RESEARCH ARTICLE

Representations of the Other in the Novel Out of the Body by Afaf Al-Bataina: A Cultural Study

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of the Other in the Arab feminist novel through an analysis of Out of the Body by Afaf Al-Bataina. The objective is to delve into the world of the Other, both Arab and Western, and to uncover the various portrayals of his character and the intricacies of his world. Accordingly, the images of the Other are diverse and are viewed from multiple perspectives. One of the findings of this study is that the author does not depart from the stereotypical portrayal of the Other commonly found in the works of many Arab female novelists. Moreover, the novel appears to attempt a critique of the entrenched cultural heritage within Eastern societies that affirms the presence of the Other/Man and grants him the prerogative to marginalise the female.

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1. Introduction

The Arabic novel has made considerable progress in its awareness of the Other, being the literary genre most capable of expressing complex human relationships, whether in terms of self-exploration or in understanding the Other. Arab novelists have depicted the Other in their works using diverse tools and drawing upon various references, leading to a multiplicity of perspectives on the subject.

To explore the representations of the Other and to uncover their patterns within the Arab feminist novel, this study has chosen *Out of the Body* by Afaf Al-Bataina. The objective is to examine the angles and perspectives from which the Other is viewed and represented, employing cultural criticism as the primary analytical framework. The study also seeks to answer several key questions, including the following: What are the forms of the Other's presence in the novel? How is the Other represented? What are his images? Moreover, how does the novel perceive the Other?

2. Concept of Representation

According to the *philosophical dictionary*, "To represent something by something else is to equalise it, to liken it to it, and to model it upon it; to represent something to the mind is to render its image through writing or other means, as if one were observing it." Representation, therefore, is the act of depiction and resemblance. The distinction between representation and simile lies in the fact that every representation is a form of simile, but not every simile qualifies as a representation.[1]

Thus, according to the *philosophical dictionary*, representation conveys the meaning of resemblance and visual depiction, derived from the verb *to represent*. Nader Kadhim asserts that "No culture is devoid of representations whether of the self or of the Other. Representation is what offers a community a certain image of itself and of the Other. It is what constructs for the community what Paul Ricoeur refers to as 'narrative identity.'" Theatrical discourse, according to Kadhim, implies that representation entails role-play, the visualisation of the scene, and the imposition of presence upon others. In rhetorical discourse, it signifies the responsibility of speaking on behalf of others.[2]

Representation is closely tied to imagery, as the image of the self is embodied and formed through the image projected onto the Other, an image that, in most cases, takes the form of opposition and difference. Such representations may be visual, verbal, or auditory. Additionally, representation can appear as narrative storytelling, a sequence of images and ideas, or it may manifest as an ideological product.[3]

Despite the multiplicity of representational forms, its linguistic form materialised through writing remains among the most significant and most consequential. This is because writing is perceived as a mirror of reality, granting representation the legitimacy of possessing truth. Language serves as the medium of representation; however, it is essential to recognise that language is inherently subjective. As a result, the representations conveyed through language are imbued with subjectivity and do not reflect reality as it is.

Accordingly, "the knowledge acquired through representation becomes burdened with subjectivity, aligning with an essential structure of memory, namely, its reductive and selective nature. This implies that representation cannot be a faithful means of perceiving all that pertains to the represented subject."[4]

Representation has replaced reality and has become the reality accessible to the individual in their relationship with the Other, taken as the accepted truth. Delving into the representations produced by the writer thus constitutes an excavation of epistemic centres and an inquiry into the cognitive structures they generate. This contributes to an understanding of the writer and an exploration of their depths. The writer is "that being who is formed within the life to which they wholly belong representations through which they live and by which they possess that peculiar ability to represent life itself."[5]

The writer produces representations, and these representations serve to convey the reality of things through language, which acquires its material form by writing. Representation reflects an aspect the writer wishes to highlight; it is merely a tool or mechanism employed by the writer to express their inner world and to project thoughts and images into the minds of others through language, which transmits the image the writer intends to communicate about the subject being represented.

Historical and spatial circumstances condition language, and thus, representation or the represented image is nothing more than the product of a specific cultural or ideological system.

3. The Other

The discourse on the Other in modern and contemporary Arabic literature constitutes an integral part of the discourse on the self and our perception of it. The image of the Other inevitably invokes that of the self, just as our image of the self necessitates the presence of the Other. The two are complementary, even as they are in opposition. "The Other is an entity external to the self, or the counterpart of the self, and there exists an inherent interrelation between them."[6]

The existence of the Other is an inevitable necessity for the existence of the self. Through the presence of the Other, the self becomes aware of its presence, its difference, and its distinctiveness. "The Other is a feeling that defines the self's perception of itself and intensifies its desire for completion either through fusion with the Other, which it symbolises,"[7] Alternatively, through separation from the Other and the formation of a distinct self-perception that defines and elevates the self.

Perspectives, thoughts, and viewpoints concerning the Other have varied since its emergence in Greek philosophy and continue into the modern era. In its earliest usage, "the term 'Other' in Greek thought denoted anything not belonging

to their cultural milieu, or was used to describe anyone who was not Greek whether from the North, the European interior, or the continents of Africa and Asia in an attempt to distinguish between the civilised Greek and the backwards non-Greek."[8]

Accordingly, the Greek philosophical perspective on the Other was shaped by a perception of the self, whereby the identity of the self was confined to the civilised Greek. In contrast, the Other was defined as everything lying outside the Greek self. Thus, "the self and the Other are born together, as sociologists and psychologists affirm. The image we form of ourselves cannot exist independently of our image of the Other. Similarly, our image of the Other inherently reflects, in part, an image of the self; the invocation of either inevitably brings about the presence of the other."[9]

The Other serves as the point of departure and the lens through which we perceive ourselves, through which the self's distinction and superiority are defined. The other is "a dynamic concept, in that it is determined only in relation to a central point. This central point is not absolutely fixed because the other may be defined in relation to an individual or to a particular group. This group may be internal, such as women in relation to men, or poor in relation to the rich or external, in relation to society at large."[10]

The Other is defined according to the perspective from which it is viewed. It is too vast and comprehensive to be confined to a single dimension. The Other can be divided into two categories: the Other within the culture of the self, and the Other outside the culture of the self, that is, the Other who does not fall within the bounds of the self, and the Other who lies entirely beyond its domain. The concept of the Other may thus be summarised as "he who differs from the self in thought, culture, gender, or religion."[11]

The self and the other, despite their differences, are intrinsically connected and interdependent; speaking of one necessarily entails invoking the other, regardless of the nature of their relationship, be it one of connection or separation. The exclusion of either leads to its disappearance and erasure, a condition that can be realised only through the permanent obliteration of one side of the binary.

The foundation of the relationship between the self and the other lies in differences, be it intellectual, sexual, religious, or cultural. This difference may result in either attraction and acceptance, manifesting as fascination and reverence, or in hostility and conflict, expressed through narcissistic self-perception and marginalisation or devaluation of the Other. "The existential awareness of the self is built upon the existence of the Other."[12] This is precisely what is reflected in the narrative model at hand.

4. The Arab Other: A Case of Separation

The novel is one of the literary forms most expansive and most engaged in the study of the Other and the presentation of their image. This is because "the literary form that synthesises numerous influences owing, first, to its length, and second, to its diverse capabilities, such as narration, description, and analysis, all of which enable it to present the clearest images of the Other."[13]

The novel has succeeded in expressing and narratively representing reality and its events, rendering them within an imaginative framework. It encompasses all aspects of life, among which one of the most significant topics it has addressed and represented is the image of the Other, a figure whose portrayal has varied according to different perspectives and viewpoints.

Afaf Al-Bataina sought, through the protagonist Mithl, the Self to express the self through her vision and subjective perceptions of the Other. She employed the novel as a vast space for such expression, as it is the literary genre that allows for the representation of this image through characters and their inner conflicts or struggles with the external or foreign Other.[14]

Through the protagonist, Mithl, the author conveyed her inner thoughts, emotions, impressions, and reflections on her conceptualisation. She employed every available rhetorical and persuasive means to do so. Given this, the image being constructed inevitably faces numerous problems: "the presentation of the Other's image is subject to a kind of

intellectual choice entangled with emotion. "[15] Moreover, these emotions are unstable, varying from one person to another and shaped by the impressions of the protagonist, Mithl, who expresses her subjective viewpoint. This leads to a distorted image of the Other-as-Self: the father, the husband, and Eastern society all appear diminished compared to the elevated, superior image of the Self: the author, the protagonist, and the female subject.

The image of the Eastern Other is presented and interpreted through preconceived notions, and it is rarely a pure form of expression, as the Self/Protagonist cannot fully align with the Other. This disalignment stems from both cultural and historical factors. The image transmitted by Mithl is ultimately the result of those entrenched cultural and social legacies stored within the collective memory regarding women/the feminine.

The image constructed by the Self of the Other cannot be separated from the cultural environment and historical contexts that contributed to its formation and crystallisation. Representation is an expression of a cultural, ideological, and imaginative reality of the Other and of the world itself: "it is not particularly close to him, but it is distinctly different from him; and yet, it is not entirely separate, for it endures through difference."[16]

Afaf Al-Bataina does not deviate from the stereotypical image of the Other often depicted by many Arab female novelists. This image typically portrays the Eastern Other as the oppressive, domineering master. This trope has contributed to the prevalence of rigid binaries, whether in terms of gender (male vs female), culture (superiority vs backwardness), or other dimensions. Such representations reinforce a racist and antagonistic view of the Other, in contrast to a narcissistic view of the Self. The Self does not transmit the image as it is; instead, it does so according to preconceived notions about the Other, resulting in a distorted and incomplete portrayal.

Through the protagonist, Mithl, the author seeks to represent Jordanian/Eastern/patriarchal society narratively, and her sense of separation from it is evident. Although Mithl belongs to that society and carries its family name, she feels intellectually detached from it. This sense of estrangement is born from the deprivation the protagonist perceives, being denied the chance to complete her studies, being deprived of sincere adolescent love, and eventually being denied freedom itself. She becomes a prisoner in her family's home, reduced to a servant for the male members of her household. She is even forced to endure her father's insults and oppression, which leads her to a form of psychological escape. She turns to prayer and religious devotion as a means of fleeing her reality and, on many occasions, contemplates suicide, yet all her attempts end in failure.

The image of both the self and the other is an imagined image before it is a real image; it derives its character from reality, yet imagination precedes reality in the formation of such images. Each party constructs an image of the Other on the basis of intentional or unintentional preconceptions and underlying motives formed within their consciousness. The novel portrays a binary opposition between the protagonist/Self and the Other in various forms, particularly the domineering Eastern Other.

Notably, the Other in the Arabic novel is not always the West. The Other may lie within us and stem from us; that is, the Self may be divided into a Self and an Other. The other is not necessarily geographically distant, historically antagonistic, or a constant rival. Instead, the Self can fracture internally, with one part opposing another.[17]This is evident in Mithl's (the Self's) conflict with the internal Other, her father Mansour, the male members of her family, and Eastern society at large.

The silence surrounding this distorted image of the Arab Other, the patriarchal society, reveals a form of self-centredness that marginalises and erases the Other, positioning the Self as the sole source of truth. This reflects Nietzsche's concept of the will to power, which "operates by glorifying the Self while invoking the Other not as a contributing force in the formation of the Self, but as the most grotesque negative reflection the Other can project about this Self. "[18]

This is the very image drawn by the protagonist, Mithl, of her family members, especially its male figures and Eastern society more broadly. She speaks on behalf of every Eastern woman, in a context marked by tension between societal structures and the self, between a centralised culture that marginalises and devalues women and a self that seeks to break free from the oppressive, hegemonic order of that culture. It is within this context that Mithl's identity is formed,

an identity that perceives all the men in her family as diseased. She states, "The men in my family are sick, and they believe they are immune to the illnesses of others."[19]

The evocation of multiple female characters and the expression of their suffering is, in itself, evidence of the protagonist's apprehension and resentment towards Eastern society, a society moulded by customs and traditions that have rendered it a stereotypical construct, one that perpetuates, across generations, an image of woman as a tool to be shaped by man and rendered submissive to his will. Her existence is confined to obedience and loyalty, and any attempt at self-expression is deemed immodesty and defiance, transforming her into a source of shame to be eradicated.

"In the context of the narrative's diagnosis of the evolving semantic conflict between images of masculinity and femininity, the text exposes the politics of male dominance in its construction of femininity as a 'dual othered identity.' Woman is simultaneously positioned as an object of desire, humiliation, and violence represented as 'difference' through the lens of erotic fantasy, yet a demonic difference that must be suppressed and veiled to protect society from its temptation and seduction."[20]

This ideological system is imaginatively represented through the portrayal of the protagonist, Mithl, and her relationship with her husband, Lazarus, who seeks to violate her body by force. When she resists, she becomes the target of violence. Mithl recounts:

"I will never forget the moment he raped me... He pounced on me and pinned me down with his hands like a beast... He threw me onto the bed, promising me pleasure. I tried to move, but I was restrained. He held me down and tried to kiss me, dodging my blows. The more ferocious I became, the more insistent and aroused he was. "[21]

The novelist delves deep into the fabric of Eastern society, probing into the psyche of the man/male even before that of the woman. Through this exploration, she affirms that all men, the Other, are internally weak despite their outwards displays of severity, harshness, and dominance. They are governed by an obsession with masculinity and virility and a fear of losing them. This is embodied in the character of Lazarus, whom Mithl refused to approach physically:

"I swore to sleep guarded by the laws of what is lawful and forbidden in the embrace of my father and my tribe and Lazarus. I pledged that my body would be claimed only by one who signs it not on paper but one who is signed by my body, not by a marriage certificate. "[22]

Mithl's refusal to surrender her body to Lazarus is, in essence, a rejection of a distorted reality that sought to violate her under the guise of marriage. He resorted to violence and beatings, encouraged by her father's advice. Lazarus, the husband, is but a replica of the father, a symbol of patriarchal authority. The husband uses the marriage contract as justification for violating and subjugating her body, whereas the father and male relatives invoke customs and traditions to legitimise such acts.

"From her perspective, the despicable husband sought to rape her using the same methods her father had once begun to employ. From the husband's perspective, she was a feast to be savoured through violence, to be subdued by force for the resistance of the female demands the tyranny of the male."[23]

Mithl is further traumatised by her second marriage to Suleiman the Other, the Eastern man, who is also obsessed with sex. She concludes that "he is no different from the men of her tribe who ruined all that was precious within her. The Western culture had not refined him; he had learned nothing and continued to carry the same disease as the ego. Her hatred for men and for everything around her grew until she began to loathe herself and the world in which she lived."[24]

Mithl had envisioned her marriage to Arab youth in Scotland as a chance for salvation. However, she comes to discover that he, too, represents another face of the patriarchal centre of Eastern society. He is no different from the Other, the father, the tribe, or Lazarus.

"In light of the experiences she underwent, Mithl found herself in a state of ignorance, blindness, and confusion. She no longer knew what she wanted or where she was headed. Thoughts of revenge swirled in her mind, and feelings of hatred consumed her for men had destroyed her life, both in her homeland and in exile."[25]

5. The Image of the Other/The Western Man: A Case of Separation

While the image of the Arab/patriarchal Other is portrayed as authoritarian and oppressive, one that crushes the protagonist's (Mithl's) hopes and ambitions and shackles her freedom, with the father, family, Arab man, and husband all acting as agents of suppression, the female protagonist turns to the Western Other. Mithl chooses to leave her husband, Suleiman, and to abandon with him the oppressed world she came from, a world in which she experienced inferiority and marginalisation, as he merely represented another replica of her Eastern society.

The first glimmer of light appeared through the Western Other, represented by the female psychologist, who helped her identify the source of her suffering and diagnosed her condition:

"You do not know what you want. Go, reflect, and define your goals. Know what makes you happy, what upsets you, and what you aspire to. Your problem stems from within yourself. "[26]

Images of violence and sexual repression continue to manifest in her relationship with Suleiman, who seeks nothing beyond the satisfaction of his desire, with no regard for his wife's emotions or psychological readiness. In contrast, is the image of the Western Other, Stuart, whom Mithl perceives as the embodiment of freedom, love, and democracy. He is the one who makes her feel her worth as a woman. Mithl states:

"In a moment of sincerity, you gave me a sense of reassurance that no man I have known for years has ever given me.

The protagonist's sense of marginalisation and inadequacy drove her to seek refuge in the arms of the Western Other. In him, she sees the horizon of hope and a promise of future independence. The Eastern woman Mithl pursues this relationship to experience a different kind of physical and emotional connection, one that contrasts with her experience of the Arab/Eastern Other.

"The Western space appears distinct from the Eastern one. In this new space, woman's relationship with men takes on a different form in which she is a partner, not merely a concubine.

The author adopts a counterstrategy for the patriarchal system and, in doing so, seeks to dismantle it through narratives. She does this by relying on a feminine confessional mode, represented through the narrator-character Mithl, whose portrayal aims to subvert and expose the contradictions of the male-dominated discourse. Like the tale of Scheherazade, who resisted the fate of death and oblivion, Mithl, the protagonist, declared her challenge in order to survive, defying the fate imposed upon her by the internal Other, her family members, especially the uncle who refused her request to live with Stuart outside the institution of marriage. This, it seems, represents a form of cultural and textual resistance enacted by Mithl/the author.

Encouraged by her friend Carol, Mithl entered into a free physical relationship with Stuart outside the institution of marriage. However, fears and anxieties continue to haunt her, prompting her to return for a visit to her family. However, she finds no change and returns to London more pessimistically than before. Her fears and distress are further heightened by a visit from her uncle, Salem, who reveals his rigidity and rejection of her relationship with Stuart. In his eyes, she has not only violated religious boundaries but also betrayed the tribe and its laws:

"I will not allow you to live this way. Neither my honour, nor my manhood, nor my religion will permit me to remain silent about what you're doing... this relationship is illegitimate, and I will not accept it.

The Western Other did not strip the protagonist of her faith but instead stripped her of her of her Arab appearance and name. She became "Sara Alexander", Mithl transformed with Western features and Western affiliation. Her new identity is but a reflection of the West, with its freedom and emancipation:

"Now I can change my name, sever my connection to my lineage, and feel at ease... and the criminals will never be able to find me.

She even declares her detachment and repudiation of her tribe:

"I used to be the daughter of my tribe. My name and face were an extension of something imposed upon me. Now I have become what I have chosen. I carry the name I have accepted, the face I have shaped for myself, and the body I have willed for my being. Only my old voice remains as it was and will remain to defend my right to live as I wish. I am no longer the daughter of coincidence or fate

Thus, from a deep sense of oppression and injustice, rebellion against society, customs, and traditions begins. This rebellion is expressed through the pursuit of a better reality through escape. This is embodied by the protagonist, Mithl, in her transformation of name and appearance and her rejection of her Arab identity.

Cosmetic surgery enabled Mithl to liberate herself from her past, beginning with her father and tribe and then her history. She freed herself from that inherited intellectual, cultural, and civilisational legacy in exchange for embracing the Western/Christian Other. Her appearance, now marked by Western features in stark contrast to her former Arab ones, becomes the symbol of her new identity:

"I used to be the daughter of my tribe. My name and face were an extension of something imposed upon me. Now I have become what I have chosen. I carry the name I have accepted, the face I have shaped for myself, and the body I have willed for my being. Only my old voice remains as it was and will remain to defend my right to live as I wish. I am no longer the daughter of coincidence or fate

However, does this disguise and mask adopted by Mithl now Sara Alexander and her assumption of a reformist role truly bear fruit within an Eastern society that neither acknowledges nor embraces Western (Other) ideals? Is concealment the most effective means by which the protagonist/author might express her views? In truth, such a solution, from a rational and realistic perspective, is unlikely to convince the reader that it departs from logical and lived reality.

Nevertheless, the author, Afaf Al-Bataina, through the character of Mithl, succeeded in breaking through the walls of silence and oblivion. She did not limit herself to speaking about her personal experience or raising issues concerning women alone. Instead, she extended her critique to include the Arab Other, whom she perceives as the primary agent of her subjugation, enforcing his patriarchal authority upon her.

Conclusion

Through her depiction of the Arab Other, Afaf Al-Bataina aims to re-examine the deeply entrenched cultural heritage that affirms the Other's dominance and grants him the right to marginalise women and render them subordinate. Consequently, the protagonist turns to the Western Other, who is portrayed as civilised, democratic, and supportive of women, in stark contrast to the Arab Other, who is consistently depicted as authoritarian and suppressive of her freedom.

In many instances, the protagonist actively renounces her Arab customs and traditions. She adopted a Western dress, appearance, and name and underwent cosmetic surgery to erase her Arab features. In doing so, the Self loses a part of its own identity, and that part becomes affiliated with the Other. It ceases to be itself in its own eyes and is transformed into the Other in the eyes of the Eastern subject.

This imagined image of the Other in *Out of the Body* falls into one of two categorical types: either a completely rejected, distorted portrayal of the Other, calling for his alienation, rebellion against him, and erasure of his existence, or an idealised vision, wherein the Other becomes the ultimate model, the Superman/saviour who rescues the Self from the depths of darkness and leads her into the light of liberation.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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