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Gender in Arabic¹

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Introduction

Arabic has two gender-linked characteristics: (i) it is not a mother tongue, and (ii) it entertains a diglossic² relationship with the dialectal Arabic mother tongues it co-exists with. Both characteristics make of Arabic a typically “public” language in an overall patriarchal context where “public” denotes “male power”, as opposed to “private” which denotes “women’s realm” (Saadawi 1980; Mernissi 1994; Sadiqi and Ennaji 2006). The study of Arabic from a gender perspective is still at its beginnings in spite of the fact that Arabic sociolinguistics has attracted the attention of scholars worldwide (Fück 1955; Cohen 1962; El Ani 1978; Ibrahim 1986; Daher 1987; Ferguson 1987; Eid 1988; Suleiman 1994; Ennaji 1995; Holes 1995; Versteegh 1997; Boumans 1998; Haeri 2000; Jonathan 2001; Rouchdy 2002; Messaoudi 2003; Miller 2004; Caubet 2004; etc.). Some of these works use the variable of “sex” in deconstructing Arabic usage, but no significant attention is being paid to the use of gender as an analytical tool in deconstructing the men/women power relationship between Arabic users.

The interaction of Arabic and gender may be attested at two levels: the formal

¹ The term “Arabic” in this article refers to *Fusha* as used in Arab-Muslim countries.

² A “diglossic” relationship involves two versions of the same language where one version is considered “High”, “formal”, and “more prestigious” and the other “Low”, “informal”, and “less prestigious”. These appellations are based on the type of functions that each variety performs in a given society (cf. Charles Ferguson who is the first scholar to use the term “diglossia” in his classic 1959 article “Diglossia”).

(grammatical) level and the sociolinguistic (relational) level. At the formal level, Arabic exhibits grammatical and semantic gender usages which may be qualified as “androcentric” (male-biased)³, and at the sociolinguistic level, Arabic is more used in male-associated than female-associated contexts.

Formal Androcentricity in Arabic

Scholarship on Arabic grammar contains extensive accounts of gender as a grammatical category⁴. Such grammatical accounts of Arabic gender were often presented in androcentric terms. Thus, for example, Ibn Al-Anbari, a reputed medieval Arab grammarian, not only investigated the gender system of Arabic grammar in great and impressive detail, but he accompanied his investigation with typically androcentric explanatory comments on why things were the way they were so far as gender-marking was concerned⁵. According to this scholar, Arabic exhibits two types of gender markers: masculine and feminine⁶. These markers appear on verbs, nouns, adjectives, determiners, and quantifiers, and may be used to signal grammatical agreement between these various categories. Thus, adjectives generally agree with the noun they modify in person,

³ It is important to note that although Arabic is androcentric, the claims made here should not be understood in strong Whorfian terms: language determines thought/culture, culture determines language. Such claims would be too strong and at best unrealistic. Hudson (1996) makes clear that meaningful claims in Whorfian terms have to be carefully qualified and empirically established, a fact which is not easily feasible. Thus, the observations and claims made about the androcentric nature of Arabic are not related to Arab culture in a direct way. Whatever links exist in this respect must be mediated and indirect. Various factors are involved in this mediation such as the speaker’s personal judgment and the general context of language use.

⁴ The term “gender” was first used by grammarians and it is only in the mid-seventies that feminists took up the term and used it as an analytical tool to deconstruct the power relation between men and women in given societies and cultures.

⁵ These are embodied in Ibn-Al Anbari’s *Al-Mudhkkar wa Al-Mu’ammath* “The Masculine and the Feminine” (fourth century of the Hegira).

⁶ The “neuter” (neither masculine nor feminine) is not morphologically encoded in Arabic.

number, and gender as in:

- (1) *muṣallimat-un*⁷ *?aniiqat-un*
 school teacher-SF-Nom elegant-SF-Nom⁸
 An elegant female school teacher

But this pattern is far from being regular, as some adjectives may not show feminine gender agreement with the noun they modify:

- (2) *?imra?at-un* *ṣaaʕiq-un/atun*
 woman-SF-Nom lover-SM-SF-Nom
 A female lover
- (3) *baqarat-un* *ḥaluub-un/atun*
 cow-SF-Nom milky-SM-SF-Nom
 A milky cow

Forms such as the ones given in (2) and (3) are not very frequent and could have easily been listed as “exceptions” to specific rules, a common feature of natural languages.

What is interesting, however, is the explanation that Ibn-Al-Anbari gives to account for such forms. According to this author, the masculine forms *ṣaaʕiq-un* and *ḥaluub-un* in (2) and (3) are “better” than the feminine forms *ṣaaʕiqatun* and *ḥaluubatun* because these forms denote “intensity” and “abundance” which are typically masculine qualities that are more associated with men and male attributes than with women and female attributes. Ibn Al-Anbari adds in relation to *ṣaaʕiq-un* (lover) that “being in love”, which is closely related to “courting”, is a typical male state, as only men are supposed to “show” or “express” love.

⁷ The masculine counterparts of *muṣallimat-un* ‘is *muṣallim-un*.

⁸ S = Singular, P = Plural, M = Masculine, F = Feminine, Nom = Nominative Case, Acc = Accusative Case, 1 = First Person, 2 = Second Person, 3 = Third Person .

The formal androcentricity attested in the comments on the examples above are far from being neutral; they stem from the subjective views of the grammarian who could not but creep into his supposedly scientific renderings of the gender system of Arabic. These comments also reflect the subordinate position in which women were (and still are) held in relation to men in the patriarchal Arab-Islamic societies and cultures. The force of such comments resides in the fact that they emanate from outstanding scholars who had considerable influence on their contemporaries' gender views.

Another example of grammatical androcentricity is attested in the regular precedence of the masculine over the feminine in expressions and sentences, as in *rajulun wa mraʿah*, *Tiflun wa Tiflah*, etc. Again this precedence would have been “normal” without the accompanying comments of grammarians like Ibn Al-Anbaari, cited in Abu-Risha (1996: 31-32)⁹:

The proof that the masculine precedes the feminine is that when you say: “qaaʿim” (standing-3MS) and “qaaʿimah” (standing-3FS) and “qaaʿid” (sitting-3MS) and “qaaʿidah” (sitting-3FS) and “jaalis” (sitting-3MS) and “jaalisah” (sitting-3FS), you find that the feminine contains additional material and what is added to is the root is “secondary”. And when you see something from a distance and you do not know what it is you say: a woman, an animal or something like that.

⁹ The translation is mine.

Ibn Al-Anbari's relegation of women to a "secondary" position in the above quote and his association of them with animals and unknown entities is reminiscent of the folk ideology which is still prevalent in the Arab-Islamic world whereby males are given precedence over females¹⁰. Indeed, the comments of traditional Arab grammarians can be read only as a particular kind of language ideology which often leads to stereotypical and sexist views in society at large.

Grammatical androcentricity is also attested in the derivation hypothesis on which a great part of the morphology of Arabic is based. The fact that in this language, the feminine gender marker contains one sound/letter more than the masculine marker has been interpreted by traditional, as well as modern, grammarians as evidence that the feminine gender is historically derived from the masculine one. Grammar books on Arabic are full of grammatical rules that formalize this derivation hypothesis (cf. Sibawayhe, Ibn Al-Anbari, Ibn Ginni, etc.).

The derivation hypothesis in the case of Arabic gender markers is, however, questionable. In fact, history has shown that human languages are naturally subject to economy (reduction at the level of form) as a result of speaking these languages. For example, the so-called "Modern English" lost some of its inflection which characterized its ancestors, namely "Middle English" and "Old English". Further, the formalists' accounts of Arabic agreement data are different from the traditional grammarians' ones; thus, some transformational generative accounts, for example, begin with the feminine form and derive the masculine form by a rule of deletion because it is "less costly" on the

¹⁰ For example, the following proverb is still in use in the everyday speech of Moroccan speakers: *lemra u lehmara ma kayDayfu!* "A woman and a donkey should not be treated as guests", meaning "should not be served lest they would be spoilt".

theoretical level and more predictable from the “explanatory power” perspective than starting with the masculine and deriving the feminine form (Chomsky 1965).

Likewise, as languages are subject to the rule of economy, it is more logical to assume that the original form in the Arabic is the feminine, and that the masculine is obtained by the “shrinking” process which languages undergo. These accounts show that traditional Arab grammarians’ derivation hypothesis was advanced and maintained mainly because it served socio-cultural purposes and had social meaning that fit within the overall Arab-Islamic patriarchy where women were subordinate to men and hence the latter needed to “grammatically” precede. Further, the fact that the generic usually doubles as the masculine in grammatical forms or word choice makes it the social norm from which the feminine derives, hence excluding the feminine from the generic. Thus, the word *?imra?ah* “woman” in Arabic is said to derive from *mar?* “person”, but only *mar?* is used generically because it is grammatically masculine. Likewise, words like *al-lmuwaaTin* “citizen-SM”, *al-?aamil* “worker-SM”, or even *al-?ustaad* “teacher-SM” are used generically although there are at least as many female as male citizens, workers, and teachers, and in spite of the fact that Arabic contains gender morphemes even in the dual form.

These facts show that the male social symbolic power is carried over to the grammatical masculine inflection. In the grammatical hierarchization process, as well as in the grammatical comments that explain this hierarchization, the masculine category is commonly taken to be bigger, unmarked, and higher than the feminine category because the social category “male” has a bigger and higher status in Arab-Muslim societies and cultures than the “female” category. As a result, the feminine category is socially viewed

as the smaller, marked, and “degenerate” version of the male category. A further supporting example of this view is the grammatical use of the term *al-?insaana* “Man/person”. Although this term may take both the masculine and the feminine gender markers in the singular, only the masculine appears when this term is pluralized: *?insaana-tun* “person FS” but *?unaas-un* “people MP” and not **unaasaa-tun* “plural FP”¹¹. Furthermore, although the term *?insaana-un* “Man/person” is used generically, it cannot be used with feminine agreement markers: **qara?a-t l-?insaana* “literally: ‘read-she Man/person’, meaning ‘the person read’” is ungrammatical. Likewise, although *?insaana-un* has a feminine counterpart *?insaana-tun*, the term *fardun* “individual” does not: **farda-tun* “individual-SF”. Indeed, the grammatical expression of individuality is predominantly male in Arab culture; the expression *ṣabdu rabbih* “God’s servant”, a modest way of referring to oneself, has a feminine counterpart, *ṣabdatu rabbiha* “God’s female servant” which is never used. The reason is that the expression *ṣabdu rabbih* started to be used in all-male public formal domains.

At the syntactic level, full agreement between the subject and the verb obtains in both VSO (Verb-Subject-Object) and SVO (Subject-Verb-Object) sentences and even in the dual form of nouns and verbs in Arabic. However, when the subject is plural, Arabic shows an interesting idiosyncrasy: agreement ceases to be symmetrical in this context:

(4) *jaa?-a al-awlaad-u wa l-banaat-u.*
 came-3SM Def-boys-Nom and Def-girls-Nom
 The boys and the girls came.

(5) *jaa?-at l-banaat-u wa l-?awlaad-u.*
 came-3SF Def-girls-Nom and Def-boys-Nom
 The girls and the boys came.

¹¹ The mark “*” means “ungrammatical; not allowed by the grammar of a language.”

(4) and (5) are characterized by the fact that the subject is formed of two coordinated nouns: a masculine and a feminine. In (4), the masculine gender agreement obtains between the verb and the subject because the nearest noun to the verb is masculine, and in (5) the gender agreement is feminine because the closest noun to the verb is feminine.

Grammatical gender in Arabic can be much more complex (Wright 1981; Benmamoun 1996; Harrell 2004, among many others). In fact, the appearance of the gender feature in this language does not always depend on the bipolar opposition male/female as in the following example:

(6) *qaala-t-i lʔanbiyaaʔu.*
 said-3SF prophets
 Prophets said.

In (6), the verb is in the singular form, whereas the subject is in the plural form, and interestingly, the agreement on the verb is feminine and singular. This type of agreement is referred to in the literature as “deflected agreement” and appears on the verb only when the latter is initial in the sentence and when the subject is plural. If the subject precedes the verb, the feminine gender feature disappears: *alʔanbiyaaʔu qaal-uu* “Prophets said”, where the morpheme *-uu* “they-MP” refers to *lʔanbiyaaʔu* “Prophets”. The appearance of the feminine gender *-at* (3SPF) in (6) is, thus, due to the syntax of the words *qaala-t-i* “said-3SF” and *lʔanbiyaaʔu* “Prophets”, that is, their specific distribution in the sentence in (6).

As it does not match the gender of the agreeing constituents, this type of

agreement may be termed “functional” in the sense that it is not gender-dependent and pertains rather to the internal grammatical distribution of verbs and subject, and not to the relation of words with the outside world. Functional gender marking is not based on the notions “male vs female”: in (6) above, the masculine noun *lʔanbiyaaʔu* “Prophets” is functionally feminine because it agrees with a feminine verb, but not grammatically feminine because its agreement is not based on the male/female opposition by virtue of the fact that all Prophets were male.

Arab grammarians hypothesized that in instances such (6) above, the gender morpheme *-t* refers to *majmuuṣah* “group”, that is, to *majmuuṣah mina lʔanbiyyaʔ* “a group of Prophets”, where agreement takes place with *majmuṣah* which is feminine (*ah* is a feminine morpheme). However, here again, *majmuuṣah mina lʔanbiyaaʔ* can never refer to a group of females, or even to a mixed-sex group of Prophets because, again, all Prophets were male. As a result, gender in Arabic may sometimes be purely functional (see Sadiqi 2003b for many more examples from the Qur’an).

Overall, formal or grammatical androcentricity in Arabic is mainly due to the interpretations that Arab grammarians give to grammatical phenomena. Such interpretations abound in grammar books and it is high time fresher dealings with grammatical gender in Arabic took place. Two questions that arise at this juncture is: First, in what specific ways is grammatical androcentricity in Arabic related to the overall socio-political background in which this language is used nowadays? Second, what is the general relationship of Arabic to present-day Arab-Muslim women? Possible answers to these and similar questions bring us to the sociolinguistic androcentricity in Arabic.

Sociolinguistic Androcentricity

Sociolinguistic androcentricity in Arabic can be understood only within the overall socio-cultural framework within which it is created and perpetuated (Badran et al 2002; Sadiqi 2003b). Like all societies and cultures today, Arab-Islamic societies and cultures are patriarchal. However, patriarchy is far from being uniform across cultures; it differs from culture to culture. Arab-Islamic patriarchy is based on the notion of space dichotomy (Saadawi 1980; Mermisi 1994): men are associated with the public space and women with the private space. This space notion (*hudud* “frontiers”) is not only spatial, but linguistic and symbolic. Thus, in addition to public places being associated with men and private places with women, public languages like Arabic are associated with men and mother tongues with women, and public rituals that are culturally symbolic like Friday prayers are associated with men and those that are private like birth rituals are associated with women. Further, public spatial, linguistic and symbolic rituals are associated with the male attributes of rationality and reason¹².

The repercussions of the gendered space dichotomy are multi-faced and far-reaching: they not only associate the public space with the outside/exterior and the private space with the inside/interior, but they also imply that the outside is the place of power where the social norms are produced and the inside is the place where this power is exercised. These two spaces are strictly gender-based and interact in a dynamic way in the sense that one does not exist without the other. It is true that women can be in some public spaces – for example, on the street, but they are not encouraged to stay there as men are; rather, they must do their business and move on. Also, men do not generally

¹² Arab-Islamic patriarchy is different from mainstream Western patriarchy in the sense that whereas the former is based on space, the latter is based on the power of “image” which creates “models” for men and women. Western women’s emancipation was not brought about by the church or through militancy, but mainly through the power of the great multinational companies which kept “guessing” the needs of women and providing those needs through constant image-creating.

spend any time in the kitchen, for example, so the taboo works for them, too, though with very different consequences.

It is in this interaction that gender identities are constructed and power negotiated. The private space is culturally associated with powerless people (women and children) and is subordinated to the public space, which is culturally associated with men who dictate the law, lead business, manage the state, and control the economy, both national and domestic. It is true that the strict public/private space dichotomy has been significantly disrupted ever since women started to take jobs outside home from the 1960s onward (although in rural areas women have always worked on their families' farms), but it is also true that even in the private space, where women may have real power (Schafer-Davis 1983; Sadiqi 2003b), men are "inserted" to satisfy their needs (food, rest, procreation) and some of men's most important life experiences, such as circumcision and marriage, take place in the private space. Thus, Arab-Muslim men have socially sanctioned power over both the public and private spaces which they direct and control. This control is supported by the various *Shari'a*-based Family laws. The question to ask here is: what is the place of Arabic in this overall space-based patriarchal system?

Arabic-Gender Interaction

Arabic has been very instrumental in this gendered space dichotomy. In fact, although Arabic co-exists with a number of other indigenous and foreign languages in present-day Arab-Muslim societies and cultures, this language has had a special social function in these societies and cultures ever since it became associated with Islam and introduced as such by Prophet Muhammad in the year 622 AD. This special function of Arabic made of it a powerful tool in the hands of the rulers. It is a fact that dominant

groups in a society achieve power mainly through control of high languages, and it is through this control that they ensure the “obedience” and “allegiance” of “subordinated” portions of the population, including women, as Mary Kaplan (1938) rightly puts it:

“Refusal of access to public language is one of the major forms of the oppression of women within a social class as well as in trans-class situations.”

Arabic-gender interaction is best perceived through the relationship between this language and the four sites of public power in the Arab-Muslim world: religion, politics, the law, and literacy.

Arabic, Religion and Gender

As the language of the Qur’an and the mosque, Arabic is more accessible to, and significant for, men than women. Although Arab-Muslim women strongly feel that they “belong” to the official religion of their countries, and hence to Arabic as the medium through which this religion is expressed, they do not really participate in public religious practices because their culture does not encourage them to do so. Most formal speeches involving women’s issues are seized to remind Arabs and Muslims that a woman’s *raison d’être* is her homes and children. Consequently, women’s “religious” space in Arabic (through which religion is expressed) is rather limited and publicly constrained (Sadiqi 2003a). For example, in spite of the fact that there are many women religious erudites in the Arab-Muslim world, women’s opinions in matters of religion lack authority and are

not publicly sought. Even when some women venture to religious opinions in books, newspapers, etc., they are never taken seriously and may even be severely rebuked or attacked, as the cases of Nawal Saadawi and Amina Wadud attest to¹³. This overall negative attitude towards women's opinions on religious matters, especially those dealing with behavior, is explained by their lack of religious credibility in the eyes of society. As a reaction, many feminists (men and women) attribute this lack of religious authority more to the male-biased interpretations of the Qur'an and the Hadiths (the Prophet's Sayings) than to core teachings of Islam (Saadawi 1980, Mernissi 1994, Wadud 1999).

Thus, women's religious space is more restricted than men's and never coincides with the latter as it is very different from it (Buitelaar 1993). These women often recite Qur'anic verses in their prayers without understanding what they mean, and listen to official formal speeches on the radio or television without understanding them. Most Arab-Muslim women are not daily exposed to Arabic; unlike men, these women, especially younger ones, do not usually attend the mosque and, thus, do not participate in the daily ritual of public prayers as frequently as men. Even when they attend the mosque, women are usually "apologetic" in this space. They pray in "special" places where they may see men without being seen by the latter. As a compensation, women visit tombs of saints and holy sanctuaries of ancestors more than men in the search for the *baraka* "blessing" which ambiguously "intermingles" with religion in their minds (Gellner 1969, Doutté 1984). These sacred tombs are generally perceived by women as being associated with religious power. This is reinforced by the important place that religious sites have in Arab-Muslim culture; they are visited for a variety of reasons

¹³ Many of Nawal Saadawi's opinions on religious rituals, such as her view that turning around the *Kaa'ba* during the *Haj* is a *Jahiliya* (pre-Islamic) ritual, were severely attacked by the religious authorities in Egypt. Further Amina Wadud's leading of a mixed prayer stirred very hostile reactions across the world.

which range from seeking to “enter paradise” after death to imploring God for bearing children, especially boys. Overall, women in general, and illiterate ones in particular, have a “strange” relationship with Arabic: they at the same time venerate it but do not really feel spontaneously attached to it the way they are to their mother tongues¹⁴.

The fact that women in the Arab-Islamic world do not publicly announce prayers, pray aloud, or pronounce religious formulae that accompany important religious rites is often exploited by patriarchal ideology and taken as proof that women are not fit for the public power. This explains the rather rare use of words like *imama* (female leader of prayers), *faqiha* (female religious consultant), *muftiya* (female religious legislator), *musaliya* (female leader of prayers), *muqri’ah* (female reader of the Qur’an), and *mujewwida* (female reciter of the Qur’an) in Arabic in spite of the fact that the language contains them.

Arabic, Politics and Gender

Politically, the official standardization of Arabic was a direct consequence of Arab countries’ association with the Arab nation (*Ummah*) after Independence. This consciously constructed alliance was based on the “one nation, one religion, and one language” principle and was needed for cultural unity and cultural identity of newly independent countries in a specific historical era where such unity made genuine political sense.

It is basically for these reasons that Arabic is the official language of all Arab states which, just after independence, joined the Arab League in which Arabic is the

¹⁴ These views are based on a survey conducted by the author in 2002. Some of the results of this survey are included and discussed in Sadiqi (2003b).

lingua franca. Indeed, in the eve of independence, women were not a priority on the political agenda of newly formed Arab states in spite of the fact that almost all nationalists used Arabic and women's issues to promise "more open" and "more egalitarian" societies after independence.

Women were excluded from the political arena and had to fight for decades to gradually gain some public visibility. Because of their relative exclusion from politics, a general tendency to disqualify women as competent public speakers in the Arab-Muslim societies has developed. This state of affairs has created an apparent paradox in these societies: women are perceived as "conservative" in the sense that they preserve oral culture by speaking indigenous, often oral, languages and transmitting cultural values, and "non-conservative" because they do not use the conservative means of public linguistic expression: Arabic. The paradox, however, makes sense politically in that it highlights the political status of oral and written mediums of language. It is true that both Arabic and indigenous oral languages (such as Berber in Morocco) are socially defined as conservative, but they are so in very different ways: whereas Berber, for example, is perceived as "conservative" because it expresses traditional oral literature and folklore in the Maghreb, Arabic is perceived as "conservative" because it perpetuates traditional written literature, history and poetry, in addition to the fact that it is the language of the Qur'an, the holy book of all Muslims.

Arabic, the Law and Gender

Legally, Arabic is the reference and vehicle of the law and law-implementation. As the exercise of the law takes place in the public sphere, Arab-Muslim women,

especially illiterate ones, do not generally understand the language of the law, and hence often fail to know their rights¹⁵. Although Arab-Muslim laws regulating policy-making and economy are based on liberal modern universal laws, those regulating the family and men-women relations and behavior are still largely based on *Sahria* “Islamic law”, which makes them more inaccessible to women.

It is important to note that Arab-Muslim feminist movements realized the legal power associated with Arabic. The politically-aware ones among them started to target the improvement of the Family law as a way out. They needed to use Arabic to enlarge their audiences and gain public credibility. In Morocco, for example, women feminist writers, activists, journalists, etc., who started by expressing their views in French during the 1960s and 1970s, skillfully switched to Arabic from the mid-1980s onward, especially when giving statements to the media, as an attempt to stop radical Islamists from using the language argument against them in the name. By using Arabic in the public sphere, these women are also seeking a place in the powerful religious and legal space. These women have succeeded in this respect as the new Moroccan Family Law attests to¹⁶. They exhibited dexterity in the use of the Qur’an and the Prophet’s sayings on TV to show that Islam as a religion and Arabic as a language are not men’s only prerogatives. In so doing, these feminists highlight the fact that Islam preaches universal ideas about equality and tolerance between the sexes. This particular use of Arabic may be seen as a site of instigating ideological change and gaining more credibility in society at large.

¹⁵ A recent national survey of *Leadership* (a Moroccan NGO) has revealed that no less than 87% of Moroccan women do not know anything about the new 2004 Family Law.

¹⁶ Cf. Sadiqi and Ennaji (2006).

Arabic, Literacy and Gender

Arabic is backed by a centuries-old documented history, literature, poetry and prose; it is perceived as the language of literacy par excellence. Arabic poetry and literature have always been prestigious forms of symbolic language. The relatively greater number of male scholars and erudites dramatizes the gap between “literate” and “illiterate” Arabs on the one hand, and distances men from women, on the other hand. As Arabic is tightly linked to literacy (it can be learnt only at school), large portions of Arab-Muslim illiterate¹⁷ women are excluded from using it. In other words, the fact that Arabic is learnt and not acquired during childhood puts it on a pedestal where men, not women, can use it and gain power through this used. As a result, the Arabic language and Arabic writings have strong “masculine” connotations and often result in the false view that thinking and rationalizing are “male”. In contemporary times, Arab women’s relation to literate knowledge is still ambiguous; it is generally believed that knowledge threatens women’s “femininity”¹⁸.

As for literate women, they have a less “detached” attitude towards Arabic, but as they, just like illiterate women, are subject to a heavy patriarchy which does not encourage them to be actors in the public sphere, they, generally tend to use Arabic less than men do.

¹⁷ The rate of female illiteracy in the Arab-Islamic world varies from country to country. Morocco is one of the most hit countries in this regard: around 60% of Moroccan women are illiterate, according to the most recent official 2002 census. The rate is much higher in rural areas. This is one of the factors which make Berber (the indigenous language) and *Darija* (Moroccan Arabic dialect) more accessible to women than *Fusha*.

¹⁸ On a more general level, the scarcity of women writers in general is due, according to Kaplan (1978), to a prohibition at a deeper psychological level so far as women are concerned. The idea that poetry and literature are not a woman’s domain is deeply internalized in women according to this author.

Conclusion

Overall, being the language of Islam, politics, the media, and written knowledge, Arabic is the “recipient” of the dominating “public” and “high” culture which constitutes the male domain in Arab countries. It is the language of institutions where the gatekeepers of Arabic are most active. Only males have the right to recite the Qur’an loudly in public, to lead the Friday prayers, to deliver Friday sermons, to slaughter animals while uttering specific religious formulae, to be present and participate orally during the marriage and burial rites, to deliver “important” political speeches, to debate “serious” literary works. Arabic is associated with formal, influential, and “serious” language functions in which women’s voices are often marginalized. These are the main reasons that mark Arabic as a male language. These reasons do NOT make Arabic a men’s language in the literal sense of the term; they simply mean that historically, more men may have been more competent in the religious and literary language-dependent professions given the greater social opportunities they had.

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