

Feminist Literature and Gender Representations in Contemporary Social Discourse

الأدب النسوي وتمثيلات النوع الاجتماعي
في الخطاب الاجتماعي المعاصر

Littérature féministe et représentations du genre dans le discours
social contemporain

ABDESSAMED CHERIFI

Mustapha Stambouli University - Mascara | Algeria
BP 305, Route de Mamounia, 29000 Mascara, Algérie

a.cherifi@univ-mascara.dz

a.cherifi@univ-mascara.dz

LYNDA KAZI-TANI

Mustapha Stambouli University - Mascara | Algeria
BP 305, Route de Mamounia, 29000 Mascara, Algérie

lynda.kazitani@univ-mascara.dz

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6161-7292>

Date de réception	Publication numérique	Archivage ASJP
18/08/2025	25/12/2026	01/02/2026

Référence électronique

Abdessamed Cherifi et Lynda Kazi-Tani, « Feminist Literature and Gender Representations in Contemporary Social Discourse », Aleph [En ligne], Vol 13 (1) | 2026, mis en ligne le 25 mai 2026, consulté le 25 mai 2026. URL : <https://aleph.edinum.org/16746>

Référence papier (archivage ASJP)

Abdessamed Cherifi et Lynda Kazi-Tani, « Feminist Literature and Gender Representations in Contemporary Social Discourse », Aleph, Vol 13 (1) | 2026, 431-441.

© Auteur(s), 2026. Les auteurs conservent leurs droits.

Article diffusé en accès ouvert sous licence Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International
— CC BY 4.0, sauf mention contraire portée sur la page de publication.

Abstract

This article examines the conceptual, historical, and critical relationship between feminism, feminist literature, and gender in contemporary social discourse. Rather than treating feminism and gender as synonymous notions, it argues that they belong to distinct but intersecting analytical fields. The study adopts a theoretical and synthetic approach grounded in feminist literary criticism, discourse analysis, and selected sociological perspectives. It first revisits the semantic and disciplinary trajectory of the concept of gender, from grammatical classification to a category for analysing social hierarchy, symbolic power, and the naturalisation of sexual difference. It then retraces major moments in the development of feminist thought and clarifies the plurality of meanings attached to feminist literature. Finally, it analyses the principal sites at which gender becomes operative in literary discourse : the codification of roles, the production of stereotypes, linguistic asymmetries, and the representation of violence. The article argues that feminist literature does not merely thematise women's conditions ; it also reveals the discursive mechanisms through which exclusion, domination, and inequality are normalised and contested. In this sense, gender functions simultaneously as a critical instrument, a site of ideological struggle, and a key to reading the politics of representation.

Keywords

Feminism, gender, feminist literature, discourse, social representation, symbolic power

المُلخَص

تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى فحص العلاقة المفهومية والتاريخية والنقدية بين النسوية والأدب النسوي والجنـدر في الخطاب الاجتماعي المعاصر. وتنطلق من فرضية أساسية مفادها أن النسوية والجنـدر ليسا مفهومين مترادفين، بل ينتميان إلى حقلين متمايزين ومتقاطعين في الوقت نفسه. وتعتمد الدراسة مقارنة نظرية تركيبية تستند إلى النقد الأدبي النسوي وتحليل الخطاب وبعض الإسهامات السوسولوجية. وهي تعود أولاً إلى المسار الدلالي والمعرفي لمفهوم الجنـدر، منذ استعماله في التصنيف اللغوي والنحوي حتى تحوله إلى أداة لتحليل التراتب الاجتماعي والسلطة الرمزية وآليات تطبيع الاختلاف الجنسي. ثم تتبـع بعض المحطات الكبرى في تشكـل الفكر النسوي، وتوضح تعدد الدلالات المرتبطة بمفهوم الأدب النسوي. وفي مرحلة أخيرة، تحلل الدراسة أهم المواقع التي يشتغل فيها الجنـدر داخل الخطاب الأدبي،

مثل ترميز الأدوار الاجتماعية، وإنتاج الصور النمطية، واللاتكافؤات اللغوية، وتمثيل العنف. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن الأدب النسوي لا يكتفي بجعل تجارب النساء مرئية، بل يكشف أيضاً الآليات الخطابية التي تُنتج الهيمنة والإقصاء، وتضفي عليهما طابعاً طبيعياً أو مشروعاً. ومن ثم يغدو الجندر أداة تحليلية، وموقفاً للصراع الدلالي والإيديولوجي، ومدخلاً أساسياً لقراءة سياسات التمثيل

الكلمات المفتاحية

النسوية، الجندر، الأدب النسوي، الخطاب، التمثلات الاجتماعية، السلطة الرمزية

Résumé

Cet article examine le rapport conceptuel, historique et critique entre le féminisme, la littérature féministe et le genre dans le discours social contemporain. L'étude repose sur une démarche théorique et synthétique, à l'intersection de la critique littéraire féministe, de l'analyse du discours et de la réflexion sociologique. Elle part de l'idée que féminisme et genre ne sont ni synonymes ni opposés, mais qu'ils relèvent de champs distincts, fortement articulés l'un à l'autre. L'article revient d'abord sur la trajectoire du concept de genre, passé d'une catégorie grammaticale à un outil d'analyse des hiérarchies sociales, des assignations symboliques et de la naturalisation de la différence sexuelle. Il retrace ensuite quelques jalons majeurs de la pensée féministe et clarifie les acceptions concurrentes de la notion de littérature féministe. Enfin, il étudie les principaux lieux d'activation du genre dans le discours littéraire : les rôles sociaux, les stéréotypes, les asymétries langagières et la représentation des violences. L'hypothèse centrale est que la littérature féministe ne se contente pas de décrire la condition des femmes : elle met au jour les mécanismes discursifs par lesquels l'exclusion, la domination et l'inégalité sont produites, légitimées ou contestées.

Mots-clés

Féminisme, genre, littérature féministe, discours, représentation sociale, pouvoir symbolique

Introduction

The relationship between feminist literature and gender is frequently approached through approximation, and sometimes through terminological confusion. In introductory discourse, journalistic commentary, and even some academic summaries, feminism and gender are treated as if they designated the same object. Yet such assimilation obscures an important distinction. Feminism refers, in the broadest sense, to a historical, political, ethical, and intellectual struggle against the subordination of women. Gender, by contrast, is an analytical category used to examine the social organisation of sexual difference, the symbolic distribution of value, and the discursive production of roles, norms, and expectations.

The aim of this article is therefore neither to collapse feminism into gender nor to oppose them in a schematic way. Its purpose is to clarify the points at which feminist literary criticism mobilises gender as a category of interpretation in order to analyse the representation of women, the codification of social roles, the unequal distribution of authority, and the linguistic mechanisms through which hierarchy is naturalised. The article is situated at the crossroads of literary criticism, discourse analysis, and sociological reflection. It adopts a theoretical and synthetic method : it revisits the emergence of the concepts under discussion, re-examines some major definitions, and then identifies the principal zones of intersection between feminist literature and gender-oriented analysis.

The central question may be formulated as follows : how does feminist literary discourse use gender in order to expose, interpret, and contest socially produced forms of domination ? In order to answer this question, the discussion proceeds in four stages. It first examines the trajectory of the concept of gender from linguistic classification to social analysis. It then turns to feminism and feminist literary criticism, with particular attention to definitional plurality. A third stage analyses the major sites at which gender becomes legible in literary discourse : social roles, representation, language, and violence. Finally, the article shows that the intersection between feminism and gender lies less in conceptual identity than in a shared critical concern with the production, circulation, and legitimation of inequality.

1. Gender : from grammatical category to social relation

From an etymological and disciplinary point of view, the terms *genre* and *gender* have circulated through several fields, notably grammar, linguistics, literary studies, anthropology, and the social sciences. In its grammatical acceptance, gender serves to classify words and pronouns ; in its modern critical acceptance, it designates a mode of reading the social meanings attached to sexual difference. This passage from grammatical category to social category is one of the major conceptual displacements of contemporary theory. As al-Bāz ī and al-Ruwaylī note, the concept acquired exceptional productivity once it entered

the human and social sciences, where it became capable of linking language, culture, representation, and ideology within a single interpretive frame (Al-Bāz'ī & Al-Ruwaylī, 2000).

In contemporary scholarship, gender should therefore not be reduced to a simple synonym for biological sex. What is at stake is not the denial of bodily difference, but the analysis of the social uses made of that difference. Gender names the historical, cultural, institutional, and discursive processes through which societies assign values, capacities, roles, rights, and expectations to subjects identified as male or female. Joan Scott's intervention remains decisive here : gender became a productive category precisely because it made it possible to think power, identity, and symbolic order together (Scott, 1986).

This perspective also helps to avoid an important confusion. The fact that the term initially circulated through grammar does not mean that grammatical gender and social gender are identical. Yet the displacement is not arbitrary. The history of the term shows that systems of classification, distinction, and opposition often migrate from language into broader cultural logics. Feminist and gender studies have been particularly attentive to this migration because it reveals how symbolic structures can sustain social hierarchies. The point is not that language mechanically determines society, but that language is one of the privileged sites at which social asymmetries are codified, repeated, and rendered thinkable.

The theoretical value of gender lies, then, in its anti-naturalising force. What had long been presented as immediate, self-evident, or biologically grounded can now be re-read as socially produced. Butler's work radicalised this perspective by showing that gender is not merely a social label placed upon a prior essence, but a set of reiterated norms through which subjects are constituted and recognised (Butler, 1990). Even when one does not fully adopt Butler's performative framework, the epistemological gain remains clear : gender directs analysis toward processes of construction, repetition, sanction, and contestation rather than toward essential identities.

2. Feminism and feminist literary criticism

Feminism emerged neither as a single doctrine nor as a homogeneous movement. It should instead be understood as a historically diverse field of struggles and theories concerned with the legal, social, symbolic, economic, and epistemic subordination of women. The genealogy usually retraced in modern criticism begins with Enlightenment thought and nineteenth-century liberal reformism, moves through suffrage movements and socialist critiques, and reaches a decisive theoretical intensification in the twentieth century with writers such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir. Wollstonecraft's insistence on education, Mill's defence of civil equality, Woolf's reflection on exclusion from the material conditions of authorship, and Beauvoir's analysis of woman as constituted other all

contributed to the making of feminist critique as a durable intellectual tradition (Wollstonecraft, 1792 ; Mill, 1869 ; Woolf, 1929 ; de Beauvoir, 1949).

Yet any attempt to define feminism must remain attentive to internal tensions. In some Arabic critical discussions, the translation of the term itself has been treated as problematic. El-Messiri (2010), for instance, insisted that the term should not be received as transparent, since its conceptual implications exceed literal lexical equivalence and are tied to broader philosophical and political assumptions. That observation remains useful because it reminds us that the circulation of feminist vocabulary across languages is never purely neutral. Concepts are translated, but they are also resemanticised according to local debates, ideological positions, and inherited intellectual frameworks.

The same caution applies to the category of feminist literature. A narrow definition would restrict it to literature written by women. A broader one would include texts centred on women's experiences regardless of the author's sex. A more critical definition would reserve the label for texts that explicitly interrogate patriarchal domination and expose the social construction of inequality. Arabic criticism has long registered this plurality. Al-Şakkār (2003), for example, foregrounds the relation between writing and women's lived experience, while Hamouda (2003) points toward the deeper critical issue of female subjectivity and its textual construction. Rather than choosing a single exclusive definition, it is more rigorous to say that feminist literature designates a field of textual practices in which gendered experience, representation, and power become central objects of literary work.

Feminist literary criticism goes further than classification. It asks how literature produces and organizes meaning around femininity and masculinity ; how it distributes voice, legitimacy, silence, and agency ; how it represents bodies, labour, motherhood, desire, domesticity, authorship, and public authority ; and how it either reproduces or contests the symbolic order that sustains hierarchy. Methodologically, this criticism has always been plural. It has drawn on historicism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, sociological criticism, post-structuralism, and, more recently, intersectional approaches. Its specific strength lies in its refusal to isolate textual form from social meaning. Literature is neither reduced to a simple mirror of society nor detached from it ; it is treated as a site where ideological formations are condensed, displaced, negotiated, and sometimes undone.

3. Major analytical sites of gender in literary discourse

A first major analytical site concerns the codification of social roles. Feminist criticism repeatedly shows that literary texts do not merely describe social life : they distribute legitimacy among positions. The opposition between public and private spheres, the recurrent association of women with domestic labour or affective care, the idealisation of motherhood, and the moral coding of feminine respectability all reveal how narrative discourse can stabilise normative expecta-

tions. Such representations are never innocent. They constitute scripts of intelligibility through which certain forms of life appear natural while others appear deviant, excessive, or unintelligible.

A second site concerns representation itself. Women often appear in literary and cultural discourse through a restricted repertory of figures : the self-sacrificing mother, the silent wife, the muse, the temptress, the victim, the body to be possessed, or the symbolic guardian of communal honour. Feminist criticism reads these figures not simply as narrative motifs, but as ideological condensations. They compress into apparently familiar images a whole social order of expectations, permissions, and prohibitions. In this sense, the stereotype is not only a false image ; it is a mechanism of simplification that makes hierarchy seem obvious.

A third site concerns language. The original version of the article rightly foregrounded a sociolinguistic dimension that deserves to be preserved and sharpened. Gender is not only a theme in literature ; it is also inscribed in the operations of naming, designation, metaphor, focalisation, and evaluative lexicon. Feminist discourse analysis asks who speaks, who is spoken about, who is authorised to define reality, and whose experience is kept structurally secondary (Al-Bāz'ī & Al-Ruwaylī, 2000). Linguistic asymmetry may take the form of derogatory labels, masculine universalisation, euphemisation of violence, or narrative framing that renders women visible only through relation to male agency. Here the convergence between literary analysis and discourse analysis is particularly strong : both seek to uncover the micro-mechanisms through which symbolic domination becomes ordinary.

A fourth site concerns violence in its multiple forms. Feminist literature does not treat violence solely as a spectacular event. It also tracks humiliation, silencing, confinement, infantilisation, erasure, coercive respectability, and epistemic disqualification. A text may denounce violence explicitly ; it may also encode it indirectly by normalising submission or by refusing women the status of full speaking subjects. This is one of the decisive contributions of feminist reading : it broadens the field of the visible and makes legible those forms of domination that do not always announce themselves as violence while nevertheless producing durable effects of inequality.

4. Intersections between feminism and gender in contemporary social discourse

The intersection between feminism and gender becomes especially visible when one considers the way contemporary social discourse organises debates around freedom, equality, sexuality, family, labour, education, and identity. Public discourse often stages gender either as a neutral descriptive notion or as an ideological threat. Such polarisation obscures the analytical specificity of the

concept. In scholarly terms, gender is valuable because it enables us to examine how difference is socially coded, institutionally managed, and symbolically justified. Feminism, for its part, provides the political and ethical horizon from which these processes can be criticised.

This relationship can be clarified through four principal intersections. The first is anti-naturalisation. Both feminism and gender studies challenge the transformation of historically produced norms into apparently timeless truths. Feminist literature participates in this challenge whenever it reveals that what is presented as destiny is in fact prescription : a woman is not “naturally” confined to a role simply because discourse has repeated that role for centuries.

The second intersection is the critique of symbolic hierarchy. Feminist criticism does not merely demand the inclusion of women within existing representations ; it interrogates the system of value that ranks activities, voices, experiences, and bodies. Gender analysis is essential here because it shows how hierarchy operates through differentiation itself. The issue is not only that women are excluded, but that difference has been organized in ways that produce authority on one side and dependency on the other.

The third intersection is the analysis of discursive mediation. The original article was correct to insist that feminist discourse often works through language in order to expose discrimination, stereotyping, and oppressive representation. This point can be reformulated more sharply : discourse does not simply reflect inequality, it helps constitute it. Literary writing, criticism, media discourse, and institutional language all participate in the circulation of categories that authorize certain social perceptions. Feminist literature is therefore not external to social discourse ; it is one of the sites at which discourse becomes self-reflexive and contestatory.

The fourth intersection concerns plurality. One of the limits of early universalising formulations was the assumption of a singular female condition. Contemporary feminist criticism has moved beyond that simplification by insisting that gender is lived differently across class, race, religion, language, geography, generation, and historical conjuncture. Even when the present article remains primarily conceptual rather than corpus-based, it is important to register this point. A scientifically robust reflection on feminist literature cannot rely on an abstract woman detached from social situatedness. The category of gender becomes most useful precisely when it helps us analyse differentiated experiences of subordination, negotiation, and resistance.

For this reason, the relationship between feminism and gender should not be framed as an opposition between activism and theory, nor as a confusion of terms. Feminism names a critical struggle against domination ; gender names one of the most fertile analytical instruments for describing the social and symbolic organisation of that domination. Their intersection is therefore dynamic : femi-

nism gives the critique its horizon, while gender gives it a powerful conceptual grammar.

Conclusion

The comparison of the two submitted versions makes clear that the strongest and most publishable line of argument is the one that treats feminism and gender as distinct but articulated categories. A scientifically strengthened version of the article must therefore preserve the original intuition regarding sociolinguistic discrimination and gendered discourse, while also adopting the clearer conceptual architecture achieved by the revised version. That is the path followed in the present consolidated text.

Feminist literature should not be reduced either to literature written by women or to a thematic archive of women's suffering. It is a critical field in which the representation of women, the codification of roles, the hierarchisation of speech, and the symbolic management of difference become objects of inquiry. Gender, in turn, is not a fashionable substitute for sex, nor a merely ideological slogan. It is a category that makes visible the processes by which societies transform difference into norm, norm into value, and value into power.

From this perspective, feminist literature performs a double task. It documents structures of domination, and it contests the language through which those structures are justified. It exposes the ordinary mechanisms of stereotype, silencing, and unequal recognition, while also opening a space for alternative representations and redistributed authority. The true point of convergence between feminism and gender lies here : both seek to understand how inequality is produced, narrated, and naturalised, and both contribute to the critical labour of denaturalising it.

A final implication follows. The relevance of feminist literary criticism in contemporary social discourse does not lie only in its thematic attention to women. Its deeper importance lies in the way it teaches us to read. It trains analysis on the politics of representation, on the discursive economies of legitimacy, and on the symbolic conditions under which subjects become visible, audible, and socially intelligible. In that sense, the intersection between feminist literature and gender remains one of the most fertile areas for contemporary critical inquiry.

Bibliography

- Al-Bāz'ī, S., & Al-Ruwaylī, M. (2000). *Dalīl al-nāqīd al-adabī : Idā'ah li-akthar min khamsīn šīlāḥan wa-tayyāran naqdiyyan mu'āširan* [The literary critic's guide : An introduction to more than fifty contemporary critical terms and trends] (2nd ed.). Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-'Arabī.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble : Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

- El-Messiri, A. W. (2010). *Qaḍīyyat al-mar'a bayna al-tahrīr wa-l-tamarkuz ḥawla al-unthā* [The woman question between liberation and gynocentrism] (2nd ed.). Dār Nahḍat Miṣr.
- Hamouda, A. (2003). *Al-khurūj min al-tih : Dirāsah fī sulṭat al-naṣṣ* [Exiting the labyrinth : A study of textual authority]. Al-Majlis al-Waṭanī lil-Thaqāfah wa-l-Funūn wa-l-Ādāb.
- Mill, J. S. (1869). *The subjection of women*. Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer.
- al-Ṣakkār, Ḥ. (2003). *Infjār al-ṣamt : Al-kitābah al-niswiyyah fī al-Yaman : Dirāsāt wa-mukhtārāt* [The explosion of silence : Feminist writing in Yemen : Studies and selections]. Markaz 'Ibādī.
- Scott, J. W. (1986). Gender : A useful category of historical analysis. *The American Historical Review*, 91(5), 1053-1075.
- Wollstonecraft, M. (1792). *A vindication of the rights of woman*. J. Johnson.
- Woolf, V. (1929). *A room of one's own*. Hogarth Press.
- de Beauvoir, S. (1949). *Le deuxième sexe*. Gallimard.