



## The Representation of Gender and Women's Cultural Differences in Bothayna Al-Essa's "Dar Khawla"

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines Bothayna Al-Essa's novel *Dar Khawla* to analyze how gender and women's cultural differences are represented in Al-Essa's work. Qualitative study design was employed to investigate these dimensions through textual and thematic analysis with respect to various cultural and feminist theoretical frameworks. As *Dar Khawla* is centralized on the themes of gender identity, postcolonial critique and cultural identity, it explored the role of language and identity construction within female characters penned by Al-Essa. It focuses on the interconnection of cultural transformation with relation to Butler's gender performativity theory and Bhabha's cultural identity. It connects cultural identity to examine Al-Essa's portrayal of Kuwaiti national identity, highlighting her engagement with cultural diversity. Gender performativity and female identity construction highlighted the themes of freedom and looking at cultural expectations as a means of liberation instead of limitations. It explores the interplay between narrative and lyrical elements in feminist writing, offering rich theoretical insights. The study employs Susan Stanford Friedman's ideas on narrative and poetic interaction to demonstrate how feminist literature reconfigures literary structures. Al-Essa's work combines poetic and narrative techniques, amplifying women's voices in resistance and conveying their experiences as a marginalized group within dominant male narratives. The analysis reveals Al-Essa's intertextuality in amplifying female voices while addressing empowerment, societal reform, and intellectual inquiry. Her advocacy for the Arabic language and cultural heritage highlights the importance of preserving identity amid globalization, while her engagement with Western culture reflects a blending of traditional values and modern influences.

**Keywords:** Gender, Cultural identity, Feminist discourse, Heteroglossia, Cultural differences, Colonialism.



## Introduction

A prominent figure of modern Arabic literature and one of the best-selling Kuwaiti novelists, Bothayna Al-Essa is renowned all over the world. Fueled by her passion for creativity, she established Kuwait Library which provides platform to aspiring writers and Takween for publishing critically acclaimed works. She has numerous accolades to her name, particularly her novel “The Book Censor’s Library” being longlisted for 2024 National Book Award in the category for Translated literature and the Sharjah Prize for Women’s Literature in 2021. Her recent novel, *Dar Khala* (2024) revolves around the themes of cultural identity, gender, and postcolonial critique narrated through the lens of a Kuwaiti mother who finds herself navigating between familial and societal issues in a society with increasing Westernized influences (Al-Essa, 2024). Al-Essa’s literary contributions include ten novels and two non-fiction works that consistently explore the complex interrelation between personal and national identity, particularly in the rapidly evolving Kuwait’s socio-cultural dimension (Alshammari, 2019). Her 2024 novel *Dar Khawla* (*Khawla’s House*) is one of her most sophisticated works to date, yet it raises some concerns. The novel’s protagonist, Khawla demonstrates the challenges experienced by most Arab women which juggle between traditional roles and modern-day ambitions while dealing with the persistent cultural clashes instilled in Kuwait’s postcolonial and colonial historical experiences (Midday, 2022). Presenting Khawla’s domestic struggles whether it’s her son’s Westernized approach or her intellectual hesitance in regards to cultural homogenization, Al-Essa built a strong representation involving Kuwait’s identity issues (Al-Essa, 2024). The novel’s thematic ranges encompass gender performativity, linguistic preservation, and critiques of “soft colonialism” which collectively demand increased scholarly attention to exploring the intersection of local specificity and global feminist and postcolonial discourses (Bhabha, 2012; Butler, 2022).

Current literature discussing Al-Essa’s work demonstrates valuable yet limited interaction with her literary works. The phenomenological study of Khalisa Bruni’s (2017) of Al-Essa’s work *The Rain Bard* nuanced outlooks on how the novel treats the concepts of alienation and psychological distress specifically through its examination of spatial metaphors and bodily experiences. Psychological dimensions of Al-Essa’s work were the focus of Bruni’s study where she employs the lens of trauma for the analysis of experiences of nostalgia and fragmentation in her work. This prioritization of individual affect rather than structural context results in overseeing the actual sociopolitical dimensions that shape these personal crises specifically on their cultural value (Bruni, 2017). Bruni’s study’s sole focus on universal human emotion was in contrast to assess Al-Essa’s character formation which is deeply embedded in historical forces such as Kuwait’s post-Gulf War transformations along with their continuous negotiations with Western cultural influences (Alshammari, 2019). Another structural analysis in Al-Essa’s work regarding violence was studied by Dalal Al-Maliki (2023) from the perspective of narrative content from traditional thematic analysis. Al-Maliki efficiently highlighted that Al-Essa’s fiction demonstrates architectural spaces to be considered places for



gendered oppression where domestic environments are often represented as representatives of patriarchal control. While analyzing the environment created within Al-Essa's work such as locked rooms and divided households, she observed them to be reflection of psychological challenges experienced by the protagonists' females (Al-Maliki, 2023). However, there was formalist approach utilized throughout the analysis which failed its ability to contextualize those findings in wider themes which answers about cultural identity or resistance by those characters. For example, the confinement of female characters, as discussed by Al-Maliki could potentially interconnect with Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity or Frantz Fanon's scholarship on colonial configuration which helps in bridging literary analysis with postcolonial theory. The lack of theoretical expansion in Al-Maliki's otherwise insightful study makes it analytically isolated.

Femineity in Al-Essa's novels was studied by Mohammed Aliazam Middy (2022) which is considered a landmark move for building a better understanding of her work's gender-conscious reading. Middy accurately observed and pinpointed that AL-Essa's work consistently portrayed the destabilization of the patriarchal norm and encouraged female agency especially representing it through intellectual women which are often seen challenging traditional gender expectations (Middy, 2022). However, her character's resistance being framed solely as individual acts against personal or societal oppression downplays the wider cultural and collective aspects of Al-Essa's feminist vision (Butler, 2022). Middy's analysis might have been strengthened through the use of Judith Butler's (2022) observation of gender being a representation of culturally tailored performance which would enable researchers to examine how Al-Essa's work acts both ways by producing and resisting gendered norms, particularly in the cultural context of Kuwait. This oversight marks a significant gap in thorough comprehension of how performative writing in Al-Essa's work not only structures but also limits gendered identity.

Given the literature analyzing Al-Essa's works, several conference proceedings and regional literary reviews report the receptive dimension of Al-Essa's stylistic novelty and thematic arches but often lack a theoretical understanding of how her aesthetic choices operate as a form of cultural resistance. While some reviewers welcome her use of lyrical prose in conjunction with classical Arabic motifs, they fail to critically evaluate how these elements act as strategies of subversion. Similarly, her initiatives Takween and the Kuwait Library are perceived as her cultural contribution instead of her wider feminist inclination and intellectual project fostered through her fiction. These gaps result in her scholarship being widely disintegrated where each study provides critical but isolated insights that demand to be synthesized accordingly through a critical framework.

This overview highlights a striking irregularity where existing studies fail to examine how her female characters negotiate identity at the junction of gender performativity and postcolonial cultural fluidity, which is the main concern of the present study. While current literature deals with the psychological, spatial, or gendered aspects of Al-Essa's work solely, this study proposes a more integrative approach by positioning her narrative among transnational feminist and postcolonial discourses. To bridge



these literature gaps, this study employs a qualitative textual analysis which is supported by theoretical frameworks such as Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Susan Stanford Friedman's (1998) feminist narrative and Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity. The purpose of these theoretical frameworks is to analyze the resistance of Dar Khawla by challenging the patriarchal and colonial imposition while demonstrating linguistic cultural autonomy for a structured and thorough understanding. The findings underscore the novels critique of "soft colonialism" which was challenged by its protagonist female character specially against Westernized education and consumerism simultaneously highlighting its circular structure of narrative comprising of intertextual properties like references from classical Arab poets i.e. Al-Ma'arri which diminish linear and male-dominated authorships.

Finally, this paper makes three key contributions. First, it ties Butler's performativity theory to Kuwaiti feminist literature which will demonstrate how the cultural script shapes and is contestation through gendered behaviors. Second, through the application of Bhabha's theory of hybridity, it examines the "museumification" of Arab identity under globalization, portrayed as a generational conflict in Al-Essa's work. Third, it underscores the novel's strategic use of the narrative-lyric hybrid model to pronounce marginalized voices in alignment with Friedman's (1998) model of feminist discursive resistance. By analyzing these dimensions, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of Arab women's literary course as both a place for resistance and a medium for cultural preservation.

## Methodology

### Study Design

This study utilized a qualitative literary analysis for evaluation of dynamics such as gender, cultural identity and feminist discourse in the literary work of Bothayna Al-Essa's Dar Khawla.

Textual analysis approach combined with critical theory was employed for the exploration of novel's narrative techniques, thematic concerns and socio-political critiques. Analytical strategy followed a through reading of Dar Khawla while focusing on themes such as gender performativity, cultural hybridity and colonial structures. It also employed interdisciplinary framework techniques to draw narrative from feminist theories of Judith Butler, Susan Stanford Friedman, postcolonial theories of Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall, and literary theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva.

### Data Collection

Dar Khawla (2024) was chosen as a primary source of text. While secondary sources included scholarly works in various domains such as gender studies, postcolonialism, and narrative theory to support the analysis. Additional insights were supplemented through interviews, essays and past works of Al-Essa related to her subject-driven fixation.



### Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis was used for the identification of recurring themes such as language, identity crisis and soft colonialism. A discourse analysis was also utilized for the evaluation of how Al-Essa merges poetic and narrative discourse in undermining patriarchal norms. Additionally, intertextuality was also assessed to locate references to Arabic literary traditions and Western theorists for the assessment of cultural dialogue.

Theoretical frameworks such as Butler, Bhabha, Hall and Bakhtin were also utilized for the analysis of characters' gendered behaviors, exploration of tensions between Kuwaiti heritages and Western influences and the polyphonic voices within studies.

### Ethical Consideration

The study strongly relied on publicly available texts and scholarly critiques to avoid misrepresentation of Al-Essa's intent. Furthermore, translation of Arabic passages (wherever applicable) was credited to their original translators or demonstrated by the researcher with transparency.

### Results and Discussion

Thematic Analysis revealed three recurring themes within Al-Essa's *Dar Khawla*, The conception of cultural differences and hybridity, gender asymmetry and female language and identity and representation of poetic and narrative elements in female discourse.

### Gender Performativity and Female Identity Construction

Butler's work indicates that gender identities impose confining roles that restrict and shame individuals. Her dramatic language conveys hope for broadening gender possibilities without imposing prescriptive outcomes (Butler, 2022). This viewpoint has revitalized queer theory, contesting limiting gender identities and influencing areas like gender and sexuality studies, as well as literary and translation studies. Although 'Gender Trouble' does not explicitly tackle translation, the notion of gender performativity provides a distinctive perspective on the subject. Similar to drag, translation engages in theatrical repetition that interrogates social norms. By highlighting its citational nature, translation can enhance and challenge standard expectations across genders and cultures (Bermann, 2014). Butler's discourse on gender correlates with Al-Essa's work.

*Dar Khawla* begins with a quote from a renowned Arab philosopher, poet, and writer, Abu al-Ala al-Ma'arri, symbolizing the voice of scholarship and intellect. He says (Al-Essa, 2024) :



I am like a word in the tongue of time  
Which included things in the distance  
The time repeats me to understand me, men.  
You also repeated a restored meaning

The irony in these verses is striking, as they reveal a positive transformation that occurs through imprisonment—a situation that typically evokes feelings of darkness, anger, or bitterness. Instead, these prisons become spaces for personal liberation, helping the speaker move away from worldly entanglements and freeing him from an obsession with society's harshness. Rather than constricting his spirit, this confinement broadens his mind and sharpens his philosophical insights( Abu-Al-Alala, 2021).

Al-Essa resists anything that constrains her freedom, particularly the dominance exerted by her son Youssef. She writes, 'Youssef tries to control her in a manner typical of an Eastern man, striving to confine her within the boundaries he has set, mainly restricting her role to the kitchen' (Al-Essa,2024).

The quotation from al-Ma'arri is essential for understanding the novel's more profound layers of narrative. The characters of the mother, 'Khawla', and her home, 'Dar', represent a parallel dimension of meaning, requiring the reader to recognize the tension between what is seen and what is unseen. The narrative's circular structure enhances this complexity by blending philosophical concepts such as fate, choice, and existential reparation. Lacking a clear beginning or end, the story moves in a circular manner, suggesting that the characters are trapped in a loop of recurring themes and choices.

### **Cultural Identity and Resistance to Patriarchal/Colonial Perspectives**

Bhabha stresses the significance of narrative analysis in examining the nation concept. This method considers aspects like national language, rhetoric, and the nation's evolving ideologies, influenced by historical contexts. He analyzes how these narratives contribute to the formation of new cultural identities (Bhabha, 2012). The notion of 'cultural difference,' as discussed by Bhabha (Bhabha, 2012), aligns with Hall's cultural identity theory (Hall, 2015) and is pertinent to Al-Essa's work, which conveys cultural diversity and transformation. Al-Essa (2024) regards her cultural background and the diversity of her ideas as integral to her identity shaped during the U.S. Army's liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in 1991. While some label her as an anarchist or extremist, others view her as an Islamic fundamentalist.

The novel critiques the 'collective cloning' of the younger generation, offering a nuanced perspective on the cultural and intellectual effects of 'soft colonialism'. This concept refers to an infiltration not through force but ideology, which subtly distorts cultural identity and promotes superficial imitation rather than genuine progress. Al-



Essa discusses the idea of ‘Transforming Identities into Museum Objects’, highlighting her son's diverse identities and how they are influenced by colonisers' identities more than national identity (Al-Essa, 2024).

The writer displays an image of her son ‘Nasser’. She says (Al-Essa, 2024):

He wore a black shirt adorned with an image of a monkey donning an upside-down red dome. Below that, his orange shorts clung halfway up his glossy, hairy thighs, stirring a wave of nausea deep within her. She understood she no longer possessed the ability to belong or not belong, not just because she was denied the role of his mother but because the devastating events of the past still loomed. She was unwilling to shatter the fragile truce between them.

This passage highlights the colonized influences of American culture that the protagonist rejects. The American fashion trends that infiltrated her society contributed to the emergence of a superficial generation, which she described as the ‘Slumber of critical thinking, proudly flaunting its layered ignorance as though it were a Harvard credential’ (Al-Essa, 2024).

Khawla discusses the disdain for ‘altaşabi wa alt’mruk’, where altaşabi refers to behaving like the youth, and alt’mruk signifies the adoption of American morals and customs. She articulates her thoughts in a sarcastic tone (Al-Essa, 2024):

Al-Essa (2024) conveys the cultural influences on Khawla, her protagonist, through

That morning, Khawla reflected on how "altaşabi wa alt’mruk" were synchronized, a realization that resonated deeply with her as she saw traces of alt’mruk entangled in the very wealth and status she once cherished. With a sense of irony, she highlighted the symbols of her former achievements—the honorary medals, the artifacts of a career-long

various terminologies. She expresses, ‘Westernization, imperialism, and modernism—not through references to Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, or Hegel, but by engaging with thoughtful thinkers like Foucault, Edward Said, Mohamed Abed Al-Jabri, Frantz Fanon, and Mohammed Arkoun. She does not admire Baudelaire's, Paul Valéry's, or Adonis's poetry, favoring instead the writings of Antara bin Shaddad, Al-Ma'arri, Ibn al-Farid, Muthaffar al-Nauab, and the raw eloquence of pre-Islamic poets. To what extent must one delve into this shared linguistic heritage?’.

The author emphasizes Khawla's worries about her children's education in international English schools and how this trend could jeopardize the Arabic language. Khawla is concerned about the effects of subtle cultural colonialism, fearing that identities—especially Kuwaiti national identity—might be diminished to mere artifacts in a museum. Al-Essa highlights the necessity of preserving her children's Arabic language and cultural identity. In a dialogue, Nasser asks, ‘Where is Hamad?’ She shrugs, explaining Hamad's tardiness. Nasser sarcastically comments on Hamad's exaggerated attempts to appear foreign, noting how he mispronounces the Arabic. She reflects on how others find humor in her remarks about identities potentially becoming museum relics, along with metaphors that may evolve into memes, posters,



and forms of entertainment in a leisure-oriented society, which does not resonate well with her.

### Poetic/Narrative Techniques in Female Discourse

Bakhtin categorizes the defining traits of heteroclitic novels—characterized by their linguistic and formal diversity—into three key points (Bakhtin, 1984):

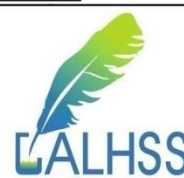
The elements of the novel's heteroglossia enhance the richness and diversity of social languages and voices expressed through various styles, merging high and low language registers. The amalgamation of different forms of social speech and personal voices in the novel encompasses a multitude of languages, poetic imagery, symbolism, dramatic elements, perspectives, character dialogues, plots, and stylistic techniques. Friedman (Friedman, 1998) investigates how the interplay of poetic and narrative discourses in female writing connects to Khawla's House novel. Al-Essa references the perspective of Khawla Bin Zaban, a figure embodying both beauty and eloquence. When a poet from Beni Fazara recited (Alamili, 1894):

Stand in Khulu's house. And ask her

The aging of her covenant and her abandonment.

Al-Essa includes a stanza highlighting Khawla Bin Zaban as a liberating figure who engages in dialogues with men. The author merges lyrical and narrative elements to express female identity and voice. Bakhtin argues that 'intertextuality' is a fundamental aspect of the novel, marked by references to other texts that enhance the narrative. This concept spans various discourses across historical contexts and social classes, impacting readers in specific situations (Bakhtin, 1984; Liapunov & Holquist, 1990). Through intertextual references, dialogism emerges, showcasing the interconnectedness of different texts. Khawla envisions a family dinner where she imagines herself in a white cotton gown enhanced by a turquoise shawl. She humorously envisions her sons returning from the mosque in traditional Kuwaiti pristine white robes, their arms radiating as if they had just stepped out of a clichéd detergent advertisement (Al-Essa, 2024).

Feminist theory amplifies the understanding of Khawla's work by emphasizing the depiction of women as a marginalized group. By integrating poetic and narrative elements, Khawla crafts a hybrid discourse that elevates women's voices in resistance, critiques patriarchal systems, and reclaims space for female agency amid oppression. Incorporating Wendy Brown's perspective strengthens this argument by highlighting the fluidity and complexity of identity. Brown posits that women are 'produced through these discourses' instead of being merely oppressed by them, which resonates with Friedman's concepts (Brown, 1997; Friedman, 1998). Together, these theorists reveal how feminist long poems defy simplistic identity classifications, celebrating their contingent and historically sensitive nature (Brown, 1997). Since female discourse cannot be restricted to one form—be it gender, class, or race—it expresses itself through diverse forms and discourses.



## Conclusions

Al-Essa's work blends poetic and narrative elements to create a hybrid discourse that amplifies women's voices in defiance of marginalisation. This approach enables her to articulate women's struggles and experiences, effectively challenging dominant patriarchal narratives and ideologies. The notion of 'cultural difference', as examined by Bhabha and Hall's theory of cultural identity holds relevance to Al-Essa's scholarly contributions, which articulate the themes of cultural diversity and evolution. Al-Essa regards her cultural upbringing and the plurality of her perspectives as fundamental components of her identity. Although some characterise her as an anarchist or extremist, others interpret her stance as representative of Islamic fundamentalism. The novel comments on the 'collective cloning' of younger generations, offering a nuanced perspective on the cultural and intellectual consequences of "soft colonialism." This concept refers to ideological infiltration that subtly distorts cultural identity, promoting superficial imitation rather than authentic development. Her portrayal of Kuwaiti national identity reveals complex engagements with themes of identity and cultural diversity. She emphasizes preserving the Arabic language and cultural identity for future generations. Feminist theory enriches our understanding of Khawla's oeuvre by highlighting the portrayal of women as a marginalised demographic. Through intertextuality, Al-Essa employs female-centred discourse to address social and intellectual issues, giving voice to diverse female perspectives.

## Study Limitation

The central focus of study on Dar Khawla may overlook the dynamic nature of Al-Essa's thematic arc through her diverse literary oeuvre. The emphasis of study mainly on Kuwaiti identity and Arabic literary traditions may limit its generalizability to broader feminist or postcolonial contexts. While Dar Khawla is a relatively recent work, its literary or long-term cultural effects may not yet be understood properly.

## Future Recommendation

Comparing Al-Essa's work to other contemporary Arab feminist writers and expanding analysis to her other creations will provide useful insights into the evolving mindset of the authors. Mixed-Method approaches will also prove beneficial in the assessment of cultural and gender norms within Kuwaiti readers with respect to the novel.

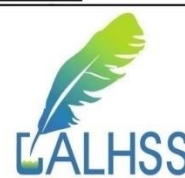
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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

### Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest

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### Research involving Human Participants and/or Animals

This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by the author.

### Informed consent

I confirm that the author has agreed with the content of this manuscript and has given consent to submit it to this journal.

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