



Balancing as a Methodology in light of Feminist Criticism

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Abstract

Balancing (*muwazana*), one of the earliest forms of classical Arabic literary criticism, consists of comparing poets, writers, or literary works to arrive at a critical judgment. It spans from early historical instances (such as the arbitration of Umm Jundub and al-Nābigha) through foundational texts like al-Āmidī's work to contemporary studies. Feminist criticism, by contrast, is a modern, non-Arab concept focused on the study of women in literature—whether as authors or as subjects—yet its methodological tools remain unsettled.

This article proposes a hybrid comparative methodology that adapts the classical practice of balancing to the concerns of feminist criticism. Traditional balancing rested on personal taste, quantitative parity, and qualitative similarity. Feminist balancing, however, must confront the acknowledged quantitative disparity in literary production between the sexes (attributed to historical suppression of women's writing) and evaluate qualitative depth through the explicit and implicit cultural patterns encoded in texts.

Three critical stances linking comparison to women are examined: (1) the stereotypical view of the female poet as primarily emotional, which both elevates and limits cultural analysis of her work; (2) "gender jealousy," in which women critics defend the moral or social image of women rather than purely artistic criteria; and (3) the approach advocated here—comparison not of relative artistic merit between male and female poets, but of the differing concepts of poetry, life, and cultural encoding that their texts convey. The article thus seeks to establish a clear, usable comparative framework for researchers working at the intersection of classical Arabic criticism and feminist literary studies.

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Keywords: Balancing (*muwazana*), classical Arabic criticism, feminist criticism, comparative methodology, women's poetry, cultural encoding, gender and literature, al-Āmidī, quantitative disparity, qualitative evaluation

1. Introduction

(Balancing) is one of the features of ancient Arab criticism and one of its earliest forms. In its simplest definition, it is "the comparison between two poets or writers, or two or more literary works to reach a critical judgment." It includes the earliest critical positions recorded in history, from the government of Umm Jundub and the arbitration of Al-Nabigha, to Arabic writings from the beginning of codification, such as Al-Amidi's work, up to contemporary research studies. Because of this quantitative effort, its vocabulary has become established as a methodology and its details have been clarified.

As for feminist criticism, it is a modern term, foreign to Arab culture. Although its definition is clear—"criticism concerned with

the study of women in literature, whether as writers or written works"—its mechanisms as a research methodology have not yet been agreed upon. Therefore, combining them (comparative criticism and feminist criticism) into a single methodology is an adventure, encouraged by the fact that the research process is nothing more than that! This article, in one of its aspects, aims to establish a type of comparative approach specific to feminist criticism, enabling researchers in this field to proceed according to a clear and unambiguous method.

Since the pillar of poetry was the standard around which literary comparisons were made in ancient criticism, and the basis of these comparisons was research into the differentiation between texts, and the instrument of comparison was the personal taste of the critic, and among the mechanisms of comparison adopted by ancient criticism and approved by critics in later eras was quantitative equality between the two products as well as qualitative similarity, then in the case of conducting a comparison in light of feminist criticism, the matter has other dimensions, since the feminism that produced this criticism is based on the fact of the atrophy or absence of the feminist aspect in the diverse human product and research into the reasons for this, and the comparison, if it takes place, addresses this difference in quantitative and qualitative size. The balance, when feminist criticism is its field, requires new mechanisms that are compatible with the ideas adopted by this criticism, foremost among which is that it acknowledges the quantitative disparity in production between the sexes, attributing this to the deliberate prevention and absence of the feminist product. The second adopted principle is that qualitative evaluation depends on the depth of the apparent and implicit patterns in the text.

Thus, we are faced with three critical positions that link the comparison to women:

1. **The female poet is emotional:** This stems from a stereotypical and established image of women's emotions as dominant over their other characteristics. This comparison is preconceived, as in a hadith attributed to Ali ibn Abi Talib (peace be upon him), when he was asked about the reason for the superiority of Umm Ma'bad's description of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), he said, "Because women describe men according to their desires and find their own qualities reflected in them." This narration can be considered the beginning of feminist criticism, as the critic here evaluates and compares based on the other's perspective, which is grounded in the psychological framework of women. It is noteworthy that in this narration, the judgment regarding the female product is positive. This judgment is followed by the old and new critical stance towards the female poet/elegy, as she excelled in this art because she employed her emotion. Scholars of ancient women's poetry decided that most of it was elegiac, and they attributed this to the simplest reason according to the expert analyst, that it is the ideal purpose for expressing delicate feelings and intense emotions, for "it is natural for women to be the most sorrowful of people in times of calamity, and the most distressed by the loss of a loved one, due to the weakness and lack of resolve that God Almighty has instilled in

their nature". Thus, they closed the way for feminist criticism to evaluate their poetry, as it is better because she is a woman closer to emotion than (he), so there is no point in digging culturally because she started her words from emotion and gained the approval of the critic because she expressed this emotion and did not argue in the messages that were included in the folds of her poetic words.

2. **Gender jealousy:** Dr. Zaki Mubarak, in his work that delved into the topic of comparison and explored its types and aspects, pointed to this. He rejected the judgments by which women compare the poetry of men, judgments that are more objective than artistic, where the woman/critic defends the image of women in poetry morally or socially. He limited his judgment to the criticism attributed to Sukayna bint Al-Husayn.
3. The comparison that the research seeks, according to feminist criticism, is not a comparison of the quality of the work of female and male poets, but rather, as Adonis explained, the basis of al-Amidi's comparison is "not a comparison between two poets, but rather a comparison between two concepts or perspectives on poetry". In other words, two concepts and perspectives on life and the responses of both sides that this poetry conveys. In the subject of the research, the comparison is between their ability to encode their texts, given that "feminist poetry" is a title that inherently contains cultural messages in its very production.

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