



Feminist Awareness in the Writing of the Syrian Writer Zakaria Tāmer

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Abstract: This article seeks to examine the image of women as reflected in the short stories by the important Syrian author Zakaria Tāmer, which were written in the second half of the twentieth century. In light of the theoretical debate on the extent to which men can faithfully represent the female experience, this article seeks to present Tāmer's work as writing that is by and large free of the chauvinistic male perceptions that were prevalent in Syria at the time, and as writing in which feminist perceptions are expressed with regard to the woman's place and status at a time when "the female voice" had not yet been formulated in writing in Syria. In many of his stories Tāmer positions the woman as a central figure and creates a new (fictional) world, wherein men and women possess equal rights and status; in other stories in which the motif of the woman's oppression is manifested, she surprises with her resourcefulness and by "breaking the rules" in protest. These perceptions are expressed even in Tāmer's early stories. Given that the writing prevailing in Syria up to the mid-twentieth century, and to a considerable degree later as well, writing that ignores female endeavor and creativity on the one hand, and mainly presents women as maidservants or mistresses on the other, Tāmer's work can be viewed as writing that extracts "the female voice" and accords it unique weight even in his first stories. As a writer who presents a high degree of feminist awareness in his writing, he conducts a literary-social-historical reform that embodies a challenge to intellectual and literary writing in the Arab world.

Keywords: Zakaria Tāmer, Syrian Short Story, Feminist Writing, Modern Arabic Literature

1. Introduction

Two principal yet contradictory approaches are evident within the wide range of feminist theories and schools of thought that emerged since the mid-nineteenth century and the in the course of the twentieth: the first is radical and views the biological difference between men and women as essential and constant, a difference that influences the entire gamut of their qualities, including their writing, and more specifically, representations of women in their writing [12]. The second approach does not see a real difference between men and women, and holds that any differences between them derive from the very differences between all human beings, and therefore the gender aspect is at best but one variable of many [13]. According to the first approach, men's writing is essentially different from women's by virtue of the fact that men cannot experience pregnancy and childbirth, and therefore their writing – and especially representations of women in their writing – will be presented from a "male"

perspective and can never be written from a "female" perspective. According to this approach, women "write from the womb" and they, and only they, can faithfully write about women and their profoundest emotional experiences. According to the latter approach, which contends that there is no difference between men and women in terms of their abilities and potential (their skills), the only difference between them is that some are male and others female.

The present article adopts the approach whereby the biological aspect is but one of the sociocultural elements anchored in the place and time from which the writing emerges. Furthermore, "male writing" is not necessarily the domain of men just as "female writing" does not belong solely to women. The term "male writing" refers to writing that expresses aggressiveness, machismo, and oppression. It is writing that does not view women as human beings, and certainly not as partners with equal rights, but mainly as a body or vessel for men's sexual gratification. According to this approach "male writing" characterizes anyone who has adopted, consciously or not, the oppressive point of view. By

contrast, the term “female writing” refers to writing that views women, first and foremost, as human beings (not a body, object, or vessel), with the same rights as men, possessing the same social and functional abilities as men, and the biological difference between them does not attest to either their intellectual or emotional capabilities, including the ability to adopt either a “male” or “female” style of writing.

The terms “male writing” and “female writing” ostensibly describe a dichotomous situation whereby all types of writing relating to representations of men and women can be classified into one of these categories, but this is not so. In many cases it is difficult to classify writing as “female” or “male”, and “seepage” from one to the other can be discerned. In other words, it is possible for a certain type of writing to simultaneously possess characteristics of both categories, and it will need to be classified in a separate category. Thus the terms “male writing” and “female writing” (unlike “men’s writing” and “women’s writing”) make an important contribution to the theoretical debate since they enable classification of men’s and women’s writing not by gender, but by the representations of men and women in their works. Consequently, a man’s writing can possess the characteristics of “female writing”, and a woman’s writing can possess the characteristics of “male writing”, and their writing can also possess the characteristics of both categories at the same time.

Furthermore, since the basic premise of this article is that a writer does not work in a void and his work is social context-dependent, it does not view either male or female writing as inherent and permanent. The differences between men and women in life in general and their writing in particular derive, first and foremost, from their being different people who have experienced different things through different “lenses”. Being either a man or a woman quite possibly bears some significance, but it does not necessarily derive from the innate biological difference, but from the fact that the society in which that person lives – in accordance with the place, time, and cultural values into which he or she was born – accords meaning to this fact, and either amplifies or suppresses the “male” aspects of a person born male, and the “female” aspects of a person born female. This is a complex process of cultural construction that commences at birth. The present study does not reject the possibility that some of the differences between men and women might stem from the physiological differences between them, however these differences are not necessarily innate, but are acquired [28].

The present study accepts the approach of several psychoanalytical theoreticians such as Juliet Mitchell and Julia Kristeva, whereby men and women alike are subject to cultural and psychological pressures, and in fact play “roles” they acquired during their childhood [33]. This runs counter to the approach of radical feminist scholars like Susan Brownmiller who hold that the reason for male dominance over women stems from the biological differences between them. However, just as it can be argued that a woman is shaped to be a woman, thus it may be said of a man that he is

not born to be a man (in the negative aggressive sense of the word), but learns and is shaped to be a man [17]. On the contrary, society ‘assigns different roles to the two sexes, surrounds them from birth with an expectation of different behavior [...] in terms of types of behavior believed to be innate and therefore appropriate for one sex or for another’ [29]. In accordance with the approach adopted by this study, in a future egalitarian society both man and woman are perceived as “others”, but since all members of society are “others”, they are equal.

2. The Discourse on Women in the Arab World

The discourse on women in the Arab world is a complex one for two main reasons: First, the rather small amount of documentation on women’s role perceptions and view of life from a historical standpoint; and second, the misconceptions concerning the history of the Third World, including the Arab world [45].¹ Up until the 1930s, history and literature were almost exclusively male domains; history and literature were written mainly by men who took the liberty of writing about women, but did not allow women to make their voice heard [15]. Consequently, the discourse on women and their status in Arab society gained scant attention or documentation [5, 36]. For example, in Ignaz Goldziher’s book on the history of classical Arabic literature not one woman is mentioned among the dozens of men that are, men of culture and literature who are documented as important figures from the rise of Islam to the end of the eighteenth century [38]. Whereas the absence of women from history books and studies on Arabic literature may attest to the norms prevailing in the Modern Era among male writers, literary critics, and historians, that avoided mentioning women writers and culturally active women in their society, there is no evidence to suggest that women were not engaged in culture and literature during that period. On the contrary, numerous studies in recent years attest to the intensive engagement of women in poetry as early as the pre-Islamic period [26]. The scant reference to this may also attest to the fact that women’s poetry was not considered sufficiently weighty or worthy of mention, and it may be assumed that there were many more women poets than we know about. In his study on women’s activities during the period that is often referred to as the Renaissance of Arab society and culture (*Aṣr al-Nahḍa*, 1849-1928), researcher George Kallas reviews the significant contribution of women in the Arab world during this period in the social, cultural, and literary spheres. In contrast with previous studies that tended not to

1. Tucker’s study which engages with women in nineteenth-century Egypt seeks to refute the static perception of “the female past” and prove that women helped to shape the period. For example, court records from the period attest to the struggle of women for restoration of their rights of which they were deprived with the expansion of the public sphere and with the social, economic, and political changes that occurred in the nineteenth century, and which kept them in the domestic sphere, thus worsening their status.

attribute significance to their activities, he notes the existence of a “women’s intellectual movement”. Therefore, ignoring women’s poetry and writing may reflect a situation of social and cultural oppression, and not necessarily the actual situation [34].

Ignoring the female voice in the Arab world was not in the exclusive domain of men; at first even female researchers mistakenly thought that all women had the same goals that had been formulated by feminists in the West [7]. Up until the 1980s the study of feminist movements in the Middle East focused on the oppression of women, and analysis of women’s status was reduced to a limited number of texts and practices, such as the veil or female circumcision that were perceived as fully reflecting the reality of their life [27]. In Western eyes the woman behind the veil became an Oriental figure of the Muslim Middle East: sexual, undeveloped, immature, enslaved, and lacking the ability to express and represent herself [30]. These research approaches axiomatically assumed an Islamic “nature” that remained essentially unchanged through different periods and in different societies, and consequently these societies were presented as backward, tyrannical, and unchanging.

Historian Deniz Kandiyoti [24], anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod [1], literature researcher Margot Badran [9], and others all stated that the feminist struggle is historically and culturally context-dependent and varies from time to time and from place to place. Kandiyoti calls this “local dialects” in feminism which developed in different societies and enable understanding of unique characteristics such as omissions, silences, and overt and coded protests [24]. Since the 1970s trends in women’s and gender studies in the Middle East have expanded, and as a consequence basic concepts and definitions which served researchers and scholars have been reexamined and re-discussed, inter alia, the concept of “feminism” in the Middle Eastern context [19]. Further evidence of developments in the field is the appearance of articles classifying the writing and the various studies on women and gender into different categories, for example, according to the stance they adopt on the issue of women’s oppression and the contribution of Islam to it [25], or according to the influence of various theories and approaches on writing in this field, among them Orientalism, modernization theories, dependency theory, and feminism and political Islam [32]. Scholars engaged in researching women in the social and economic history of the region have discovered, for example, that women constituted an integral part of the economy of the studied locality and period. They thus shattered the myth that Muslim women were passive and isolated in a separate, traditional, and unchanging world [19]. Furthermore, Badran draws a distinction between overt and covert feminism, thus enabling application of the term “feminist writing” to texts that have not yet reached the public sphere due to societal restrictions, for example in Egypt between the 1950s and 1970s [9].

Badran and Cooke are aware that there is also male feminist writing, but claim that the reference point of these pro-feminist men, as they call them, is European society, whereas women in

Arab society write about themselves from an inside view of their lives (they are “there”, whereas men observe them from the outside, and consequently their writing is “secondhand”). The researchers admit, however, that the writing of several men who called for the advancement of women’s status, risking both their personal and professional standing, cannot be ignored. Some were even arrested when they called for removal of the veil, like the Egyptian intellectual Ahmad Luṭfi al-Sayyid, founder of the *Al-Jarīda* newspaper, and the Iraqi poet Jamil Sidqi al-Zahāwi (1863-1936). However, Badran and Cooke contend that women’s feminist writing preceded that of men, in Egypt for example, but it was male writing that was published, such as the books by Qāsim Amīn, *The Liberation of Women* (1899) and *The New Woman* (1902), which given the sociocultural perceptions prevailing in the Arab-Muslim world at the time of their publication, were considered revolutionary [10]. In his writings Amin relied on sacred texts (the Qur’an) and attempted to give them a new interpretation, according to which the good of the Egyptian nation mandates an essential change in perception of the woman’s place in family and society. He called for fundamental reforms in women’s status, including broadening women’s education, removal of the veil, abrogation of arranged marriages (marriage as an economic-social-political transaction), and abolition of polygamy and instant divorce. Like his predecessors, his point of departure was the family unit. To his mind, the Egyptian nation is equal to the sum of the family units comprising it; the single family unit comprises a couple; if the single family unit is a healthy one, then society as a whole will be healthy. Amin opposed the imagined patriarchal social construction that attributes inherent, congenital intellectual inferiority to women in comparison with men, which mandates that they remain in the private sphere. It is possible, however, that like philosophers before him Amin was less concerned with women, but rather with the Egyptian nation, and he sought ways that would lead to its independence. Women’s education was designed, first and foremost, to improve children’s education which, according to Amin, would be women’s chief contribution to nationalism and society.

Badran and Cooke explain that unlike their sisters in the West, feminist women in the Third World and the Arab world were compelled to carve their path in what was essentially an agrarian society that underwent gradual urbanization processes, and religion in that society was, and still is, an important source of identification and influence in everyday life. These societies were under either European colonial rule or a Western imperialist hegemony at the time when feminism began to take shape. Women who wanted to voice feminist views risked being perceived as both anti-national and anti-religion. In this respect, the struggle of women in the Arab world was, and still is, more complex than that of feminists in the Western world. Literature written by women since the 1990s is far more accessible and available in the Arab world, not only in countries like Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, but also in the Gulf States [22]. In recent years, with technological developments and the penetration of the Internet into the Arab

states on the one hand, and the outbreak of the “Arab Spring” on the other, women throughout the Arab world are venturing to publish their work far more than in the past, and in it they voice ideas of liberation and freedom in a variety of writing styles, and far more directly and bluntly than ever before [21].

The present study seeks to present Zakaria Tāmer’s unique writing which expresses some far-reaching outlooks for their time (from the late 1950s) and calls for complete equality between men and women in Arab society.

3. Zakaria Tāmer's Writing

Born in Damascus, Tāmer began publishing his stories in the late 1950s. On completion of his elementary schooling he was compelled to leave school and help to provide for his family, and he completed his education on his own at a later age. Publication of his first stories revealed his unique talent for trenchantly critical, allegorical, and metaphorical writing, which places the figure of the Syrian and the Arab oppressed by the regime at the center. Thus, his work can be viewed as not only literary-artistic writing but also militant intellectual writing that seeks to reflect the society from which it sprang, to react to it, and to propose alternatives to it in the form of the short and the very short story genre which throughout all his years of writing served as a platform for expressing his ideas [20]. His writing attempts to contend with the prevention of freedom of expression in Syria throughout most of its history in the Modern Era, from the Ottoman Empire Period, through the British Mandate Period, and even more so after Syria gained independence in 1944. This is particularly notable during the rule of Hafez al-Assad (1970-2000). Tāmer’s writing contributed considerably to the shaping of a critical literary-intellectual narrative in the form of the short story genre, which up to the mid-twentieth century had not yet formed. His writing gives the ostensibly marginal voices in Syrian and Arab societies the possibility of expression, and empowers them by presenting them as possessing power and the ability to identify the weaknesses of the seemingly strong. Influenced by the ideas of the nineteenth-century Syrian reformer 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Kawākibi, who in his essays severely criticized the Ottoman regime, Tāmer’s writing challenges the oppressive regimes in Syria in general, and Assad’s regime in particular [20]. His writing exhorts his intellectual contemporaries to aspire to complete freedom of expression in their writing, free of the establishment’s fetters, and to completely avoid perquisites. In his writing Tāmer developed and refined the style of writing known as “counter power”, namely total rejection of everything represented by the establishment, without a willingness to hold a dialogue or reach a compromise.

4. The Woman's Image in Tāmer's Writing

As militant intellectual writing that engages with numerous social and cultural subjects in blunt critical

language, examining the representations of women in it is of particular interest: To what extent does Tāmer’s writing not only reflect the image of the woman in Arab society, react to and criticize reality, but also creates an alternative narrative to the representation of women in Syrian and Arabic literature, thus expanding the intellectual-public discourse on this subject? The stories presented below illustrate different representations of the woman in Tāmer’s writing throughout all the years of his work. *The Moon Unmasked* (Wajh al-Qamar) is one of his relatively early stories. It was first published in the *Al-Ādāb* periodical in August 1962, and in an official collection of Tāmer’s work some ten years later (*Damascus on Fire*, 1973). This was after it was analyzed in depth by the Syrian critic Husām al-Khaṭīb, who also claimed that it was he who “discovered” the story and helped Tāmer to understand the extent of his daring in writing it [3]. One of the important messages in this story is that the woman possesses the ability to change her destiny and fulfill her femininity despite the oppression she experiences at the hands of the men around her.² In this story Samiḥa is described as a girl who was raised in a rigidly traditional atmosphere; when she was ten her father slapped her when he saw her dress riding up her thighs; when she was twelve she was raped by an unknown male assailant; a short time after she was married her husband divorced her because she did not satisfy him sexually and she recoiled from his touch. When she returned to live in her parents’ home she discovered that her elderly father had decided to chop down the lemon tree whose fragrance she had loved in her childhood. Her father was loath to heed his daughter’s entreaties not to chop down the tree, and ordered a woodcutter to do the job. The entire story is accompanied by the sound of the axe striking the lemon tree, and since in Arabic it is feminine (*shajara*) it can symbolize Samiḥa and her femininity, whereas the axe symbolizes the male attempt to inflict both physical and mental harm on her. At the same time the story is accompanied by the shouts of a madman who is chased and hurt by the neighborhood boys. His voice might express Samiḥa’s inner cry. Amid the uproar made by the children, the shouts of the madman, and the sounds of the axe, Samiḥa lies down on the couch, sinks into a sort of hallucination or daydream and recalls the rape she experienced as a young girl. In a healing process reminiscent of Freudian therapy, the man that assaulted her body and femininity becomes a “dead fire” after she draws him up from her subconscious and confronts the horror she underwent.

‘She looked at the man and saw that he had changed. Having relinquished his youthfulness, he had become middle-aged. She recognized him at once – she had been not more than twelve years old when she was returning home, and the evening darkness had begun to flow into the lanes. When she had arrived close to the dilapidated, deserted house

2. In the present article I focus on aspects that accentuate the research subject, although the stories mentioned can obviously be addressed from numerous other aspects.

a middle-aged man had blocked her way and roughly seized her hand. "I'll kill you if you scream," he had said to her in a husky voice.

'He had quickly dragged her into the house and stripped her of her clothes. At that time her breasts had not yet ripened, though her flesh was smooth and firm. The man's body had the smell of a dead fire.

'Samīḥa gazed at the middle-aged man apprehensively, for he had returned to her after protracted waiting. She wanted to rush toward him and lay her head on his chest, but she heard him say to her, "I'll kill you if you scream."

'She did not resist; she was bewitched by the extraordinary tenderness flowing deep within her, and she remained lying on her back waiting for the body of a middle-aged man which had the smell of a dead fire

'[...] At this moment it was possible for her to hide herself in the dilapidated deserted house, with the darkness of evening and the middle-aged man.

'[...] She sensed that the middle-aged man had departed and was dying in some faraway place' [40], 101-102, translated into English by Denys Johnson-Davies).

After acknowledging the experience of the rape that she had repressed for so many years and deciding to confront it, Samīḥa fantasizes about having sex with the madman.

'She wished that the madman might be transformed into a deluge of knives that would inundate her body, slowly rending her flesh, then leaving her face to face with the aged terror.

'Samīḥa went back to stretching herself out on the couch; she closed her eyes. One day she would be alone in the house and she would entice the madman to enter. Without shame she would strip herself of her clothes and would give her breast to the madman's mouth; she would laugh, intoxicated, as he tried to gnaw at the nipple. In a breathless voice she would ask him to bite her flesh, to sink his teeth into it till the blood gushed forth and stained his lips. Then she would lick his lips with avid tenderness' [40].

The relationship described above between Samīḥa and the madman does not attest to a normative relationship. Samīḥa, who was so badly hurt in her youth, is not expected to have a normative life in the society in which she lives (in the fictional world and probably in reality too). However, the striking fictional "healing" described at the end of this story enables her to express her femininity, albeit unconventionally, and with a man who symbolizes society's "marginal voice". It is interesting that the connection between Samīḥa and the madman enables the two of them to express themselves – she her femininity and he his masculinity – and find a salve for their pain when both are excluded from "normative" society in which they serve as targets for physical harm.

One of the interesting techniques in Tāmer's writing for engaging with women's oppression is manifested in the short story *A Pretty Woman* [43]. This story contains traces, not to mention influences, of magical realism, surrealism, and the absurd. It illustrates, very compellingly, a woman's rape by establishment representatives (all of whom are men) who are

supposed to defend her status and protect her:

'The anonymous Layla was a beautiful divorcée who was raped by the manager of the company where she worked, the taxi driver who drove her to the police station raped her, the policeman who listened to her raped her, the doctor who examined her raped her to ascertain that the rape wasn't a false claim, the judge to whom she related in great detail how she was raped three times raped her, although he didn't rape her in court but in his chambers after asking her a few questions it would be inappropriate to ask in public, and the journalist raped her after putting everything she said down on paper. Layla felt she had been humiliated to such a degree that she had the right to vengeance. So she told Death what had happened to her, and it didn't rape her, it simply covered her flesh with snow that froze the blood in her veins' [44].

According to the story, Layla was divorced by her husband for reasons unknown to us. There are no further identifying details about her. This attests to the degree to which her marital status is significant, let alone critical on occasion, in a society or societies in which women like her live, even in the reality of the early twenty-first century. From the outset the very fact that she is divorced taints the woman with a certain degree of fault, flaw, or blame which lay the ground for the subsequent rapes, even if the intention is to metaphorical rape – the continued exploitation of the woman and denial of her rights. According to the story, Layla's rights were denied in her place of work, by the authorities (which are controlled by men) that are supposed to enforce the law, by agents that mediate between the citizen and the authorities (represented by the taxi driver), and even by the doctor and the judge. Particularly interesting is the fact that when Layla tells the judge she has been raped she reports three assaults, although in fact at this point in the story she has been raped four times. This may allude to the fact that Layla does not tell the judge about the real rape, the one which apparently occurred in reality, but tells him about the other instances which can be seen as cases of solely metaphorical rape. In other words, physical rape is not spoken about in Arab society (similar to Samiḥa in *The Moon Unmasked*). It is worthy of note that intellectuals, creators, and writers are not mentioned in this story, which may allude to the fact that the woman, or the issue of women's status, is not on the public agenda, which in turn raises difficult questions on the role of intellectual writing in Arab society and in general.

The subject of suicide, which appears in this story, has been discussed only rarely in Arabic literary works, despite the fact that it is an important and highly-charged issue in Arab culture. Therefore Tāmer's choice to engage with this issue is of particular interest, since Layla's suicide can be viewed in two contradictory ways. First, suicide as the end of the road, with Layla as a victim of society, and the second – suicide as a decision and taking the initiative, albeit an extreme one. According to the latter interpretation, Layla decides to take her fate into her own hands and is no longer prepared to go on playing into the hands of other men in her society. She "breaks the rules" and removes herself from the oppressive, male-dominated society "game" with an extreme

yet conscious and intentional act. This can be seen as a sort of “counter power”, i. e., total rejection of the male hegemony, whatever the cost may be [20].

Suicide for reasons of personal hardship is strictly forbidden by Islamic law since the body is perceived as belonging to God, and although the verses in the Qur’an that address this question are not unequivocal and are given to various interpretations, *Ḥadīth* (Arabic oral tradition) literature leaves no room for doubt in this regard and strictly forbids it. A person undergoing prolonged torment is being tested by God. Surrendering can be likened to surrendering to the tortures of Satan and he will be doomed to eternal hell and damnation. Consequently, Tāmer’s engagement with suicide is interesting and to a considerable extent challenges popular religious-cultural perceptions and traditions on this subject. The story places responsibility on society which from the outset led to this woman’s wretched situation, while creatively addressing suicide: it challenges society, and mainly the intellectuals who are supposed to instigate the public discourse on this subject and present different ways of thinking to the political and religious establishments ruling the state and Arab society.

We cannot ignore the title of the story, which was published about a decade after the release of the film *Pretty Woman* (1990). Whereas in the film the heroine refuses to accept male society’s attitude toward her as an “inferior” woman, in Tāmer’s story it is only Death that does not rape Layla, or in other words, death is the only place or situation in which women are seemingly accepted as equal to men. However, the “pretty woman” in the story is the one who by committing suicide manifests her strength, her resolve, her ability to make difficult decisions and implement them; she is the one who takes her fate into her own hands and does not leave it or her body in the hands of others. She does not play the accepted game; on the contrary, it is she who makes the rules under the difficult circumstances in which she finds herself.

In other stories by Tāmer the married woman is portrayed as a victim of her husband. One story, the untitled *Story No. 19* [44], describes Huda who on her way home from the bakery witnesses the hanging of a young man who evidently murdered an entire family to avenge the murder of his brother. A moment before the execution is carried out their eyes meet, and she feels as if the young man was ‘her little brother hanging onto the hem of her garment and seeking protection’ [ibid]. When she gets home Huda tries to relate her harsh experience to her husband, but he, who has only just woken up, forces her to have sex with him:

‘Huda half closed her eyes and in the silent, windowed room with the curtains drawn and the door closed, she saw a man moving, crouching over a woman with a rope around her neck forcing her to breathe heavily and grunt, and starting to choke her each time she tried to escape him. The man scrutinized her for a long time, as if he were a trader who has bought a cow and wants to make sure he hasn’t been cheated. She was ashamed and closed her eyes, wanting to be dead meat, but her body disobeyed her and began doing

everything that pleased him and infuriated her. Huda heard her husband telling her jokingly that after all that effort she would surely be giving birth in nine months time, and she wanted to voice her objection and tell him, for instance, that he would never be the father of her children, but she preferred not to say a word [...] She quickly put on some clothes and hurried into the kitchen’ [44].

It seems that it is no coincidence that Huda identifies with the young man sentenced to be hanged. Like him, she feels she has been sentenced to “strangulation” when her husband has sex with her against her will. She accepts the “punishment” meted out to her just like the young man who has been sentenced to be hanged and does not have the right to appeal the verdict. Moreover, in this story it transpires that what seems to be pleasure in the man’s eyes is a pretence to the point of a sense of suffocation and total rejection by the woman, to the extent that Huda hopes she never brings his children into the world, even though she does not say so explicitly. Huda’s silence, like that of many women in a male-dominated society, is the gravest danger of all that can be indicated in this story. While having sex with the woman is perceived by the man as fulfillment of his manhood, in the woman’s eyes it is perceived as execution by hanging, similar to the hanging she witnessed.

Interesting distinctions can be found in this story between situations in which the woman chooses to either speak or keep silent, situations in which she chooses to either resist or not. In contrast with Huda’s silences (for example, she does not dare tell her husband to go and eat out, and does not reveal her feelings about having sex with him), at first she does try and resist the sex act her husband forces upon her. It may be stated that her silences are conscious, out of choice, even though she is seemingly in a situation of no choice. In other words, despite being in an inferior position to that of her husband, she is revealed as a woman who makes decisions concerning when to speak and when to remain silent, according to the circumstances. Silence as an ostensibly passive act is revealed in this story as an active act undertaken out of a conscious choice on what to talk about with her husband, and under which circumstances not to share her feelings with him. Huda’s body, however, does not obey her and evidently pleases her husband against her will. The distinction between mind and body is important since despite the harm caused to Huda’s body against her will, her mind remains unattainable, free of the man’s coercive hegemonic control, and he will never be able to gain access to it by force. In other words, even though she is the man’s victim the woman still possesses certain basic liberties, and what seems on the face of it to be a situation of male dominance and female victimhood, it is far more complex: In relationships between men and women there are not only male victors and vanquished females. The women portrayed as weak and passive reserve the right to react under certain circumstances, and also the right to choose silence in others. Even though they do not have control of their body, they do control their mind, which is not for sale and cannot be acquired by force or owned. It is so basic and intrinsic that

only the person him- or herself (in this story, only the woman) has direct access to it. In this respect, Huda's silence attests to a more profound complexity on the emotional and human levels.

Another point worthy of note in the story is the woman moving out of the domestic sphere into the public sphere. This move is attended by an unpleasant experience for her (all she did was go out to buy food for breakfast and stumbled into a public hanging situation), but her return to the domestic sphere is no less difficult. In my view this embodies severe criticism of the woman's exclusion from the public sphere out of an ostensible desire to protect her lest she be unable to cope with the "big world", whereas the most terrible act of all occurs in the domestic sphere where there is nobody to protect her.

Another representation of the woman is manifested in the figure of Shahrazad that appears in several of Tāmer's short stories. In *Spring in the Ashes* [39], the title story of his second collection, Shahrazād is portrayed as helping to reform women's status as equal to men. The story's protagonist, described as gaunt and sickly, purchases a maidservant, and the two are revealed to the reader as reincarnations of the mythological Shahrayār and Shahrazad who meet after a prolonged separation. A war against an unknown enemy separates them again, and after the war two major events take place in the story: the only man remaining after the war searches for food for the only surviving woman, and brings her an apple:

"The silence was total and the city was a blackened heap of rubble with smoke rising from it. The man heard the sound of muffled weeping. He looked around until his eyes fell upon a young woman lying on the grass. He approached and asked her, "Why are you crying?"

"The city is burned down. Everybody is dead".

"Then there's nobody left".

The woman did not reply and started sobbing again. He asked her again, "Why are you crying?"

And she replied, covering her face with her hands, "I'm hungry".

The man left her and began searching for something to eat. He was happy when he found an apple tree whose branches were laden with ripe fruit. He picked some apples and brought them to the woman, and followed her with compassion as she hungrily devoured them [...] He asked himself, "Is this girl's name Shahrazad?" [39].

This story corresponds with the story of Adam and Eve in which the responsibility for their expulsion from the Garden of Eden seemingly falls on Eve who tempted Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, and thus the events in the story attest to rectification of that historical wrong and removal of guilt from the woman. The second seminal event is that the two link arms and walk toward the city in the hope of making a new life for themselves:

"The man helped the young woman stand up and they slowly walked toward the blackened, dead city. Suddenly they heard the chirping of a bird. They halted and their eyes met in a long gaze, and it seemed to the man that he could

hear the sound of children's shouting mingling with a distant howling. The man and the woman walked on, their arms twined in affection and friendship. Facing them was the sun was young, shining' [39].

The linked arms may attest to a situation of total equality reached by the man and woman, and only after they have attained total equality in their relationship they are able to return to the charred city. The sound of the children's voices mingling with a distant howling may allude to the pain entailed in the hoped-for change. The sun shining is not only 'the sun of a new day' but that of a new era in terms of the egalitarian norms and values on which the new Arab society would be founded.

One of the central questions concerning this story is why a war had to break out in order to effect the change, and to which war does the story allude. It may be assumed that Tāmer's writing in this story seeks to indicate that the past Arab wars and conquests, in which Arab society still glorifies in the present, left it internally shattered (evidence of this may be found in the sword hanging on the wall in the story). The flight from the city is a metaphor highlighting the desire to flee the pall of smoke hanging to this day over Arab consciousness, and Arab society's historical and cultural memory, or in other words, Tāmer's writing depicts an Arab society that to this day is still paying the price of glory. The feeling this story evokes is one of satiety and disillusionment with the historical heroic stories of past wars, and a call to abandon the sword and start discussing social values. Hanging a sword on the wall as a cultural symbol glorifying the Arabs is presented in this story as a value that should be changed, and perhaps even replaced by more relevant social values. Fighting is presented as the Arabs fighting against themselves, indiscriminate fighting for the sanctification of values related to war and bloodshed without first clarifying who the war is against and for what. Even the description of the story's male protagonist (apparently Shahryar) as gaunt and sickly may allude to the sickness of society. It seems that according to Tāmer, Arab society must conduct a trenchant internal debate on its willingness to facilitate full equal rights for women. This means abandoning old traditions and concepts. "Sanctification of the sword" must be replaced by sanctification of human beings. In this story the man going off to war may be of prime importance, since for the most part the "war" takes place among men (male society), ergo it is they who must change.

In *The Distortion*, which was published some thirty years later, Shahrazad reappears, but this time as the queen [42],³ and it presents a sort of dialogue with the historical-mythological text of *The One Thousand and One Nights*. According to the original story, each morning Shahryar in the role of the king executes the young woman he took to wife the night before. Every evening Shahrazad tells him a story, but does not complete it, and thus manages to postpone her execution for one thousand nights. On the one thousand and

3. This story appeared together with *The Last Night* under the title *Shahrayār and Shahrazād*. I have chosen to address only the first of the two.

first night Shahryar decides to revoke the royal decree (which he himself issued) mandating that he execute the woman he had wed. Thus Shahrazād saves not only herself but many other women as well, and she becomes a universal symbol of women's resourcefulness in dire situations. In Tāmer's story the roles are reversed: it is Shahrayār who has to tell a story to Queen Shahrazād every night, but on the one thousand and first night he refuses to tell her another story, even though she threatens to behead him as she had done with her previous husbands, and so he is executed. After his death Shahrazād revises *The One Thousand and One Nights* stories:

'Over the following days Queen Shahrazād summoned many of her closest writers and ordered them to rewrite the stories of *The One Thousand and One Nights*, and make the required amendment. Her orders were carried out and Shahryar became women's adversary down the generations' [ibid].

Shahrayār's refusal to obey Queen Shahrazād's command may indicate that he is not thinking about members of his own sex and does not comprehend the social-historical significance of his refusal. He fails in his mission, and does so on the last night. Thus he enables Shahrazād to make the required amendment in *The One Thousand and One Nights* to women's status in the collective cultural-historical memory of Arab society. Although the nature of the rewriting is not explicit, it may be interpreted as a call for the "appropriate reform" of women's status in relation to men, i. e., making women's rights equal to those of men. In the "rectification" or "reform" that Shahrazād introduced into the stories, man and woman become adversaries of equal status. This rivalry grants women what they have not had thus far – the opportunity to contend with men as adversaries of equal status and rights.

Women's resolve, resourcefulness, and their willingness to even sacrifice their life not only for their personal freedom but also for the establishment of an Arab society that sanctifies human rights, and first and foremost freedom of expression, is also manifested in Tāmer's writing for children, which is considerably influenced by the early-twentieth century writings of 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Kawākibi who harshly criticized the Ottoman regime's rigid and oppressive attitude toward its subjects [20]. Most of Tāmer's writing for children was done in the 1970s, when he published about one hundred children's stories, some of which were published under the aegis of the Syrian Ministry of Education. One example can be found in *The Girl Who Loved Freedom* [41]. This is a story about a king who imprisons his daughter in a palace surrounded by crocodile-infested water in order to thwart her attempt to marry a young man from a poor family. One of the crocodiles explains to the princess that 'anyone who loves freedom should be prepared to sacrifice their life for it' [ibid.]. At that moment the princess shouts 'I am willing to give my life for a life of freedom'. As she utters the last word the water surrounding the palace disappears and the crocodile turns into a strong, fleet-footed horse that carries her far away from her prison. The story ends with the statement that 'freedom

can vanquish any prison'. The princess's willingness to sacrifice her life for freedom presents freedom as a supreme value, so much so that it is worth sacrificing one's life for it. The notion of sacrifice for the sake of freedom that appeals to Arab intellectuals no less than children is particularly courageous in view of the fact that Tāmer placed a young girl as his leading protagonist, and it is she who succeeds in 'vanquishing the prisons'.

5. Discussion

In this article I have presented the image of women as reflected in the short stories by the Syrian author Zakaria Tāmer which have been published in the Arab world since 1957 and throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Against the backdrop of feminist theories, first in Europe and later in the discourse in the Arab world, Tāmer's writing is to a large extent free of the chauvinistic male perceptions that were prevalent at the time. Furthermore, in many of his stories Tāmer "creates" a new (fictional) world in which women and men enjoy equal rights and status, for example in the story *Spring in the Ashes*. In other stories in which the motif of women's oppression is manifested, the woman surprises those who represent the fixed "male" thinking with her resourcefulness, and finds a salve for her pain, even though it might be unconventional, for example in *The Moon Unmasked* and *A Beautiful Woman*. Against the backdrop of the writing prevailing in the Arab world up to the mid-twentieth century, and to a considerable extent later too, writing that ignores women's endeavor and creativity on the one hand [5, 15, 36], and presents women in modern Arabic literature mainly by means of images of a maidservant or mistress on the other [6], Tāmer's work can be seen as writing that extracts the "female voice" and grants it unique weight even in his earliest stories. In his writing Tāmer not only challenges the perceptions presenting women as "the weaker sex", or alternatively which view the woman as "a deficient man" [23], but he seeks to establish an alternative world in which women have full equal rights to men. In his writing women are often presented as being cleverer than men, resourceful, and showing initiative, as I have demonstrated in the various stories cited in this article. Similar to the approaches that view silence as an act of resistance by women [4] rather than weakness or passivity, the woman's submission and silencing in some of Tāmer's stories are presented to a large extent as a source of her strength and a sort of "counter power" [20]. *Story No. 19*, for example, reveals a relationship founded on deceit and it cries out for a change in women's status and situation. In *The Moon Unmasked*, too, the numerous omissions in the image of Samīḥa's mother may be interpreted as not at all random; thus, for example, her mother might represent the older generation of silenced women in Arab society. The mother's voice is not heard at all, and the absence of any mention of connection or communication between her and her daughter throughout the story may reflect the social and cultural reality in which women live. In this reality Samīḥa may

represent women of her age and generation in Syrian society, and perhaps even in wider Arab society, and she cannot share with her mother, not to mention any other adult in her life, the tragedy of the rape she suffered, for fear of the “stain” that will adhere to her even though she was the victim. It is specifically against this harsh personal, social, and cultural background of women in the society described in Tāmer’s stories, that Samīḥa’s ability to cope with the terror she experienced and rehabilitate herself, may attest to Tāmer’s groundbreaking approach in representing the female voice in his writing, and his attempt to convey the message that women have the power to significantly improve their life and status in Arab society.

Similar to Kandiyoti’s claim [24] that the feminist struggle is historically and culturally context-dependent, thus intellectual-literary writing must be examined in its historical, social, and cultural context. Based on this concept, it may be said that the silences in Tāmer’s writing, those seemingly “missing” parts of the woman’s figure and voice in his stories, may reflect the “conspiracy of silence” in Arab society regarding certain issues (such as rape) which are not spoken about, but this does not attest to the author ignoring them or to adopting a “male” stance on these topics in his writing. On the contrary, those missing parts of the story, and mainly the absence of the female voice in these stories (for example, *Story No. 19*, *The Moon Unmasked*, and *A Beautiful Woman*) help to convey the sense of distress in the face of society ignoring the woman’s situation in the story, and apparently in the reality of the period as well.

6. Conclusion

It may be said then that Tāmer’s writing seeks not only to reflect reality but also, and mainly, to create a different reality, to generate social-cultural-historical change in men-women relations in Arab society as this is manifested, for example, in *The Distortion* in which the woman (Shahrazād) initiates social-cultural-historical reform by rewriting *The One Thousand and One Nights*. By means of this reform she becomes Shahrāyār’s adversary, not his maidservant. In other words, the change in Shahrazād’s status, and in fact the status of all women, is in their ability to be adversaries with equal rights and status from a legal, moral, and ideological standpoint. As a writer who in his writing demonstrates a high level of feminist awareness, he accomplishes a literary-social-cultural-historical reform that embodies a challenge to literary writing in the Arab world. Thus too in *The Girl Who Loved Freedom* in which the princess is willing to sacrifice her life for freedom, and so it is she who succeeds in ‘vanquishing all the prisons’.

In Tāmer’s writing, women who “break the rules” and revolt against male oppression, for example in *A Beautiful Woman*, are unique not only against the backdrop of literary writing in Syria in his time, but also to a considerable extent in the entire Arab world. For example, in Egyptian literature written between the 1940s and the mid-1970s, challenging those in positions of authority is represented by an unplanned

uprising, a momentary outburst, a sort of loss of composure ‘in a moment of erupting anger’ [48]. By contrast, the women in Tāmer’s writing are not characterized by loss of composure. On the contrary, they are described as taking the initiative or exercising discretion and deciding to express their opposition by demonstrating resourcefulness and courage in the face of the complex circumstances they experience.

It is true that women can always be viewed as a symbol of Arab society, and it can always be argued that Tāmer’s writing, like that of other authors, “enlists” women and makes use of them for the needs of Arab society. For example, Samīḥa in *The Moon Unmasked* can also be viewed as a metaphor for Arab society: from Samīḥa’s independent thinking it can be inferred that the independence of Arab society exists within her, and that she can free herself from the social and cultural “fetters”, albeit not easily, and even though the change might be painful. However, even though this interpretation may be true of some of Tāmer’s short stories, in many others (for example, *Spring in the Ashes* and *The Distortion*) positioning the woman as the man’s complete equal may attest to his gender-feminist perceptions. Thus Tāmer becomes not only a pioneer of the short story genre [46, 47], but a pioneer of the feminist perception supporting the fully equal status of women in Arab society at a time when the “female voice” had not yet been formed in the Arab world.

Although in many of Tāmer’s short stories the woman remains in the domestic sphere, and when she attempts to leave it for the public or political sphere she is “raped” by society (as demonstrated in *A Beautiful Woman*), this can be seen as an attempt to illustrate the sheer vastness of the contradiction for his readers, or the potency of the clash between the domestic sphere, the ostensibly natural female territory according to traditional male hegemonic concepts, and other external territories or spheres. Furthermore, in Tāmer’s writing it is almost impossible to find references to alternative familial systems (for example, single-parent, or homosexual and lesbian relationships), with the exception of isolated allusions;⁴ neither can references be found in his stories to additional social-familial-gender issues such as child adoption. In this respect, his writing does not unfold the entire social-gender canvas. This can be associated with Tāmer’s biographical circumstances – his exile from his homeland did not free him and his writing from the yoke of censorship, which is an integral part of the writing of any author and creator wherever he or she may be, either consciously or unconsciously, especially those who live under an authoritarian regime. However, his writing accords genuine weight to the “female voice” and this in turn attests to “buds of feminism” in his writing, and even beyond that.

4. For example, in the autobiographical novel *For Bread Alone* by Muḥammad Shukri [37], in which he refers to homosexuality and links it with sodomy. In the 1990s Huda Barakāt published her novel *The Stone of Laughter* [11] about a man who shifts between masculinity and femininity, and this was only after the Lebanese author moved to Paris.

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