

The Lost Speech: Towards a Non-Sexist Language

Zuleikha Abu Risha

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Reviewed by Saleh Ibrahim, Lebanese U.

Abu Risha, Arab writer, columnist, and poet, defines her book, *The Lost Speech: Towards a Non-Sexist Language* as an attempt to present a practical pattern for emancipating the Arabic language from the dominant patriarchal style (p.7). She also aims at triggering the sense of justice, ensuring a healthy atmosphere for communication, and addressing first the groups that are receptive to change (p. 27).

The author who is President of The Women's Studies Center in Amman, defines sexism as an "ideology that controls not only the humanitarian behavior, thought and feelings but also the language, a humanitarian product as well" (p. 21). She bases her definition on earlier definitions of sexism, the most important of which is by Linda Phelps: "a social relationship in which males have authority over females" (p. 19).

She calls attention to an important and basic fact in the Arabic language, namely that the man is often identified with characteristics of power, strength, perfection, nobleness, decision - making, and sexual activity, whereas the woman is equated with softness and smoothness (p. 13).

While tackling Arabic culture, Abu Risha discusses Ibn el Anbari's book "*The Male and the Female*" in which he tries to prove that the man is the origin.

She explains first that "in the *Qoran*, there is no clear sign that Eve was created from Adam's rib or that he was created first. However, the interpreters who depended a lot on the Old Testament wrongfully understood this" (p. 39).

Within the same context, Abu Risha notes that the makers of ancient myths believed that the female was superior. "She is the goddess of the matriarchal society. She is the big mother" (p. 40). Then humanity moved from matriarchal to patriarchal culture (p.41). In this manner, Abu Risha tries to prove indirectly that women are at the origin of culture.

After this historical introduction, the author addresses the issue from a practical perspective. She starts with "sexism in children's literature" and discusses three phases:



1. quantitative analysis of the content: the number of male and female characters in titles, texts and drawings;
2. qualitative analysis of the content: the characteristics and roles given to women as compared to those given to men;
3. analysis of sexism in the language: how words and linguistic rules are used (pp. 50-56).

She then suggests "a general framework for a non-sexist literature" that contains:

1. an equal presence of male and female characters;
2. a fair distribution of roles between men and women in academic life, in practical life, and in politics;
3. a fair distribution of psychological, emotional, and biological characteristics between both sexes.
4. the emancipation of the Arabic language by eradicating sexism as much as possible (pp. 59-61).

Finally, Abu Risha proposes alternatives for a number of sexist terms, expressions, and sentences. She acknowledges the difficulty of achieving a non-sexist language, because language is a humanitarian-social heritage that cannot be changed overnight. However, she is trying to change the rigidity of the linguistic heritage (p. 8). Since marginalizing woman's role in the language leads to marginalizing her role in reality, we have to "change the language."

Translated from the Arabic
by Ghena Ismail