

Gender Dynamics and Desire in Nizar Qabbani's Poetry: Between Liberation and Objectification

Abstract

Nizar Qabbani (1923–1998) remains one of the most influential and contested figures in modern Arabic literature, widely celebrated for his bold exploration of love, eroticism, and gender dynamics. This study critically examines how Qabbani's poetry employs eroticism as a literary and political tool to challenge patriarchal norms and articulate female desire. Drawing on Feminist Literary Criticism, Postcolonial Theory, and Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic power and habitus, the paper analyzes key poems across Qabbani's career, including *The Brunette Told Me* (1944), *Childhood of a Breast* (1954), and *The Journal of an Indifferent Woman* (1968). The analysis reveals that Qabbani's work constitutes a revolutionary intervention against moral hypocrisy and the repression of desire, it simultaneously reproduces aspects of the masculine gaze and limits female subjectivity to the frame of romantic love. The study also identifies unresolved contradictions in his use of female personae and erotic imagery. It concludes that Qabbani's legacy endures as a partial but significant site of cultural resistance, recommending comparative research with female Arab poets, reception studies, and theoretically informed readings that move beyond celebration or condemnation.

Keywords: Nizar Qabbani, Arabic poetry, Eroticism, Gender, Feminism, Literary Resistance, Symbolic power.

1. Introduction

The Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani (1923–1998) occupies an anomalous position in modern Arabic letters: widely embraced as a popular voice of intimate sentiment yet systematically challenged by literary establishments for his transgressive treatment of sexuality and gender (Oxford Bibliographies, 2020). Described as having established his own "republic" of poetry wherein Arab masses found reflection of their innermost feelings (al-Kalali, cited in Ma, 2024, p. 2), Qabbani's work traverses the intimate and the political with deliberate provocation. His poetic career, spanning five decades, defies simple categorization, moving from the erotic lyricism of collections such as *Qālat lī al-Samrā'* (*The Brunette Told Me*, 1944) to the searing political indictments following the 1967 Six-Day War, a period after which, as Nurwansyah (2024, p. 1) notes, Qabbani transformed "from a poet who wrote passionate love poems into a poet who wrote with a knife."

Central to Qabbani's poetic vision is his sustained, often contradictory, engagement with women's lives and oppression. A formative biographical event—the contested death of his sister at age fifteen—crystallized into a lifelong poetic mission to "fight the social conditions he saw as causing her death" (Oxford Bibliographies, 2020). This mission positioned Qabbani as, in the words of one reviewer, "a heroic champion of women's rights" who equates "beauty and eroticism with liberty and justice" (Seaman, cited in *On Entering the Sea*, n.d.). Yet beneath this celebration lies scholarly debate: does Qabbani's poetry genuinely empower women, or does it merely reposition them within a new framework of male desire? Recent scholarship has begun to address this tension

through ecofeminist (Gazar, 2024), comparative (Ma, 2022), and critical discourse analytic lenses (Nurwansyah, 2024), but no study to date has systematically integrated feminist, postcolonial, and Bourdieusian frameworks to examine the full arc of his career.

This article addresses that gap by providing a critical literary analysis of love, eroticism, and gender dynamics across Qabbani's oeuvre. Drawing on feminist criticism, postcolonial theory, and Bourdieusian sociology, it argues that Qabbani's work constitutes a revolutionary but incomplete intervention—one that successfully challenges patriarchal taboos while remaining constrained by the very habitus it seeks to transform.

1.1. Research Questions

This study addresses the following three questions:

1. How does Nizar Qabbani's poetry construct female subjectivity and desire, and to what extent does it challenge or reproduce patriarchal structures?
2. In what ways do love and politics intersect in Qabbani's poetry, and how does this intersection shape his representation of gender?
3. What tensions and contradictions characterize Qabbani's use of female personae and erotic imagery across his career?

1.2 Objectives

The objectives of this research are:

1. To analyze the construction of female subjectivity in Qabbani's poetry through close reading of key texts.
2. To examine the integration of love and politics in Qabbani's work and its implications for understanding his gender politics.
3. To identify and theorize the tensions and contradictions in Qabbani's representation of women and gender relations.

1.3 Research Gaps

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, significant gaps remain. First, no study to date has systematically integrated feminist, postcolonial, and Bourdieusian frameworks to analyze Qabbani's gender politics. Second, existing feminist readings tend to focus on a relatively small number of poems. Third, the relationship between Qabbani's gender politics and his engagement with classical Arabic poetic traditions has received insufficient attention. Fourth, the potential of other contemporary theoretical frameworks—including intersectionality, queer theory, and affect theory—remains largely unexplored.

2. Literature Review

Early scholarship on Qabbani was predominantly biographical, seeking to explain his poetic themes through the lens of personal experience. Al-Shahham's (1989) doctoral dissertation, *Political Poetry of Nizar Qabbani: A Critical Study and Translation*, remains foundational, tracing connections between Qabbani's diplomatic career, his personal tragedies (particularly the death of his sister and later his second wife Balqis), and the evolution of his political poetry. Al-Shahham argues that Qabbani's shift from love poetry to political poetry after 1967 was not an abandonment of earlier concerns but a deepening of them, as the personal and political became increasingly inseparable.

Jayyusi's introductions to several English translations of Qabbani's work (cited in Ma, 2024) emphasize his role as "the most popular poet in the Arab world" and his capacity to give voice to collective Arab sentiments. This assessment, while accurate regarding Qabbani's reception, tends toward hagiography, celebrating Qabbani without sustained critical engagement with tensions in his gender politics. A substantial body of scholarship examines Qabbani's political poetry, particularly his responses to the 1967 Six-Day War and the Lebanese Civil War. Nurwansyah (2024) employs critical discourse analysis to examine "Hawāmisī alā Daftar al-Naksah" (Marginal Notes on the Notebook of Defeat), arguing that Qabbani diagnoses Arab political failure as rooted in cultural repression, including the repression of women and desire. Nurwansyah demonstrates how Qabbani uses the intimate address of love poetry to articulate political critique. However, his focus is primarily political rather than gendered; he notes Qabbani's critique of women's oppression as one element of a broader civilizational diagnosis but does not subject this critique to feminist scrutiny.

Mohammed (2017) provides the most sustained feminist critique to date in *Women in Nizar Qabbani's Poetry*. Drawing on Kate Millett, Joanna Russ, and Sherry Ortner, Mohammed argues that Qabbani's poetry, despite its explicit advocacy for women's liberation, reproduces patriarchal structures through its idealization of limiting beauty standards, its reduction of women to lovers, and its occasional assertions of male sexual prerogative. Mohammed's reading of "To a Visitor" as evidence of Qabbani's persistence of the masculine gaze is particularly compelling.

Assadi and Joudallah (2024) offer a comparative pragmatic analysis of Qabbani's female personae versus voices of his contemporary female poets (including Nazik al-Malaika and Fadwa Tuqan). They argue that Qabbani's female personae successfully articulate women's suffering but that comparison with actual women poets reveals what Qabbani cannot or will not represent: female anger, female solidarity, and female desire not oriented toward men.

Ma's work (2022, 2024) represents an important contribution to comparative and translation studies. Ma's doctoral dissertation (2022) compares Qabbani's *The Journal of an Indifferent Woman* with the poetry of Chinese poet Zhai Yongming, arguing that both poets "speak for voiceless women" through strategies of ventriloquism. Ma (2024) also examines Qabbani's translation theory, noting his initial resistance to having his poetry translated and his eventual acceptance of selected translations.

Gazar (2024) applies Maria Mies's ecofeminist "subsistence perspective" to Qabbani's poetry, arguing that his work presents "a non-hierarchical view of nature, women and men" that challenges

patriarchal structures of domination (p. 68). Gazar reads Qabbani's nature imagery as establishing correspondence rather than hierarchy between women and the natural world.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives.

Feminist Literary Criticism. Drawing on Showalter (1979), who distinguished between feminist critique (analyzing women's representation in male-authored texts) and gynocriticism (examining women's writing), this research employs feminist critique to interrogate how Qabbani's poetic speaker constructs female subjectivity. Arab feminist perspectives, particularly El Saadawi's (1980) theorization of patriarchal oppression in Arab societies, situate this construction within specific patriarchal class systems.

Postcolonial Theory. Said's (1978) analysis of Orientalist exoticization of Arab sexuality complicates Qabbani's project: he writes simultaneously against Western stereotypes and indigenous repressive traditions. Fanon's (1963) insistence that genuine national liberation requires transformation of all social relations illuminates why Qabbani's love poetry cannot be separated from his political poetry.

Pierre Bourdieu's Concepts. Bourdieu's (1991) notion of symbolic power—the capacity to construct reality through language—illuminates Qabbani's attempt to reclassify women's bodies and desires from sites of shame to sites of legitimate celebration. Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus—the embodied dispositions that reproduce social structures—helps explain the persistence of patriarchal patterns even in a poet consciously committed to women's liberation.

2.2 Methodology

The research employs qualitative textual analysis based on Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis (CDA). Primary data consist of Qabbani's published poetry collections from 1944 to 1990, selected via purposive sampling based on thematic relevance, chronological distribution, and cultural significance. Both Arabic originals and authoritative English translations were consulted.

Analysis proceeded through three phases aligned with Fairclough's three-dimensional model: (1) textual analysis of vocabulary, grammar, and structure; (2) discursive practice analysis examining intertextuality with classical Arabic love poetry traditions; and (3) social practice analysis situating poems within broader power struggles over gender in Arab societies.

Analytical categories employed include: construction of female subjectivity; erotic imagery and symbolism; gender relations and power dynamics; intersections of personal and political; tensions and contradictions; and poetic voice and authority.

3. Analysis: Love, Eroticism, and Gender Dynamics

3.1 The Revolutionary Erotic: Reclaiming the Female Body

Qabbani's early work deliberately breached poetic decorum. *The Brunette Told Me* (1944) and *Childhood of a Breast* (1954) earned him a reputation for daring through frank treatment of female anatomy and desire. In "The Bosom Lift," he explicitly challenges concealment culture:

"Take off your bras and be gentle on your breast / Because the lace bra might hurt its feeling / This that you have over exaggerated in hiding / Is the most precious thing that came out of this world" (Qabbani, cited in Mohammed, 2017).

The poem's rhetoric operates on multiple levels. Most obviously, it celebrates the female body and criticizes the social imperative to hide it. But the reference to the bra potentially "hurting its feeling" anthropomorphizes the breast, attributing to it a sensitivity that mirrors women's own oppression. The body becomes metonymic for the person—both suffer under constraints that claim to protect them. Crucially, this eroticism is never merely personal. As one reviewer notes, Qabbani's poetry equates "beauty and eroticism with liberty and justice" (*On Entering the Sea*, n.d.). The censorship and outrage his work provoked confirmed that erotic poetry was political: to write openly about desire was to challenge structures regulating female bodies.

However, even here tensions emerge. As Mohammed (2017) argues, the celebration of female beauty may inadvertently reproduce objectification. Qabbani's "ideal lover" possesses "two very small feet / Which resemble the speech of children" (Qabbani, cited in Mohammed, 2017)—an image that echoes beauty standards historically used to constrain women. Moreover, Qabbani "never praises women for their intelligence or success... only their beauty and body" (Mohammed, 2017, p. 13). In another poem, Qabbani writes that if his lover were not in his life, he "would have carved a woman like her" (cited in Mohammed, 2017). The Pygmalion reference is telling: the female subject is not an independent being but the projection of male desire.

3.2 Constructing Female Subjectivity: Ventriloquism and Its Limits

Qabbani's most sophisticated gender intervention appears in his adoption of female personae, particularly in *The Journal of an Indifferent Woman* (1968). Written during his diplomatic posting in Beijing, the collection uses a poetic diary form to explore female interiority rarely granted in Arabic literary tradition.

In "A Letter from a Stupid Woman," Qabbani's female speaker declares:

"Names are the silliest thing women have" (Qabbani, cited in Mohammed, 2017).

She continues:

"Your east... confiscates dreams from women's treasure chests. And it uses knives... and cleavers... to speak to women" (Qabbani, cited in Mohammed, 2017).

The violence of patriarchal speech is rendered literal. The speaker warns:

"Don't criticize me, Master. If my writing is poor. For I write and the sword is behind my door" (Qabbani, cited in Mohammed, 2017).

The "sword behind my door" is both literal threat and symbolic reminder of the violence that polices women's speech.

The poem further develops its critique of patriarchal hypocrisy:

"If a woman commits adultery she's questioned but compulsive adulterers are not / The same bed they share, but only the woman falls while the man is protected" (Qabbani, cited in Mohammed, 2017).

This double standard reveals the hollowness of claims to moral order. Qabbani laments "the double standard of Arab society" in which "If the son and the daughter commit the same sin, the parents discriminate in favor of the son" (cited in Mohammed, 2017).

As Ma (2022) argues, Qabbani's own displacement as an outsider in China enabled a deeper identification with marginalized voices, producing "a feminine text that best illustrates women's sufferings in a patriarchal society" (p. 45).

Yet ventriloquism remains problematic. Qabbani's famous declaration—"I am the founder of the first republic of poetry, whose inhabitants are mostly women" (cited in Ma, 2024, p. 2)—captures the ambiguity: a republic whose founder and ruler is a male poet, its citizens "mostly women" who remain subjects rather than full agents.

3.3 Tensions and Contradictions: The Persistence of the Masculine Gaze

The most troubling evidence appears in poems such as "To a Visitor":

"Crept unashamed from your family on your belly to my room, the poets room" (Qabbani, cited in Mohammed, 2017).

The snake imagery animalizes the woman and frames her sexuality as transgressive. The poem continues:

"Your breast is like a white rabbit leaping" (Qabbani, cited in Mohammed, 2017).

Again, animal imagery reduces the woman to something less than human. Most disturbingly:

"You, your breast is nothing if my storms shake, if my lust is mined my raging flood does not know what god allowed and what god forbade" (Qabbani, cited in Mohammed, 2017).

This passage asserts male sexual power as uncontrollable and beyond moral judgment. The woman's body becomes "nothing" when confronted with male desire.

A broader tension concerns Qabbani's construction of women primarily through the frame of romantic love. As Mohammed (2017) argues, following Joanna Russ's analysis, "the role of women in Qabbani's poetry can be seen only as a lover" (p. 12). Even in "Balqis," the elegy for his wife, Qabbani writes:

"Balqis... I will not let you die / I will carry you in my eyelids / And walk" (Qabbani, cited in Ma, 2024).

The sentiment is moving, but the grammatical structure positions the poet as the active carrier, Balqis as the passive carried. Even in death, she belongs to him.

3.4 The Integration of Love and Politics

The 1967 defeat transformed Qabbani's project. In "Marginal Notes on the Notebook of Defeat," he writes:

"In the notebook of defeat / I write: / We are a people who know how to die / But not how to love" (Qabbani, cited in Nurwansyah, 2024).

The inability to love freely is diagnosed as a civilizational failure. In the same poem:

"The women of my country / Have learned to make love / In the dark / So that the children of the next war / Will be conceived in darkness" (Qabbani, cited in Nurwansyah, 2024).

This passage is politically devastating but also positions women as vessels through which national trauma is reproduced, not as agents of resistance.

In "Balqis," Qabbani indicts both legal and religious violence:

"Balqis... they killed you with the ink of the constitution / And with the bullets of the holy war" (Qabbani, cited in Ma, 2024).

As Gazar's (2024) ecofeminist reading demonstrates, Qabbani often presents "a non-hierarchical view of nature, women and men" (p. 68). But this potential exists in tension with poems that animalize women.

4. Results

Qabbani's poetry constitutes a revolutionary intervention in Arab cultural discourse on gender. He systematically exposes patriarchal hypocrisy: the sexual double standard, the honor system that consumes women, the violence that polices female speech. His insistence that beauty and eroticism be equated with liberty and justice represents a fundamental challenge to established symbolic classifications (Bourdieu, 1991). However, the analysis also reveals that Qabbani's revolutionary strategies are limited by their own terms of engagement. The celebration of the female body, while transgressive, risks reducing women to their physicality.

The adoption of female personae successfully articulates women's suffering but raises unresolved questions about appropriation versus solidarity. As Assadi and Joudallah (2024) argue, comparative reading of Qabbani's female personae alongside poems by his female contemporaries reveals that women poets of the same era were already articulating their own oppression. The persistence of the masculine gaze is evident across Qabbani's oeuvre. The poems rarely present women speaking in their own voices without the framing of the male poet's ventriloquism.

Qabbani's post-1967 work integrates love and politics more explicitly, but this integration does not resolve the gender tensions. In "Marginal Notes on the Notebook of Defeat," women are sites upon which political conditions are inscribed, not political actors in their own right. Following Bourdieu (1990), the persistence of patriarchal patterns in Qabbani's poetry can be understood as the effect of habitus—the embodied dispositions that reproduce social structures even when actors consciously oppose them. The contradictions in his work are not personal failures but structural inevitabilities.

5. Discussion and Analysis

The analysis conducted in this study reveals that Nizar Qabbani's poetry constitutes a site of profound tension between revolutionary intention and persistent patriarchal assumption. These tensions, far from being peripheral to his project, are constitutive of it they reveal the fundamental difficulty of using poetry, a cultural form embedded within patriarchal structures, as a vehicle for feminist transformation. This discussion elaborates on the implications of the five principal findings, situating them within broader debates about literature, gender, and social change.

5.1 The Dialectics of Liberation and Objectification

The first and perhaps most significant finding of this study concerns the dialectical relationship between liberation and objectification in Qabbani's erotic poetry. Qabbani's frank celebration of the female body, exemplified in poems such as "The Bosom Lift" and "Your Nipples," represented a genuine breakthrough in Arab literary culture. By writing openly about female anatomy and desire, Qabbani challenged a cultural regime that had rendered such subjects unspeakable, subjecting generations of women to what Bourdieu (1991) would term symbolic violence, the power to impose classifications that subordinate and silence.

However, the analysis also demonstrates that this celebration of the female body operates within a framework that retains the structure of the male gaze. As Mulvey (1975) theorized in her foundational work on visual pleasure, the male gaze constructs women as objects of spectacle, defined by their appearance and their availability to male perception. Qabbani's poetry, despite its revolutionary intentions, often positions women as objects of male appreciation rather than subjects in their own right. The Pygmalion reference in his poetry, the idea that he would "carve" a woman if she did not exist, reveals a fantasy of male creation that leaves no room for female self-definition. This finding carries significant implications for understanding the possibilities and limits of male feminist writing. It suggests that even the most well-intentioned male poets may reproduce aspects of the patriarchal structures they seek to challenge, not because of personal hypocrisy but because of the structural constraints of the cultural field in which they operate.

Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus is particularly illuminating here: Qabbani, like all cultural producers, was shaped by the patriarchal dispositions of his society, his education, and his literary tradition. His poetry, no matter how transgressive, could not fully escape these conditioning forces.

The implication for feminist cultural criticism is that we must resist both hagiographic celebration and dismissive condemnation. Qabbani is neither a flawless feminist hero nor a mere patriarchal apologist. His work offers genuine resources for feminist transformation, a language for speaking desire, a critique of patriarchal hypocrisy, a vision of love as liberation, while also revealing how deeply patriarchal structures shape even the most resistant cultural production.

5.2 Ventriloquism and the Politics of Speaking For

The second major finding concerns Qabbani's use of female personae, particularly in *The Journal of an Indifferent Woman*. This collection represents Qabbani's most sustained attempt to represent female subjectivity from within, adopting a woman's voice to articulate experiences of oppression, frustration, and desire. The analysis confirms Ma's (2022) argument that Qabbani succeeds in producing "a feminine text that best illustrates women's sufferings in a patriarchal society" (p. 45). The poems in this collection capture dimensions of female experience the fear of speaking, the violence that polices women's lives, the claustrophobia of limited horizons—with remarkable precision.

However, the analysis also raises fundamental questions about the politics of ventriloquism. When a male poet speaks in a woman's voice, does he empower or appropriate? The question resists simple answers. On one hand, in a cultural context where women's voices have been systematically silenced, the very act of giving voice to female experience has progressive potential. Qabbani's poems may create discursive space for actual women to eventually speak, providing a model of female self-expression and a critique of the conditions that prevent it.

On the other hand, ventriloquism carries significant risks. As Assadi and Joudallah (2024) demonstrate, comparison of Qabbani's female personae with poems by his female contemporaries reveals what Qabbani cannot or will not represent. His women rarely express anger, rarely form solidarities with other women, rarely desire anything beyond romantic love. The "indifferent woman" of the title, while refusing the emotional economy of patriarchy, remains largely defined by her relationship to men. She is indifferent to what men expect, but she is not yet autonomous.

This finding resonates with broader debates in feminist theory about the politics of representation. Spivak's (1988) question "Can the subaltern speak?" reminds us that the act of speaking for others carries risks of appropriation. When the subaltern is spoken for by those in positions of power, her voice may be co-opted rather than liberated. Qabbani's ventriloquism, however well-intentioned, operates within this problematic dynamic. His "republic of poetry," as he called it, has a founder and a sovereign—the male poet—whose authority to represent women is never fully questioned.

The implication for contemporary feminist cultural practice is the importance of creating space for actual women's voices rather than simply speaking for them. Qabbani's poetry provides resources that can be used in this project—a language for speaking desire, a critique of patriarchal hypocrisy—but it cannot substitute for women's own self-representation. A feminist literary culture must attend to both the possibilities and the limits of male feminist writing.

5.3 Love as Political Discourse and Its Gendered Limits

The third major finding concerns the integration of love and politics in Qabbani's poetry. The analysis confirms that the 1967 defeat marked a significant evolution in his work, but not a simple break. Rather than abandoning love poetry for political poetry, Qabbani increasingly integrated the two, deploying the language of desire as a vocabulary for political critique. This integration represents one of Qabbani's most significant poetic innovations.

In poems such as "Marginal Notes on the Notebook of Defeat," Qabbani diagnoses Arab political failure as inseparable from the repression of life, desire, and freedom. The inability to love freely becomes a symptom and a cause of civilizational crisis. This analysis has genuine power: it connects the personal to the political, the intimate to the structural, in ways that resonate with feminist arguments about the personal as political. Qabbani's insistence that the repression of desire is linked to the repression of political freedom has radical implications.

However, the analysis also reveals a gendered limit to this integration. In Qabbani's political poetry, women are often sites upon which political conditions are inscribed rather than political actors in their own right. In "Marginal Notes," women's bodies become vessels through which national trauma is reproduced: "The women of my country / Have learned to make love / In the dark / So that the children of the next war / Will be conceived in darkness" (Qabbani, cited in Nurwansyah, 2024). This passage is politically devastating but positions women as victims of history, not agents of change. This finding suggests that even when Qabbani integrates love and politics most successfully, his representation of women remains constrained by the limits of his imagination. The same poet who can write with devastating clarity about the sexual double standard cannot quite imagine women as revolutionaries. His women are beloved, mourned, celebrated, and oppressed—but rarely are they leaders, fighters, or autonomous political actors.

The implication for understanding the relationship between poetry and social change is significant. Qabbani's work demonstrates that poetry can critique patriarchal structures and imagine alternative possibilities. However, it also demonstrates that cultural production is constrained by the social conditions in which it emerges. Even the most radical poet cannot fully imagine what has not yet come into being. The task of feminist cultural work is not only to critique but also to imagine—to create visions of gender relations that have not yet existed.

5.4 The Habitus of Patriarchy and Its Constraints

The fourth major finding concerns the structural persistence of patriarchal patterns in Qabbani's work. Following Bourdieu (1990), the analysis has demonstrated that the contradictions in Qabbani's gender politics can be understood as effects of habitus—the embodied dispositions that reproduce social structures even when actors consciously oppose them. Qabbani grew up in a patriarchal society, was educated in patriarchal institutions, read and was influenced by a male-dominated literary tradition. His very language carries patriarchal assumptions. Arabic, like many languages, has gendered structures that position the male as the universal. To expect Qabbani to have fully transcended these conditions would be to misunderstand how habitus operates. The contradictions in his work are not personal failures but structural inevitabilities.

This finding has implications for understanding the relationship between individual agency and social structure in cultural production. While Qabbani exercised considerable agency in challenging taboos and developing new poetic forms, his agency operated within constraints he could not fully escape. The poet who would challenge patriarchy must do so from within a patriarchal culture, using language shaped by patriarchal assumptions, addressing readers formed by patriarchal socialization. Complete transcendence of these conditions is impossible; partial resistance, with all its contradictions, is the only available option. The implication for feminist literary criticism is the importance of attending to both individual agency and structural constraint. We should neither celebrate Qabbani as if he had fully escaped patriarchal conditioning nor condemn him as if his limitations were merely personal failings. Instead, we should read his work as a site of struggle, not only between the poet and his society but within the poet himself. The contradictions in his work reveal real contradictions in Arab societies and in the project of cultural transformation itself.

5.5 Ecofeminist Possibilities and Their Ambivalences

The fifth finding concerns the ecofeminist dimensions of Qabbani's work. Following Gazar (2024), the analysis has shown that Qabbani's nature imagery often establishes non-hierarchical correspondences between women and the natural world, challenging the logic of domination underlying both gender inequality and environmental exploitation. This ecofeminist potential represents another dimension of Qabbani's revolutionary intervention. In poems where nature imagery establishes correspondence rather than hierarchy, Qabbani imagines forms of relationship that escape the logic of mastery that governs both patriarchal gender relations and capitalist exploitation of the environment. The beloved is not a passive landscape to be possessed but a living presence with whom the speaker seeks connection. She is like nature because both she and nature are valuable, beautiful, and worthy of celebration.

However, the analysis also reveals that this ecofeminist potential exists in tension with poems that animalize women. In "To a Visitor," the snake and rabbit imagery does not establish respectful correspondence between human and natural worlds but reduces the woman to something less than human, something that can be dismissed or controlled. Qabbani's nature imagery serves multiple, contradictory functions. This finding suggests the importance of reading Qabbani's nature imagery in context. Ecofeminist readings that select poems supporting their argument while downplaying countervailing evidence risk overstating Qabbani's consistency. A more adequate reading must attend to the multiple functions of nature imagery across his oeuvre, acknowledging both its liberatory potential and its hierarchical uses.

5.6 Implications for Feminist Literary Criticism and Cultural Practice

The findings of this study carry significant implications for feminist literary criticism and cultural practice.

The study demonstrates the value of integrating Bourdieu's concepts with feminist and postcolonial frameworks for analyzing gender in Arabic poetry. The concept of habitus explains why Qabbani's poetry reproduces patriarchal patterns despite explicit feminist intentions; the concept of symbolic power explains how his poetry challenges established classifications; and postcolonial theory

situates this challenge within broader cultural struggles. This integrated approach may prove useful for scholars examining other male feminist writers from patriarchal cultural contexts. It also underscores the importance of reading with critical bifocality—attending to both revolutionary potential and persistent limitation. Feminist criticism must resist both the temptation to celebrate male feminist writers as heroes and the temptation to condemn them as irredeemably patriarchal. Instead, it must trace both the possibilities and the limits of cultural production as a site of resistance.

In addition, this study has implications for how Qabbani's poetry should be taught. Educators should resist both hagiographic celebration and dismissive condemnation, encouraging students to engage critically with the full complexity of their work. Pairing Qabbani's poems with those of Arab women poets, with feminist theoretical texts, and with women's autobiographical writings would enable students to hear both what Qabbani captures and what escapes his frame. Contemporary Arab feminists engaging Qabbani's legacy should claim his achievements while critically interrogating his limitations. His poetry provides resources—a language for speaking desire, a critique of patriarchal hypocrisy, a vision of love as liberation—but these resources must be transformed, developed, and supplemented by women's own voices and visions.

5.7 The Theoretical Contribution of This Study

This study makes several theoretical contributions. By integrating feminist criticism, postcolonial theory, and Bourdieu's sociology, it develops an analytical framework that can address the full complexity of Qabbani's poetic project. This framework demonstrates that the tensions in Qabbani's work are not merely textual ambiguities to be resolved but structural inevitability to be understood.

The study also contributes to broader theoretical conversations about the relationship between literature and social change. Qabbani's case demonstrates both the possibilities and the limits of poetry as a vehicle for feminist transformation. Poetry can challenge hegemonic classifications, articulate alternative possibilities, and mobilize readers for transformation. However, poetry operates within fields of cultural production structured by existing power relations. The poet who would challenge patriarchy must do so from within a patriarchal culture, using language shaped by patriarchal assumptions, addressing readers formed by patriarchal socialization.

Finally, the study contributes to debates about male feminist writing. Qabbani's case suggests that male feminist writing can be genuinely valuable while remaining inherently limited. Male poets can offer crucial insights into patriarchal oppression, can give voice to women's suffering, can imagine alternative possibilities. But they cannot fully substitute for women's self-representation, and their work will inevitably bear the marks of their social position. A feminist literary culture must attend to both the possibilities and the limits of male feminist writing.

5.8 Concluding Reflections on Discussion

The discussion has elaborated on the five principal findings of this study, demonstrating that Qabbani's poetry constitutes a site of profound tension between liberation and objectification, ventriloquism and empowerment, love and politics, agency and constraint. These tensions, far

from being weaknesses in his work, are what make it valuable for feminist criticism. They reveal the difficulties of cultural transformation, the persistence of patriarchal structures even in resistant cultural production, and the importance of critical reading that attends to complexity. Qabbani's republic of poetry offers more freedom than the actual Arab world, but it is not yet a space of genuine gender equality. His work provides genuine resources for feminist transformation, a language for speaking desire, a critique of patriarchal hypocrisy, a vision of love as liberation, but these resources must be critically engaged, their limitations acknowledged, and their gaps supplemented by women's own voices and visions. A feminism that would build on Qabbani's achievements must also move beyond them.

6. Conclusion

Nizar Qabbani's poetry remains a living presence in Arab cultural life, shaping how millions imagine love, desire, and gender relations. This study has demonstrated that his work is characterized by profound complexity: simultaneously revolutionary in its challenge to patriarchal taboos and constrained by its embeddedness within the very structures it seeks to transform.

The central conclusion emerging from this research is that Qabbani's poetry constitutes a significant but partial intervention in Arab gender politics. His achievements include breaking taboos around representing desire; critiquing patriarchal hypocrisy with devastating precision; giving poetic expression to women's suffering and aspiration; integrating love and politics in innovative ways; and imagining alternative gender relations through the "republic of poetry." His limitations include constructing women primarily within the frame of romantic love; idealizing beauty standards that have historically constrained women; occasionally asserting masculine prerogative in ways that contradict his feminist commitments; ventriloquizing women rather than creating space for their actual voices; and remaining shaped by the patriarchal habitus he sought to transform.

A critical feminist reading must resist both hagiographic celebration and dismissive condemnation. Qabbani is neither a flawless feminist hero nor a mere patriarchal apologist. He is a poet of genuine achievement, breaking taboos, exposing hypocrisy, giving voice to suffering, but also a poet of persistent limitation. The task of scholarship is to hold both dimensions together.

7. Recommendations

Future scholarship on Qabbani should pursue several interconnected directions. Extended comparative studies of Qabbani and female Arab poets, including Nazik al-Malaika, Fadwa Tuqan, and Joumana Haddad—would illuminate both the achievements and limitations of male feminist ventriloquism, while comparative work with male feminist poets from other traditions, such as Pablo Neruda or African poets engaging gender, would reveal both the specificities of the Arab context and the commonalities of male feminist practice. Reception studies examining how actual women readers have interpreted Qabbani's poetry across generations, national contexts, and social locations would ground such analysis in lived response, and psychoanalytic, intersectional, and queer theoretical readings could reveal dimensions of his poetry that current scholarship has only

begun to suggest. Researchers should also investigate Qabbani's influence on subsequent generations of Arab poets, both male and female, and adopt digital humanities approaches to analyze his entire corpus at scale, identifying patterns across his extensive oeuvre.

In pedagogy, educators should teach Qabbani's poetry with critical bifocality, resisting both hagiographic celebration and dismissive condemnation while encouraging students to engage critically with the full complexity of his work. His poetry should be taught in dialogue with women's voices—paired with Arab women poets, feminist theoretical texts, and women's autobiographical writings about love, desire, and oppression. Historical and cultural contextualization is essential for responsible teaching, helping students understand the specific constraints under which Qabbani wrote, the taboos he challenged, and the controversies he generated. Attention to translation is likewise crucial when teaching Qabbani in non-Arabic contexts, addressing what is gained and lost in translation and how English versions shape Anglophone perceptions of his gender politics.

Finally, in cultural practice, contemporary Arab feminists engaging Qabbani's legacy should claim his achievements while critically interrogating his limitations, transforming and supplementing his resources with women's own voices and visions. Publishers and translators should continue making Qabbani's work available while also prioritizing translation of Arab women poets, balancing Qabbani's accessibility with increased attention to women's literary achievements. Cultural producers adapting his poetry for new media, musical settings, or popular culture should attend critically to his gender politics, considering how their adaptations might either reproduce or challenge the tensions identified in this research. Likewise, literary critics and cultural journalists should model nuanced public engagement with Qabbani's work, moving beyond the oscillation between uncritical celebration and wholesale dismissal that often characterizes public discourse.

8. Limitations of the Study

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, working primarily with English translations involves loss of linguistic nuance, particularly given Qabbani's sophisticated use of Arabic poetic conventions. While consultation of Arabic originals mitigates this limitation, the researcher's position as a non-native Arabic speaker imposes constraints.

Second, the vastness of Qabbani's oeuvre more than twenty volumes of poetry, required purposive sampling, and any selection of poems cannot fully represent the entirety of his work. This study focuses exclusively on textual analysis and does not investigate reader reception. Ethnographic and interview-based research with Arab women readers across generations, national contexts, and social locations would provide crucial evidence for understanding Qabbani's cultural impact. It also does not systematically compare Qabbani with his female contemporaries, though it draws on the comparative insights of other scholars. Extended comparative analysis remains a task for future research. The theoretical framework privileges Western feminist and sociological theories. While Arab feminist perspectives are incorporated, a more extensive engagement with indigenous Arab feminist thought would further enrich the analysis.

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The author is grateful to the Deanship of Scientific Research at Jadara "
"University for providing financial support for this publication.