 'explicit verses.' As for the status of women, it did not fundamentally change." (6) Because women represent the face of the nation, they "did not own their honor in their own hands. Rather, their honor remained subject to the laws of ownership, reproduction,

and the preservation of lineage, and their individual freedom of living remained subject to the imaginary identity of the nation. The woman's body was not separate from the body of the nation." (7)

This remains the case even though the Qur'anic text equates men and women in more than one Surah—for example, Surah An-Nahl: "Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while he is a believer - We will surely cause him to live a good life, and We will surely reward them according to the best of what they used to do." Additionally, in a Hadith mentioned in Sahih Muslim, the Prophet states, "God does not look at your bodies or your images, but He looks at your hearts," pointing with his fingers to his chest.(8)

The researcher, as she seeks to delve into the cracks and fissures of the virile structure, extracts (from the sacred text or the Prophet's Hadiths) only that which permits her argument in monitoring the Islamist political tide.

She also deconstructs what she calls the "institution of the hijab," or Islamic dress, which, for her, is nothing more than a slogan adopted by religious fundamentalisms and used in political discourses that conceal hidden implications which prevent women from political life, since their bodies are deemed forbidden from engaging in political practice, essentially being sources of shame and needing to be hidden from view. The critic asserts that the "institution of the hijab" is "a process of 'gender marking' of bodies, more than an ideological process of marking." (9)

This institution condemned the exposure of the feminine sign because it causes temptation and seduction for the male other, as long as the woman's body reveals itself and its details. Fathi Ben Salama comments on this: "Woman has become, in her essence, an eye, a radiant sexual eye whose focus must be blocked. But everything indicates that closing this eye does not remove its dangerous magic, but rather only drags its ghost towards the dark darkness. Its dark rays only increase in danger, and this imminent danger threatens the light of the divine signs."(10).

It is worth noting that a group of Islamic laws concerning women derive their argument for establishing legal statutes from the Biblical texts. The attributes of deceit and trickery that have been embedded in the fate of women since the story of the beginning of creation mentioned in the Holy Qur'an, and the burden of Eve being responsible for bringing Adam to Earth, are all details that conceal the discourse of Biblical myths. This is because the Holy Qur'an "presented the story in a formulation that differed from what was stated in the Torah, and did not place blame on women, but was neutral in its discourse (...). However, Islamic interpreters transferred these details from the Torah, and mythical connotations became widespread in their interpretations, which established absolute truths about men and women in the popular imagination: she is derived from a crooked rib, she is the companion of Satan, the source of sin and vice, her weapon is temptation, and her nature is deceit and cunning..."(11).

There is no doubt that Ben Salama, with her bold readings and fierce writing, critically engages with jurisprudential propositions, such as the Shaarawy model she addresses. Despite the latter's claim to be informed by biological sciences in his interpretation of gender roles, the author exposes the jurist's gender ideology; specifically, his identification with Aristotelian philosophical thought and his reliance on Aristotle's model built upon a system of dualities that positions women as synonymous with night and darkness, and men as uniquely characterized by the attributes of day and whiteness.

This is the same funereal view that confines women to negative functions, while men's roles are exempt from negativity and enjoy positive functions. It is based on this foundation that the

patriarchal system was constructed—a structure built with virile arms and haunted by the clamor of identitarian fantasies—which believes that "a man's sexual life is characterized by an active nature, while a woman's sexual life is passive." (12)

Al-Shaarawy prioritizes the unilateral component of divine creation over the dualistic component solely to eliminate the 'legitimacy of women working outside the home' (13) He goes so far as to disregard the sacred text that refers to Surah Al-Layl: "﴿And by the night when it covers, and by the day when it appears, and by Him who created the male and the female﴾." The aforementioned verse clearly explains "the temporal duality: night/day, followed by the gender duality: male/female, which is self-evident." (14) However, Al-Shaarawy does not resort to this Qur'anic text; rather, he "compares the second duality to the first, (...) and he uses this comparison politically." (15).

Despite being riddled with gaps and fissures; the Arab intellectual system does not abandon this structure. Its historical memory and current legislation rely on the clamor of identitarian fantasies and reside within its metaphysical past, sanctifying its history and achievements. This utopian view of the past prevents us from seeing its flaws, causing our gaze to seek only the image that boasts of perfection.

Conversely, as the critique suggests, "the deep past can only be transformed by loving it in another way. Peoples never break with their past; rather, they liberate themselves from it. They achieve this by working to transform it into an internal moral class from which they draw inspiration, not into a political enemy." (16)

## **2. Cultural Suppression**

In her research on the masculine-feminine duality, Raja Ben Salama dedicates herself to reading the linguistic and rhetorical heritage corpora, dismantling its connections and eradicating all the tumors infected with patriarchy. This effort adds another critical loophole to her discourse, a foundation upon which the structure of masculinity builds its narratives. The researcher seeks to remove the veils of hidden male authority in linguistic and critical institutions, revealing the intrigues of patriarchal resistance rooted in Arab thought. This resistance aims to refute women's writings and exclude them from the circle of thought and creativity, even casting doubt on their creative works and accusing them of plagiarizing male works and attributing them to themselves.

This is exemplified by the case of the writer Ahlam Mosteghanemi and the uproar that swept the literary scene, accusing her of stealing the novel *Memory in the Flesh*, and the case of Nazik Al-Malaika and the critics' refusal to grant her leadership in free verse and acknowledge her efforts to destabilize the system of the masculine verse column. Her work sought to form a new poetic vision that differed from the traditional Arabic poem in both external form and internal content. Nonetheless, the critique asserts that they "prevent the female from the honor of leadership—meaning that virility can only be challenged (or broken) by a male, while the female can only be a follower, not a leader, helpless, not capable—and the female remains a female and has no place in the arts of virility." (17)

Thus, Ben Salama once again condemns the heritage discourses that celebrate male authority at the expense of the feminine, which is excluded from the monetary system. The male presence has strengthened its power since the first centuries within poetry forums, as the Arab Literary Establishment has always championed the great poets and fortified their poems with amulets of virility. Consequently, the voices of the male poets of the Arab nation have taken root in critical discourse, while "women's poetry is confined to the circle of the clan." (18)

Female poetry, in this view, neither expresses the nation nor revives the Arabs' exploits and stories, as its creative capacity is coupled with wailing and the searing of the soul (cauterizing the groins). The hemorrhage of its poetic words involuntarily approaches the purpose of mourning the ghosts of the dead. The poet's words are forced to submit to the memories of mourning, as exemplified by the case of Al-Khansa who composed poetry in mourning for her brother, Sakhr. The eloquence of her poetry is only proven by its affiliation with the patriarchal system, as long as it revives male archetypes from the grave of death, evoking her brother's exploits and lamenting him, instead of singing of life or penetrating its own being and sensing the existence of women. This dynamic, therefore, perpetuates male dominance and submits to the virile institution.

If "the presence is universally recognized for men—which is confirmed in the objectivity of social structures and activities of production and reproduction, based on a sexual division of the labor of production and reproduction, biological and social, and granting men the lion's share" (19) —then through these practices, male dominance is confirmed and firmly established within the social and cultural structure.

This critical fundamentalism, plagued by sexism even in creative works, imposes strict penalties whenever the feminine *tā'* breathes the allure of love and flirting with the beloved. It colludes with phallic male authority in depriving women of their creative rights and in solidifying the dominance of the virile male.

Considering that poetry is the "Arabs' collection of poems" (*dīwān al-'arab*), as they say, and from which creative genius emerges, this genius was manifest among the Arabs in the concepts of "male devil," "bazil camel," and "bazil camel is the complete stallion." (20) Even the meanings included in the Arabic critical works to clarify the boundaries of poetry indicate a focus on the virile male. The feminine is excluded from their calculations since it is prohibited from the field of poetic creativity, and a woman cannot be crowned with virility. If the feminine *tā'* is added to the word *fahl* (meaning strong), it is transformed into meanings of "a sharp-tongued woman" (*fahlah*). (21) She is perceived to have morals inappropriate for her gender, and if her virility is acknowledged, her feminine self is denied, for "she is a virile man."

The patriarchal system was established to "resist women's writing in three ways: either denying that the poet is a woman, denying that she is a poet, or punishing her. A woman who engages in poetry and proves her ability in it may be considered a man or a stallion." (22)

Accordingly, the writer, based on the measures taken against women and their exclusion from the practice of writing, refers to the Arab metaphysical rhetorical apparatus called the "institution of *al-Bayān* (the Statement)", which she considered a reproducing image of the phallic rational system. In this regard, she says: "It is a system that makes writing a subject of marginalization and erasure, and elevates the authority of the phallus and values that make men the master of women, that makes the other reductive and the minority excluded, and that makes thinking an affirmation of identity and a denial of difference." (23).

The concepts that the *al-Bayān* system relied on, such as the "pillar of poetry" and "poetic virility", all stem from a masculine critical system that "exalts the status of reason, resists contradiction and considers it impossible, attempts to protect poetry from madness, delirium, and error, praises moderation, harmony, and other rational principles, and excludes everything that threatens the foundations of patriarchal society with its various hierarchies, with its respect for the ancestors and its marginalization of the foreign and the feminine." (24)

However, the intellectual theses that critic Raja Ben Salama relies on justify what serves her critical discourse, leading her to select from the wealth and diversity of traditional knowledge only those models that confirm her point of view. For instance, Arab culture champions the model of the Andalusian poet Walladah bint al-Mustakfi and her poems brimming with the allure of love and the praise of the beloved—an example that confirms the rebellious sense of feminine creativity and the manifestation of its presence within men's gatherings.

The researcher also raises the issue of the linguistic duality based on word and meaning, and the philosophical thinking preoccupied with the duality of matter and form, noting their congruence with the duality of feminine poverty and masculine fullness. In Ben Salama's view, the ancients' exclusion of both Dhu al-Rummah and Abu Tammam from the circle of virility is due to their erotic writings that escape the torment of strict masculine expressions and flow with the sweetness of feminine fragility and the journey of love and poverty. This is what necessitated the rejection of Dhu al-Rummah because "love actually feminizes the lover." (25).

The patriarchal literary establishment also revolts against poetry obsessed with the display of meaning, as is the case with Abu Tammam. Although meanings are "put on the road," as Al-Jahiz said, and the debates of ancient linguistic schools sometimes celebrated the word and sometimes excluded it from its aura, similar to the meaning, Raja Bin Salama, in her deconstruction of the duality of the word and the meaning, affirms the dominance of meaning and the establishment of its foundations within Arab thought, because it belongs to the phallic mental centrality. Meaning is considered the essence and the origin, while the word is secondary and an external shell whose mission is merely to reveal meanings.

Thus, male biases nested with cunning tricks in the linguistic system, enabling men to "exclude women from competition, depriving them of the opportunity to appear in public, and preventing them from being present in the world of witnesses to shape reality. They remained on the edges of memory. If they wanted to think, their minds were immature. If they aspired, their achievements were devoid of value and importance. If they spoke, their words were playful and deceptive." (26).

The marginalization of creative women from the critical arena in the past, and the usurpation of their creative rights by monopolizing writing as a purely male practice, resulted in cultural infanticide. The text draws a parallel, stating that "He who practiced burying girls alive in the pre-Islamic era continues, in our current era, to practice cultural infanticide against the female sex." Accordingly, we find Bint Al-Shati' asserting that "literary historians have deliberately obliterated Arab women's literature in past eras, and that they have cast its traces into the shadows. The era of documentation and its men have deprived women of their rights, which is what Bint Al-Shati' calls the ordeal of emotional and social infanticide." (27)

But if language is not innocent and remains loyal to the cunning of male grammar, and its connection to the phallic rhetorical institution is complicated, how can a creative woman then activate a feminine writing that counters male writing within a system that sanctifies only patriarchal ingratitude? The text describes this situation as a process of male domination of the entire field—the production of discourse, truth, meaning, science, and intelligence simultaneously. Thus, women find themselves in a kind of linguistic castration, forced to express through bodily movements, laughter, and tears what is repressed, suspended, and postponed in the depths of a history of silence and of "blank subjects" for a discourse that has not yet been destined to speak. (28).

Therefore, in Raja Ben Salama's discussion of the rooting of difference based on the term "feminist writing," she highlights the pitfalls of this term, arguing that it praises male superiority, reverts to the hierarchical order, and highlights the differences between the sexes. If the Arab feminist movement is ambitious to raise the slogans of "feminist writing" in contrast to "male writing," Ben Salama considers this "a reduction of difference to the different, and another arrangement of differences, which can only perpetuate misunderstandings between women and men, and between critics and creators." (29) She adds another point, saying, "Perhaps women's writing is nothing more than one of the 'essential idols' that hides from us the facts of writing and creative imagination." (30).

She concludes with a writing that avoids the sexual binary, shatters the institutionalization of gender, and the conflicts between a deficient femininity and a masculinity brimming with fullness. The author's goal is to liberate herself from the idea of sexual divisions. Therefore, in her alternative discourse to this conflict between male and female writing, she presents her concept of "androgynous" writing—that is, the human self and the continuous divisions that inhabit it—which contributes to the process of creative writing by blurring the boundaries between identities. The text, in this context, "is a mutation, not a fruit generated according to a logical process." (31).

Regarding women's affliction with the characteristics of a negative vessel that draws from emptiness instead of masculine fullness, Ben Salama reconsiders these cultural statements and examines the Arab heritage to respond to its thinkers with their virile concepts. Since the poets crowned by the critical system with the medal of virility are obsessed with loss and the double emptiness from which poetic writing emerges, why then does the patriarchal system despise the negative vessel while drawing from its emptiness poetry that sits on the throne of virility? In this regard, she states: "Fullness and completeness must be offered as a sacrifice to writing. There must be emptiness with which the writer's chest opens to receive it." (32)

She adds in the same context, "This emptiness is neither feminine nor masculine, but rather the emptiness of the human being with the vagina. Vaginal emptiness is not only the concern of women, but also the concern of men, as in the Qur'anic and ancient usage of this word. However, the social system that arranges the differences between women and men tends to make women the sole bearers of this emptiness, which fuels fears that lead to their concealment and erasure from public life." (33).

### **3. Symbolic Violence**

In her critique of patriarchy, Ben Salama addresses the concepts of cultural violence, which have immortalized a fear within the subconscious of women of engaging in conflicts to defend themselves and protect their rights from extinction. Although violence lashes out at women, cultural and legal structures along with a system of eroded customs and traditions still incite violence against women. Instead of the woman being the victim, she is undeservedly given the role of the executioner, as "the dominated apply to relations of domination statements constructed from the perspective of the dominant, making them, accordingly, appear as if they are natural. This can lead to a kind of self-deprecation (Auto-dépréciation), but rather to self-abasement (Auto-dénigrement)." (34).

The issue of violence against women is the result of the fermentation of relations of domination in the cultural imagination, which, over time, have become eternal axioms and accepted legislation. Therefore, Ben Salama considers the culture of violence to be "all actual and discursive practices, all values, images, and symbols that lead to violence against women, or encourage it, or lead to the settlement of violence and its defense by women themselves, or lead to encouraging its victims to



remain silent about it and not resort to the authority of the law to impose punishment on the aggressor.” (35).

Ben Salama believes that the structure of masculinity is tied to concepts of discrimination based on sex. Her persistent questions (fossilized questions) within the fabric of Arab culture have enabled her to eradicate manifestations of structural violence and racism against the feminine other. This perspective leads her to examine racism according to the proposition made by the Tunisian philosopher Fathi Al-Maskini, because it is "a type of human policy toward itself. We never despise anything except what resembles us or is of our kind. Inanimate objects, plants, and animals are beings that exist outside the possibility of racism. Every racism requires some kind of horizontal relationship with the victim." (36). In this way, racist practices allow for the rejection and erasure of human identity.

As for the gender distinction between masculinity and femininity, which the patriarchal system exploits by permitting violence against women, it leverages the procedural connotations of the core of racism, which "takes the best of a being's identity or purpose—what they perceive themselves to be or what shapes their pattern of self-awareness—and uses it as if it could be a tool to insult their essence. Racism is an instrumental or procedural use of people's identities, treating them as if they were a moral burden from which we have the right to be freed.” (37).

Hence, Ben Salama demolishes the structure of masculinity, which is tied to the bars of sexism and cultural discourses of violence, by exposing the most important symbolic principles embedded in cultural perceptions and social structures. Structural violence, according to her, "does not originate from individuals, but rather from social and legal structures adopted by individuals and groups. It is a quiet violence that operates silently, but it operates constantly.” (38).

Ben Salama draws from the discourses of cultural violence the principles of inequality of rights between the gender binary, revealing the manifestations of inferiority that are clearly demonstrated in inheritance issues, considering them a structural violence that increases the severity of the differences between the sexes. Regarding the issue of inheritance, she says, "It is violence that does not constitute an assault on prevailing morals, and some may consider it a partial issue that has no impact on practical reality. Nevertheless, inequality has negative, unconscious effects that make women and men live their modern era while seeking outdated, discriminatory relational patterns, which no longer have any justification other than Qur'anic verses that have been irrationally objectified and isolated from their historical and social context.” (39).

The author also condemns the media and social media that have perpetuated degrading perceptions of women, assuming that women are consumer objects that trap masculinity in a snare of temptation and seduction, as if they were a Pandora's box, from which all the world's evils and demons flow. Therefore, Ben Salama asserts that the violent discourses women are subjected to in daily life—sexual harassment, the promotion of veiling slogans, the suppression of sexual desire through female circumcision, and the permissible verbal violence in everyday life—are all practices that degrade women's dignity and force them to bear the burden of depreciation and contempt for the feminine. The principle of dignity that Ben Salama formulates in her discourse derives its concept from Kantian formulations and leads to the fact that "every person has the right to be treated, in their relationship with other people or with the state, as an end, not a means, and as being more precious than anything else and of supreme value." (40).

Although we are witnessing the developments of virtual worlds today, and the empowerment they have given women a voice and a presence in the media and virtual arenas—evident in the fourth wave feminist movement, or hashtag feminism, which has embraced virtual reality to liberate women's voices from the grip of patriarchal isolation—this is an important movement in the current era, as it has at least allowed the stories of women and the brutal violence they face to spread, enabling their statements to prevail worldwide. However, this movement ignites the war between the sexes and remains confined to virtual struggle and digital platforms. It is an "exclusionary, bourgeois movement that does not address all women." (41)

However, has the discourse of violence really been deterred? As Ben Salama sees it, it derives its greatest power from religious fundamentalism, the rhetoric of sin and excommunication, and the resulting sexual ideology that widens the gap between the sexes. In this regard, she states: "The harshest forms of violence against women are cultural violence, and the harshest forms of cultural violence are those perpetrated by individuals who speak in the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful, to spread calls for cruelty, to excommunicate advocates of equality and freedom, or, at best, to spread harsh calls for mercy, as in the fatwa calling for beating one's wife with a beating tinged with tenderness, or in the fatwas calling for the circumcision of girls without amputating all of their sexual organs." (42).

Accordingly, the discourse of the structure of virility aims to criticize fundamentalist centralization in all its forms, and calls for separating religion from state organizations and legal legislation in order to limit practices of violence and achieve the rights of complete equality and social justice between women and men. In order to enjoy individual freedom, it is necessary, in the writer's view, to undermine the traditional structure and join the ship of modernity instead of withdrawing into the cocoon of the past and adding to it more intellectual petrification and spiritual obsessions. She concludes that "With loss and sincere mourning, not with an obsessive defense of identity, we can begin to renew thought and life, and even renew religious life itself." (43).

#### **4. In Criticism of Arab Melancholia**

As a woman who lives and thinks, Raja Ben Salama writes about what the Arab self-resides in, with its chronic loyalty to identitarian paradigms and refusal to abandon or liberate itself from the commandments of heritage. If we are meant to have emerged from our lost homelands and the paradise of the past, are we truly living in an intellectual modernity and establishing an ambitious modern state that uses reason instead of tradition, or are we still floundering in talk of a modern revolution that has yet to take place?

Ben Salama believes that we must liberate ourselves from the centralities of heritage and create a break with its contents, a concept she expresses with the term "the work of mourning" (*le travail du deuil*), which she derived from the concepts of psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud. Its significance works to "create a break with the lost, whose illusion of survival has been exposed to the exposure of reality." (44) Yet, the writer emphasizes the Arab thought's confusion within the illusions of the past. They are unable to revolutionize mentalities that uproot themselves from the roots of their heritage, and are thus doomed to the fate of melancholy—that is, "the inability to break away and the inability to lose the illusion." (45).

The author points out that even if Arab thought rushed to write the history of the Renaissance and deposit it among the educated to confine it to the campaigns of Western thought "of Napoleon Bonaparte"—despite the fact that Arab culture has produced many voices that host the spirit of

renewal, such as the intellectual struggles of "Muhammad Iqbal," for example—it remains a vow to condemn and denounce the concepts of modernity in the Arab world. Its lived reality is still far from the lights and biography of modernity, as it is supposed to be "a movement of unmasking and unveiling. It is a critical interpretive position that exposes all assumptions in all fields to collapse, and as it is an interpretive relationship with heritage, it exposes its unconscious symbolic structures and a painful but inevitable disintegration of its founding myths."(46).

From this perspective, Ben Salama refers to the issue of modernity as a position of the self and a radical modernization of it, serving as a means for the feminine to escape from the clutches of patriarchal centralizations. The idea of modernity, as the writer conceives it, is manifested by living the experience of unveiling, which leads to "the essence of what is in modernity of stripping and revealing the unconscious symbolic structures, and at the same time refers to a creative transformation of the self." (47)

This implies changing and renewing oneself within the framework of openness to the world. Yet, because the nationalist and Islamic ideologies emphasized their preaching legislation, the self is rendered incapable of bringing about these transformations and establishing the dream of a modern state. This failure stems from the fact that "the process of political, legal, and economic modernization to which Arab societies were subjected shook the bonds that bind people to their old identities, without creating the bonds that actually bind them to modern spaces that allow freedom and help them to separate themselves from pre-civilized civil structures such as the clan, the sect, and so on." (48).

Therefore, Raja Ben Salama condemns the practices of nationalist and advocacy paradigms for sowing the seeds of ignorance, while reality requires inciting the mind to think instead of lamenting the mirage of the nation-state and advocacy. This is because both seek help only from "the deep past as the only metaphysical revolution that our peoples can be reassured by or rely on." (49).

In Ben Salama's view, the modernity of the Arab world is still suspended on the balconies of heritage, and on the notion that the laws of Sharia are valid for all times and places. Arab culture lives on the rhythm of the interface between heritage and modernity, unprepared to delve into the issues of separation between worship and transactions. The feminine thus remains bound by discourses of exclusion and marginalization. She concludes with the observation that "Today's Arabs apply the poet Rilke's saying: What was is no longer theirs, and what will be is not theirs."(50).

## Conclusion

Because every intellectual journey must conclude, we summarize the most significant findings reached by this study, without claiming to capture the entirety of Raja Ben Salama's critical discourse:

- ✓ Raja Bin Salama monitors the fissures in the structure of virility within ancient Arab culture, noting the contemporary resurgence of measures that have widened the gender gap.
- ✓ The critic's mastery of archaeological approaches and the utilization of deconstruction mechanisms contributed to destabilizing the structure of the Arab system from within, achieved by examining key heritage texts and exposing the embedded tenets of patriarchal dominance.
- ✓ Ben Salama's fierce and critical writing successfully excavated the Arab cultural structure to capture practices that deter the feminine and erase it from the spheres of the Arab system.
- ✓ The chapters of "The Structure of Virility" reveal the exploitation of the sacred text by religious fundamentalisms and their identitarian fantasies, leading to the entrenchment of their legislation at the heart of the political system.

✓ Raja Ben Salama deconstructed grammatical and rhetorical systems, demonstrating the complicity of the critical and linguistic establishment with patriarchal hegemony.

✓ Ben Salama's study presents a bold and explicit secular call to break with the metaphysics of the past and embrace the project of modernity to advance the state toward enlightened horizons that bridge the wide gender gap and enact laws of equality and individual freedom.

✓ The discourse of violence, or culture of violence in the Arab world, as the critic explains, is merely a mirror image reflecting the jurisprudential interpretations that support the political establishment and perpetuate the classification of women in the category of guilt and criminalization.

- (1) Raja Bin Salama, *The Structure of Virility, Studies in Masculine and Feminine*, Dar Petra, Syria, First Edition, 2005, pp. 17-18.
- (2) *Ibid*, p. 16.
- (3) *Ibid*, p. 20.
- (4) *Ibid*, p. 22.
- (5) Rahal Boubrik, *Women's Pool-Religion in the Feminine Form - East Africa, Morocco*, First Edition, 2010, p. 12.
- (6) Raja bin Salama, p. 40.
- (7) *Ibid*, p. 42.
- (8) Muslim bin Al-Hajjaj Al-Qushayri Al-Nishapuri, *Sahih Muslim*, quoted from: Rahhal Boubrik, previously mentioned reference, p. 17.
- (9) Raja bin Salama, p. 39.
- (10) Fathi Ben Salama, *Islam and Psychoanalysis*, translated by Raja Ben Salama, Dar Al Saqi, Lebanon, first edition, 2008, pp. 219-220.
- (11) Al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*, quoting: Issa Barhouma, *Language and Gender, Linguistic Excavations in Masculinity and Femininity*, Dar Al-Shorouk, Amman, first edition, 2002, pp. 77-78.
- (12) Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Sex as Social Engineering*, translated by Fatima Zahra Azrouel, Arab Cultural Center, Morocco, fourth edition, 2005, p. 17.
- (13) Raja bin Salama, p. 36.
- (14) *Ibid*, p. 36.
- (15) *Ibid*, p. 36.
- (16) Fathi Al-Maskini, *Migration to Humanity*, Dar Al-Aman, Morocco, First Edition, 2016, p. 93.
- (17) Abdullah Muhammad Al-Ghadami, *The Feminization of Poetry and the Different Reader*, Arab Cultural Center, Morocco, Second Edition, 2005, p. 12.
- (18) Raja bin Salama, p. 44.
- (19) Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, translated by Salman Qafrani, Arab Organization for Translation, Lebanon, first edition, 2009, p. 62.
- (20) Abdullah Muhammad Al-Ghadami, the same reference, p. 13.
- (21) Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-Arab*, Volume 11, Dar Sader, Lebanon, p. 518.
- (22) Raja bin Salama, p. 44.
- (23) *Ibid*, pp. 46-47.
- (24) *Ibid*, p. 47.
- (25) *Ibid*, p. 50.
- (26) Issa Barhouma, *Language and Gender*, p. 72.
- (27) Abdullah Muhammad Al-Ghadami, *Women and Language*, Arab Cultural Center, Morocco, Third Edition, 2006, p. 17.

- (28) Umm al-Zayn bin Shaikha al-Maskini, *The Noise of the Feminine: Towards a Creative Feminism*, Hindawi Foundation, United Kingdom, First Edition, 2023, p. 42.
- (29) Raja bin Salama, p. 53.
- (30) Ibid, p. 53.
- (31) Ibid, p. 53.
- (32) Ibid, p. 54.
- (33) Ibid, p. 55.
- (34) Pierre Bourdieu, op. cit., p. 62.
- (35) Raja bin Salama, p. 101.
- (36) Fathi Al-Maskini, *Migration to Humanity*, p. 72.
- (37) The same reference, p. 73.
- (38) Raja bin Salama, p. 106.
- (39) Ibid, p. 106.
- (40) Ibid, p. 107.
- (41) Umm Al-Zain Bin Shaikha Al-Maskini, *The Noise of the Feminine*, p. 62.
- (42) Raja bin Salama, p. 112.
- (43) Ibid, p. 29.
- (44) Raja bin Salama, p. 146.
- (45) Ibid, p. 146.
- (46) Ibid, p. 145.
- (47) Ibid, p. 152.
- (48) Ibid, p. 160.
- (49) Fathi Al-Maskini, previously mentioned reference, p. 92.
- (50) Raja bin Salama, p. 166.

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