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Special Issue:

Teaching Nineteenth-Century Literature and Gender in the Twenty-First-Century Classroom

Guest Edited by Lara Karpenko and Lauri Dietz

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### **Liberating the Classroom: The Artistic Teaching of Gender in Nineteenth-Century Literature Courses at An-Najah National University**

By [Mohammed Hamdan](#), An-Najah National University

<1> As a lecturer at An-Najah National University in Nablus City, Palestine, where famous Palestinian poet Fadwa Tuqan (1917-2002) was born, I give students the opportunity to draw parallels between the female characters they study in fiction, Tuqan, and their own experiences. Trying to establish these connections can be quite challenging to students for a number of reasons, such as religion and social traditions. However, the task of creating connections paves the way for further explorations of the possibilities and limitations of gender studies, which I encourage students to talk over in the classroom. Using the classroom as a liberating space for intellectual discussions and freedom of speech can be both constructive and deconstructive at the same time. It is true that the classroom allows students to freely express themselves regarding gender questions. Yet, it is difficult to abandon certain aspects of traditional thinking that may be at risk if the discussion is taken too far. The promising thing about classroom debate, to put it differently, is the chance it offers to students—particularly female students—to establish links between the feminine self, fictional female characters, and the real world outside. This, nonetheless, comes at the expense of self-jeopardy, as leaving traditions behind can be considered an individualistic act of treason to the collective mind. Islam, generally speaking, consolidates familial ties and a collective mode of being. Islamic societies tend to be interdependent in terms of action, behavior, and thinking. Women occupy a specific image within this Islamic collectivism, and to teach what is perhaps seen as threatening to this religious image can easily incur conflict.

<2> This paper examines the experiences and practices of teaching nineteenth-century gender studies at An-Najah National University in the West Bank, focusing on students' pedagogical reception and discussion of sexuality and gender studies in the classroom. I argue that the classroom, the first subject discussed in this paper, gives students the chance to break away from social conventions to which they are continually exposed. The classroom is treated as a space where students are pushed out of their traditional intellectual limitations via the emphasis on unbiased, free, and artistic creativity.(1)

Throughout the entire fall term of 2015, I encouraged students to think artistically, a concept that refers to innovative ways of learning that exclude memorization and the pedagogical centrality of the teacher. The concept of artistic teaching, which I discuss in the second section of the paper, means that the student's role in the classroom exceeds the mere act of listening and restricted rational thinking. In other words, students overcome the limits of their traditional social experiences by engaging with nineteenth-century literary texts via imagination, cross-cultural reading, and intuitive analysis. Artistic teaching, indeed, carries students beyond social conventions into an engaging, challenging, and unprecedented textual analysis of nineteenth-century feminist literature. The paper concludes with examples of in-class presentations where students boldly cross and question cultural borders by linking nineteenth-century texts to modern-day political, social, and economic issues in Palestine.

<3> Education in Palestine has faced problems and complex dilemmas, starting with the 1948 War that led to the rise of the State of Israel. Palestinians continue to suffer from the absence of political, social, and economic freedom. In fact, the nature of the constant political and military struggle in the Palestinian Occupied Territories has rendered the quality of education offered to male and female students at academic institutions poor and inadequate. Take, for example, the limitations that Israeli soldiers impose on the freedom of movement to Palestinian students and academics leaving for universities on a daily basis: Ali Abunimah states that "in 2006, the Council of the Israeli Academy of Sciences and Humanities decided to protest 'a practice recently instituted by the Israeli military authorities, to deny or restrict the passage of Palestinian students and scientists to their venues of academic study or research'" (28). The restriction of passage is a common practice by Israeli soldiers who are part of an organized mechanism that seeks to stultify education and silence Palestinian academic voices. Palestinian academics see this restriction as integral to the Israeli occupation, which endeavors to constantly wage war against education and freedom of speech. These academics, however, consider academic institutionalization in the Occupied Territories as a powerful, if not the most effective, mode of resistance against Israeli policies. Today, education is emphasized as one of the basic rights and tools of recouping voice and liberty among Palestinians who are represented in historical and literary texts as voiceless and powerless. As a male lecturer at An-Najah National University, I share my colleagues' belief that education and intellectual liberty still form the basis for local and international recognition of Palestinians' struggle for freedom.

<4> Throughout the history of the Palestinian struggle for liberation, the political, social, and educational roles of women have been marginalized. Yet, it is no secret that Palestinian women played a major role in the sociopolitical and academic liberation in the lives of Palestinians, and thus, must not be excluded from national recognition and social acknowledgement. The beginning of women's activism started as early as 1921 with the establishment of the Palestinian Women's Union. The Union led famous demonstrations against the British occupation and its policies, which created consistent conflicts between Palestinian Arabs and Jews at the time.<sup>(2)</sup> Palestinian women currently occupy crucial positions in the main public and private sectors, especially within universities. In spite of the immense sacrifices they have offered, there is an obvious attempt to silence women within a traditional patriarchal mechanism that aims at pushing them to the margins of history, power, and writing. Mariam Cooke compares Arab women with their Euro-American counterparts, arguing that the former "are

more than victims. They embody silence, the prohibition on language. They live apart, far from places that give space to speech. Their mouths are covered, their voices are strangled” (85). Cheryl Rubenberg also suggests that patriarchy in the West Bank is “a system for monopolizing resources, maintaining kinship status, reproducing the patriline, controlling women’s sexuality and bodies, legitimizing violence, and appropriating women’s labor” (35). It, therefore, seems that the struggle of Palestinian women is twofold: women endeavor to achieve political freedom and national unity (constantly hindered by the conflict with Israel) while at the same time striving to break the chains of patriarchal control by re-questioning gender equality, silencing, and social subjugation.

<5> Beginning with a glimpse at the historical and sociopolitical struggle of Palestinian women is necessary to understand the overall structure and purpose of this work. Providing a background of the relentless questioning of patriarchal laws and gender hegemony helps one understand the position of current female students whose opportunities in academic arenas, where such laws partially cease functioning, are far better than their predecessors. The shift from Palestinian women’s social oppression and meager academic chances to modern-day female students’ progressive and even radical learning shows real advances in social and academic reform. The subjugation of Palestinian women’s voices in the past can, thus, be brought into conversation with contemporary female students who form the majority of cohorts in the humanities colleges. An-Najah National University, like other Palestinian universities, is an ideal environment for facilitating scholarly independence and critical thinking by which students attain the agency to subvert archaic gender conventions and social canons. I must mention here that two out of the seven classes I taught in the fall term of 2015 consisted of only female students.<sup>(3)</sup> The absence of male students made female student engagement with literary texts exploring culturally sensitive issues, such as the female body, intellectual liberty, and autonomy, more comfortable and energetic. However, the fact that I am a male lecturer still makes some female students highly conscious of their answers and in-class participation. Being aware of this problem, I presented myself as a neutral participant in discussions. It is nevertheless important to note that the mere assumption of a neutral position is inadequate because a number of female students feel reserved and constrained within the presence of what they may consider a “patriarchal figure.” However, in order to make students feel more confident, I conferred my feminist reading of nineteenth-century texts by emphasizing academic discussions. I showed students that feminism and gender studies are significant approaches to reading literature, which I extensively used in writing my PhD thesis in the UK from 2011 to 2015. Female students’ confidence and trust in a male lecturer do not happen overnight: it can take months. This probationary period was necessary to become a non-threatening genderless presence in the classroom who ceased to represent the patriarchy of the society outside the classroom, someone with whom female students communicate freely without fear of repercussions for the views they express. The fact that these students became intellectually open to the shared educational process increased their awareness of the significance of their academic spaces as well as their rights on both political and personal levels.

<6> A large number of female students claim that their education is double-edged. While they generally believe that academic institutionalization in the West Bank is a necessary part of the struggle against Israel’s stultification policies, they argue that learning about nineteenth-century Euro-American gender

issues—which are alien to their oriental culture—makes them aware of their feminine identity and opens multiple intellectual horizons normally monopolized by masculine voices. The female students' opinions here are reminiscent of a Palestinian woman who revealed in an interview that “my struggle for emancipation as a Palestinian is inseparable from my struggle for genuine liberation as a woman; neither of them is valid without the other” (Shaaban 164). To reuse Tuqan as an example, the poet epitomizes this bifold trend to represent women as national fighters and social contenders. In her famous autobiography, *A Mountainous Journey* (1985 [1990]), Tuqan expresses her incompatible struggle between the quest for self-identification and increasing national demands, especially after the Six-Day War that resulted in the victory of Israel over Arab armies in 1967 and the occupation of the majority of the West Bank. Tuqan's development as a free poet and activist in later decades has pushed the issue of gender and women's social participation to the fore. Her name is still brought into academic discussions inside classrooms at Palestinian universities, especially at An-Najah National University, where she is remembered first and foremost as a prominent figure that managed to set an example of defiant feminists ready to sacrifice everything, not only for the land but also for the fulfillment of selfhood.

### **The Classroom Space: Dictation or Liberation?**

<7> One has to remember that classrooms can be paradoxical spaces where education falters between states of familiarity and alienation. Advocates of traditional education argue that classrooms must be an extension of familiar domestic spaces, where students are considered sons and daughters before they are treated as adults with free choices. Following this logic, schools and universities must take up the role of dictation where students are no more than listeners in the classroom. The one-way channeling of education releases students from in-class participation while the responsibility of education lies on the shoulders of teachers. This method is still present at An-Najah University's faculty of humanities and social sciences. Many classes and course plans do not encourage student activities beyond bringing notebooks and writing what teachers dictate without the need to communicate their own thoughts on the subject matter. Innovationists, on the other hand, argue that classrooms must be organized around a futuristic pedagogical philosophy that breaks with the past and its tenuous traditions for the sake of desired changes, improvement, and better opportunities. Classrooms, in this sense, are normally regarded as dangerous sites of self-transformation. The knowledge that students acquire, especially in feminist readings of subversive nineteenth-century literary texts, is viewed as detrimental to rigid cultural structures that strive to keep students' thinking within the terrains of religion and tradition. Ronald Glass suggests that

Classrooms that embody education as a practice of freedom cannot be made entirely safe. These learning environments are unavoidably risky in terms of the intellectual regions they engage, the emotional experiences they engender, the verbal exchanges they facilitate, and the actions they endorse. The volatile issues explored in them are among the most explosive and divisive in the culture, unearthing major fault lines that shake the foundations of meaning for individuals and society as a whole. (15)

Glass's words here can typically be applied to the context of modern-day Palestinian academic institutions and, for the sake of this paper, An-Najah National University. Some parents, particularly those who live in rural areas, are suspicious of sending their offspring to urban universities. They believe that academic environments reflect badly on their offspring's moral wellbeing. The major worry comes from parents' suspicions of the nature or type of education offered to students, particularly female students, inside classrooms. Freshmen who choose to join the faculty of humanities, especially the Departments of English and French, are normally warned that they must be ready to sacrifice some of their beliefs at the expense of "the volatile issues" discussed in the classroom. These "volatile issues" could range from the thematic exploration of theology, God, and the meaning of existence in literature to the examination of transgressive female characters whose actions create intellectual controversy between a student and her or his fellow classmates, between students and teachers, or between students and their inner selves.

<8> The potential of classrooms to engender "emotional experiences," as suggested by Glass, can be taken as evidence that the classroom functions as a liberating as well as a challenging space. To make this more concrete, I briefly provide an in-class example where students of nineteenth-century literature become emotionally responsive to certain gender subjects with which they identify personally and socially. In teaching Elizabeth Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" (1852) and Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), students become both shyly responsive to the emotional catharsis generated by the process of reading, understanding, and analyzing women's misfortunes in both texts. Miss Maude Furnivall in Gaskell's short story becomes subjected to Lord Furnivall's tyranny, abandonment, and ultimate death. In a similar scenario, Louisa Gradgrind in Dickens's novel is victimized by her father's rigid didacticism, which forces her to run away and attempt adultery with James Harthouse before she eventually returns to her father. In the classroom, we read and comment on parts of these texts from the perspective of gender, and students feel obliged to respond to the plights of Gaskell's and Dickens's women as if they were real. One of the female students suggested that Maude's and Louisa's return, whether dead or alive, is the return of justice, victory, and balance to a system that is dominated by hierarchical powers, parallel to those that also control our Palestinian society. Students normally avoid engaging in textual conversations regarding the sexual representation and sentimental impact of these fictional women in the corridors of the department. Such conversations might be taken out of context and used to reflect badly on the cachet of speakers and listeners. Whilst in the classroom, however, students feel responsible for finding answers to questions that concern the ostracism of nineteenth-century women and whether an analogy to a present-day Palestinian woman's fall from grace is possible.

<9> Teaching Gaskell and Dickens to third-year female students in the Novel & Short Story course is based on Mary Lenard's proposition that both writers share at least two significant qualities as novelists: namely, an interest in social issues and a corresponding conviction that fiction could change society for the better by influencing the audience. In addition, both authors share a quality that most critics have seen as a weakness: the tendency to deal with social issues in their fiction by resolving conflicts through feminized conventions, such as religious conversion and emotional reconciliation (109).

<10> The significance of Dickens's and Gaskell's texts, hence, emanates from their exposition of social problems that fundamentally relate to gender bias. Based on this, female students find resemblances between Dickensian and Gaskellian female characters and twenty-first-century Palestinian women. Inside the classroom, which Winkler and DiPalma term as a place of "... 'safety' where students and faculty could talk about and examine painful subjects," female students bring examples of Palestinian women who are victimized by/in their society (6). Taking Dickens's and Gaskell's women as models, these students debate the potentialities and limitations of women's defiance of social or religious control as well as the possible outcomes that may arise out of their actions that are considered socially transgressive.

<11> The fact that the Novel & Short Story course I taught in the fall term of 2015 consisted of only female students does not mean that fruitful discussions of the positions, subversion, performance, and social reconciliation of nineteenth-century English and twenty-first-century Palestinian women were always successful. Dissonance sometimes emerged among students with respect to the rationality of women's subversive actions. Female students who come from working class backgrounds tend to insist that no matter what women do, they must comply with familial, social, and religious rules. Transcending or transgressing already established boundaries makes them liable to ostracism and punishment. This type of student, approximately less than half of the classroom population, argues that dictation is better than critical thinking, as it keeps a tight rein on academic integrity and pedagogical formality. They also argue that the subject matter tackled in the classroom must conform to social standards and insist that failure to do so will result in the birth of evil thoughts, leading to corruption and contradiction between social reality and what they regard as alien or Western.

<12> More than half of the female students in this course, on the contrary, believed that the classroom—at least theirs— must be employed as "the most radical space of possibility in the academy," to borrow bell hooks's words (12). This type of student treats the classroom as a space where the rivalry of voices is freely practiced. It is one of the few places where the democracy of thought is allowed without external judgments or embarrassment. The regular attendance of these female students in the classroom became integral to the structure of the course and pedagogical process, as they formed a vital force that believed in change and originality. I always encourage this type of thinking, even though I am aware of its danger if it is carried outside the classroom. After reading Dickens's and Gaskell's texts, a female student came to my office and said that "literature has taught me to be radical." The oppression of women in these taught texts, she continued, "makes me believe in the intellectual potential and value of us ladies, a value that lies beyond the common social perception of women as subjects of sexual desire." This response increased my enthusiasm for teaching this course (as sometimes the attitudes of the former type of student had hindered free discussion of the texts); I suggested that this student read some foundational feminist criticism beginning with Gilbert and Gubar's seminal *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979).

<13> My suggestion was constructive, as the student came to the next lecture with a notebook containing detailed analysis of the subversive acts of Dickens's Louisa and Gaskell's Maude. In her analysis, she also emphatically used Gilbert and Gubar's argument that many nineteenth-century women were frustrated with the misogynistic world they lived in. Gilbert and Gubar conclude their

monograph by recommending a break away from patriarchal tradition and its impositions. The predominance of the patriarchal tradition in the nineteenth century was questioned in the student's reading by relating it to modern-day Palestinian patriarchy, which, to reuse Rubenberg's words, "control[s] women's sexuality and bodies [and] legitimiz[es] violence" (35). This is only one example that proves both the development of students' analytical research capabilities and their initiative in taking part in critical thinking over gender-related subjects. More importantly, the student's research activity demonstrates how education *within* the classroom space "not only serves as a formal centre for the process of knowledge production, but also as a catalyst for social justice through the challenging of both injustice and unequal power arrangements..." (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 57). What students, therefore, discuss in the classroom is both a process of factual and theoretical expansion of knowledge and reinvestigation of social injustices that perhaps affect them personally. This process transforms into an artistic methodology by which students not only build a critical relationship with literature but also communicate their own experiences imaginatively. Artistic teaching starts at the moment students feel motivated by and confident about their abilities to speak about the literary text in question both critically and creatively.

### **Teaching Artistically. . . Teaching Innovation**

<14> In order to help students rethink various gender-related literary and social topics, I encourage a pedagogical methodology that aims at creating ways of communication between the literary and the real. In this particular instance, my role as a teacher of nineteenth-century literature and gender studies emphasizes a concrete understanding of literary works and gender bias, therein linking that bias to current social and political issues that affect women in the West Bank. In order to motivate students to think critically and creatively about various nineteenth-century literary subjects that are regarded as taboos because of their social sensitivity in a Palestinian context, I create an artistic teaching environment in the classroom. Teaching artistically implies a process by which both teachers and students adopt and share creative ways of discussing and learning that indicate expressive knowledge and action and can thus be juxtaposed with scientific or rational approaches. To put it differently, the teaching of nineteenth-century literature and gender can take place through the acquisition of the language of art, imagination, creativity, and even intuition. Indeed, artistic teaching enhances scholarly forms of knowledge that students acquire through unrestrained creative thinking. In defining "teaching as an art," Elliot W. Eisner accounts for four basic reasons that generate his definition:

First, it is an art in the sense that teaching can be performed with such skill and grace that, for the student as for the teacher, the experience can be justifiably characterized as aesthetic....  
Second, teaching is an art in the sense that teachers, like painters, composers, actresses, and dancers, make judgements based on qualities that unfold during the course of action....  
Third, teaching is an art in the sense that the teacher's activity is not dominated by prescriptions or routines, but is influenced by qualities and contingencies that are unpredicted....  
Fourth, teaching is an art in the sense that the ends it achieves are often created in process....  
It is in these four senses—teaching as a source of aesthetic experience, as dependent on the



perception and control of qualities, as a heuristic, or adventitious activity, and as seeking emergent ends—that teaching can be regarded as an art. (Lutzker 52-53)

These four reasons justify the fact that what makes teaching artistic is the random, unpredictable, or intuitive process that teachers employ during in-class discussions. To free students' minds of "prescriptions or routines" is the key to producing an aesthetic atmosphere within which students experience ultra-perceptions of both textuality and social reality. Going against the conventional plan is an artistic plan *per se* that consolidates students' analytic qualities and original thinking. The achievement of desired ends, which is "often created in process," is therefore possible if the process itself is versatile for the changeability of situations in the classroom. Since artistic teaching requires dynamism on the part of both teachers and students, predetermined course plans can pose a challenge to learners as they adjust their capabilities to move beyond traditional pedagogical boundaries and approach literary texts intuitively. The teacher's departure from the rigid application of a course plan to a meticulous examination of specific scenes or points of debate in a nineteenth-century novel, story, or poem can open artistic spaces for students to ponder. Moreover, teaching artistically captures students' attention and interest, thus building their memory and creative faculties. Good teachers are always remembered for facilitating relationships between the student, text, and the intuitive acquisition of knowledge via imagination.

<15> In following an artistic approach to teaching gender in nineteenth-century literature classes, I aspire to create a liberal mode of reasoning and sense of individuality in students whose culture generally supports a collective method of thinking. Going against already established gender or religious traditions is considered a threat to the social system. However, the classroom environment, as I discussed earlier, offers a temporary escape from the constraints of such traditions. The question that remains is whether students are able to take critical or liberal thinking beyond the walls of the classroom. Though it seems a difficult question and dangerous act to consider, the female classroom audience still has the chance to develop their individuality and critical thinking internally. As a teacher, I tend to foster an ideology that gives students the chance to experience their freedom and recognize their artistic potential and individual capabilities. I allow for multidimensional interactions with students and give them enough time to respond critically and artistically to questions that seem alien to their culture. Building confidence is an important factor in initiating these multidimensional discussions between teachers and students. It is important that students feel confident and comfortable in the classroom so that their responses to gender-related questions, for instance, are not judged based on cultural standards. The repetition of these discussions in the classroom leads to increased scholarly competence, which recursively motivates freedom of speech on the part of students.

<16> I must add here that female students' freedom to learn and think critically is also tied to the teacher's freedom to teach. In this sense, An-Najah National University, among other Palestinian universities, must take up new pedagogical strategies to support a free educational process. This leads eventually to the enhancement of both teachers' and learners' experiences. Giving teachers the authority and free choice required to teach creatively or artistically improves the teaching process immensely. The choice of subject matter to discuss in classrooms, specifically sexuality and gender, is not always free to decide in the Department of English. Teachers are normally monitored to ensure that

what they teach fits with the culture's social and religious criteria. Teachers who violate traditional academic regulations or who tend to be more creative—call it radical here—are sometimes punished, yet their punishment depends on how far they go into detail when discussing a subject such as the female body in nineteenth-century fiction. Other teaching strategies have to do with the general structure of classrooms, such as the number of students in classes and the employment of technology. The use of technology, for example, can make students more interactive and creative in that they pay undivided attention and elicit a response to the screen space. A video showing women who are repressed and mistreated in films adapted from novels or dealing with real-life situations makes the discussion of gender politics more engaging, as it speaks to students' minds more straightforwardly. This puts them on the defensive and invites quick answers or reactions.

<17> Bearing in mind the limitations imposed on the teaching process, I still communicate to students a sense of the necessary development of their individuality and creative thinking. The artistic communication of knowledge to students follows multiple ways, which range from acting to argumentation to roundtables to video screening. To take acting as an example, I suggest that students play the role of women they study in nineteenth-century literary works. Even though they feel embarrassed or cautious of role playing certain scenes where women are victims of patriarchal injustice and social prejudice, students gradually feel motivated and they understand that role play, in this context, is no more than an academic need for the manifestation of women's misery in the nineteenth century and modern Palestine. Being sympathetic to the unfair representation of women, some female students went so far as to write creatively on gender-related topics, ranging from poetry composition to singing to storytelling. Most of the students were brave enough to present their creative works in the classroom. Some of them, however, were anxious about presenting their love poetry to their classmates. A student came to my office after I delivered the lecture and showed me a poem she wrote to her imaginary lover. She complained that she could not present her work because of its sensitivity. She said that she had a talent for writing love poetry, but the fact that she lived with a conservative family in the countryside forced her to write secretly. This student and others offer compelling examples of how education gives a glimmer of hope, even when moving beyond traditions becomes a risky choice; nonetheless, students continue to write and enjoy the experience of learning about nineteenth-century literature, culture, and gender topics that are usually parallel to current social issues in the West Bank. In the following section, I provide detailed cases of students' in-class scholastic reception of and involvement in nineteenth-century gender studies and literature, which is usually divided into two groups. Whilst the first is responsive to gender studies, the second opposes these discussions due to the fact that women's roles are well-defined in Islam and, thus, must not be interrogated. The student who wrote poetry represents the first group and majority of the classroom.

### **The Reception of Gender: A Case Study**

<18> During my early lectures at An-Najah National University in the fall term of 2015, I noticed that students struggle to differentiate between "sex" and "gender." It is crucial to point out here that using the word "sex" in the classroom is not trouble-free. A male teacher in the Department of English must be careful when talking about gender and female sexuality, especially in an all-female classroom. I find that the artistic teaching of gender in the context of nineteenth-century literature in a room full of

women can be hard, as discussion is subject to misinterpretation. The teacher can, however, communicate gender-related ideas using an artistic strategy that alerts students to the fact that the word “gender” is only used in an academic context. To describe the meaning of sex and its difference from gender, jokes or medical terminology can artistically be employed to assure students of its necessary unadulterated usage. Quoting from a medical book or telling a funny anecdote or folkloric tale about a fictional character who has lost a sexual organ during a battle or ceremony is an artistic methodology that makes the definition of sex less straightforward or upfront. In explaining gender studies in nineteenth-century literary texts, I point out from the outset that “sex” refers to the biological or physical features of the human body, which is either male or female. “Gender,” on the other hand, means social and linguistic behavior, activities and roles that men and women perform.

<19> In order to help students understand the difference between sex and gender, I start by explaining Judith Butler’s theory of performativity and solely applying it to Louisa’s acts in Dickens’s text. I clarify that gender for Butler is not stable and cannot be taken as a coherent identity. Instead, gender reality implies that it “is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (Butler 527). Taking theatricality into consideration, which Butler emphasizes as a central exemplar of gender construction, I expound how an actor or actress uses a multiplicity of bodily gestures, symbols, and ideas to communicate the meaning of self and, eventually, the concept of power. This definition can be carried out in real life, I continue, where social behavior or the scenario of actions becomes the means by which power relations are decided. Louisa in *Hard Times* exemplifies Butler’s renunciation of traditional conceptions of gender by appropriating her sexuality “to be the source of exciting, desirable and cleansing change” (Ingham 100). By describing Louisa’s actions as extreme in an environment where she is taught to be obedient, chaste, and silent, students understand that her actions outside the house offer an alternative definition of gender. She builds up a mode of subversive passion by contemplating the flames in the hearth, escaping the house representing her father’s rigid didactic system, and attempting adultery with James Harthouse. These actions decide her true femininity, the point where she retains her real and social sense of womanhood. Her father, Thomas Gradgrind, no longer becomes the social and textual center of the novel.

<20> The fact that both the daughter’s and father’s roles in the novel are subject to change, in that the “polarities that usually mark gender differences in nineteenth-century criticism, as, for example, the difference between feeling and thinking” (Carr 162), makes students more receptive to women’s roles. In addition, it makes them appreciate women’s abilities and rights to release natural forces when faced by indoctrinating powers. The father, who represents a social force of indoctrination, is subverted at his own game by having to give in to Louisa’s feelings and passion. Applying this to Palestinian society, students argue, is easy since many female students can possibly fall prey to these didactic systems that emphasize thinking at the expense of emotions. Some Palestinian patriarchs, who tend to be intolerant of feelings as they consider them signs of vulnerability, are very likely to emulate Thomas Gradgrind’s paternal role as the household dictator. Moreover, some students even go so far as to suggest that if such Palestinian fathers feel threatened by their daughters’ education, they will bring it to an end. Female students’ education means that a woman treads into the masculine territory of thinking and intellectual superiority, which is similar to Thomas Gradgrind’s fear of Louisa’s outbursts of passion,

leading eventually to her mental awakening and realization of womanhood. Feeling enthusiastic about the subject, one of the top students in this Novel & Short Story course recommended an analogy to Edgar Allan Poe's "Ligeia" (1838). She suggested that Poe's unnamed narrator in the story murders his wife because she threatens to surpass him intellectually.

<21> Being immensely intrigued by this analogy, I assigned this student and two of her classmates three different research topics to prepare and present to the rest of the class. I specifically assigned each one of them a certain nineteenth-century literary text to research and analyze using gender theories. The assigned texts included Poe's "Ligeia" (1838), Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), and Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856). I gave the three students a whole month to conduct their research, by which time they presented their work, which I briefly summarize below.

#### **Student A: "Ligeia and Palestinian Women: The Dilemma of Education"**

<22> According to this student, Ligeia and contemporary Palestinian women share the potential of being sites of intellectual danger. Ligeia's dilemma lies in her intellectual maturity, which represents a challenge to her husband's (the narrator's) learnedness. The student quoted at length from Poe's story where the narrator confesses that Ligeia's learning "was immense—such as I have never known in woman. In the classical tongues was she deeply proficient...I have never known her at fault" (348). The student explained how Ligeia poses a threat to the narrator's state of being because she enters a masculine space to which she is traditionally denied access. She, thus, reduces the narrator to a listener, a status that drives him to madness and increases his desire to kill. Becoming a mere listener implies the loss of speech, a conventional, basic masculine trait, to Ligeia, who emerges in the text as the influential mouthpiece of truth and knowledge. The student then linked this narrative to current issues and events that took place in the West Bank in the last two years or so. She mentioned that a Palestinian girl was detained and tortured by her father because she asked to go to Birzeit University, which is located on the outskirts of Ramallah City. The father thought of this metropolitan university as a possible source of corruption, a place that is too far (30 miles) from home where the girl lives with her family in Tulkarem City. Not unlike Poe's narrator in "Ligeia," the Palestinian father thought of his daughter's decision as threatening to his masculine and patriarchal authority, as decision-making and intellect are domains to which women are forbidden entry. The student asserted that this example must not be generalized: the display of extreme violence and objection to education that incurs the father's fear of intellectual liberty and independence does not necessarily mean that all Palestinian fathers belong to the same category.

<23> The student concluded by alluding to the story of Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani girl who was shot in the head by Taliban gunmen for going to school and speaking up for the right of women's education.<sup>(4)</sup> Yousafzai's resistance to objectification can be doubled with Ligeia's subversion of the traditional treatment of women as Angels of the House. Yousafzai and Ligeia, in this sense, challenge the patriarchal repression of female intellect and undermine the domestic space as a requisite of true femininity. The student finally urged her classmates to employ the classroom as a space where all women release themselves from intellectual subservience.

<24> The absence of male participants increases the overall confidence of female students who are never judged for what they think and articulate. Despite the fact that male voices are absent, some female students tend to position me as the representative of a patriarchal culture that tends to oppose and silence their intellectual acts. This is a reaction I understand and perpetuate by occasionally pretending to be an outsider who carries this specific patriarchal ideology that is not keen on compromising mental spaces with women. This pretense becomes successful at times, since it makes the academic debate a thought-provoking process. By positioning myself as the other, female students feel obliged to respond, and I see that the majority of students get involved in the discussion. My reaction to the dilemma of Ligeia, who may also be responsible for the failure of domestic communication, elicits responses from students who are normally silent in the classroom. They defend Ligeia and real-life female figures, arguing that whatever women do, their actions are justified, and the time has come to rise above the body within which they have always been imprisoned and suppressed.

#### **Student B: “The Question of Honor: Hester Prynne and Modern Palestine”**

<25> The student began her presentation by defining “honor” killing as acts of revenge that are carried by male relatives against women for bringing shame upon the entire family. Involvement in sexual relations outside of marriage or violation of religious and social principles is normally implicated in the act of public punishment or homicide. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne violates the basic doctrines of American Puritan culture—faith and chastity—and is publically punished through the humiliating staging of her body on the scaffold.<sup>(5)</sup>

<26> Hester is subjected to Puritan religious laws and marital retribution. The Puritans, on the one hand, ensured that no sexual relations are to take place outside marriage. The repression of sexuality is met by the emphasis on people’s godly behavior and devotion, and, if sexuality has to be practiced, it ought to be socially and morally regulated, idealized as a reproductive, domestic conduct. On the other hand, Chillingworth cannot stop seeking to destroy his enemy, minister Dimmesdale, for trespassing on his private space—the female body and household. Yet, Hester subverts the traditional establishment of the “honor code” by going against both the religious institution and matrimonial control, thus becoming symbolic of the rising power of women in nineteenth-century America.

<27> The student then went on to explain how Hester’s objectification on the scaffold could be compared to what some Palestinian women nowadays experience at the hands of family members if they are suspected of having sexual or romantic relationships before marriage. The student made an analogy between Hester and Aya Baradiya, the 20-year-old Palestinian student who went missing for more than a year in 2010. Later, it was found that Baradiya was murdered at the hands of her uncle who confessed to the Palestinian police that he had committed an “honor” killing. The student noted that Baradiya was innocent from the beginning, and her murder was a consequence of fatal suspicion and jealousy. The murder instigated an immediate public and official response: not only did the Palestinian government scrap “historic laws that permitted leniency for the perpetrators of so called ‘honor’ killings,” but also university students protested and women spoke out resentfully against Baradiya’s death (Sherwood). Bearing in mind cultural differences between nineteenth-century America and

modern Palestine, the student suggested that both Hester and Baradiya were victims of choices.<sup>(6)</sup> Whilst Hester chose to be with Dimmesdale, the man she loved, Baradiya only decided to go to university and to reject her 37-year-old foreign suitor. Hester lives whereas Baradiya dies; however, both create chaos and revolutions within the gender politics of their societies, thus inspiring and assuring women that changing the future is possible.

<28> Again, I tried to create doubts concerning the fictional and real characters of Hester and Aya. However, my attempt was met with complete rejection and dismay. All students explained that Hester's and Aya's actions were projections of a patriarchal mentality that is controlled by double standards. Patriarchs project their internal fear of the other sex on the bodies of women and fashion terms such as "honor" in order to justify their punishment and revenge. When I assumed a patriarchal presence and mentioned that these women were responsible for protecting their bodies because they were also seen as social constructs, students responded by denying the traditional collective thinking that perceives women's bodies as sites of possible shame. On the contrary, all female students agreed that women were free to choose, and men's bodies must also be regarded as possible sites of shame based on their sexual actions.

#### **Student C: "Women and Money: Facing Financial Autonomy, Facing Death"**

<29> In this presentation, the third student started by giving a brief commentary on women's financial concerns and their relation to gender development. She argued that men are more likely to possess money than women, and that this becomes clear in nineteenth-century Western societies as well as modern Palestine, especially in conservative communities where women are sometimes denied access to the job market. Money confers power and social status on those who earn it through work or inheritance. Since women occupy secondary positions within the traditional binaries of power representation—man/woman, public/private, strong/vulnerable—they cannot be allowed to gain financial independence. The student, in addition, quoted Caroline Sweetman's "Editorial" where she argues, "in many contexts, the principle that women should not earn cash has been overcome, yet the belief that it is a male head of household who controls cash income and other important resources remains" (4). It, thus, seems that women's control of resources and achievement of financial authority generates a sense of anxiety in patriarchal societies. The student explained how men must preserve the high authority traditionally bestowed on them, and if they are no longer in control of the family's financial resources, they both run the risk of losing their position and esteem, thereby facing the threat of feminization as the father symbolically becomes secondary within the symbolic order.

<30> The student intriguingly interwove the subject of economic freedom in Flaubert's nineteenth-century French novel *Madame Bovary* with current Palestinian women and the limits of gender equality. In *Madame Bovary*, to begin with, the student clarified how Emma Bovary is a rebellious woman who manages to overturn the traditional position of the husband as the absolute controller of financial resources. Regardless of her sexual adventures in which she also employs her body as a monetary value to trade with, Emma satisfies her desire for luxury goods by purchasing them on credit from the cunning merchant Lheureux. "Then the lusts of the flesh, the longing for money, and the melancholy of passion," the student quoted, "all blended themselves into one suffering, and instead of turning her thoughts

from it, she clung to it the more" (Flaubert 76). Emma is a passionate woman who always dreams of romance and luxury, and she drains her husband Charles Bovary's money over the pursuit of her desires. Emma's desire for financial independence emanates from her sense of powerlessness. The fact that she cannot control her destiny is induced by the lack of financial resources, and, hence, the use of her own body becomes a source of income—that is, sex for money

<31> The student then cautioned that readers should be wary of making direct comparisons between both Bovary and Palestinian women due to patent cultural differences. She urged, however, that a comparison pertaining to finance and women's equal pecuniary dominion could be established here. Palestinian women are victims of a stringent patriarchal law that generally strives to subject them to secondary roles within the system of currency and wealth distribution. With a specific reference to a 2014 European Union-funded project on Palestinian women and inheritance, the student held that some of these women were deprived of their legal right of inheritance. Eleven percent of the women in the study were not only excluded from inheritance after the proprietor's death but also "beaten or physically assaulted" or even threatened with "murder" (European Union 58). Even though women's right to inheritance is mentioned in the *Holy Qur'an*, some men tend to ignore it because this right is controlled by "societal norms." In other words, if women ask for their share, they will be branded as immoral deviants of "social customs and traditions" that demand complete silence, shyness, and acceptance of non-sharing (European Union 15). The analogy this student created showed that despite the fact that Emma Bovary's and current Palestinian women's situations are different, they are both financially suppressed. The fact that Madame Bovary, who fails to pay her debts, commits suicide at the end of the novel, and that some Palestinian women are killed because of asking for their share of the inheritance shows a certain type of patriarchal ideology that subjugates women through money. Bovary's use of her husband's money or a Palestinian woman's demand of her share, however, proves women's awareness of money as a determinant of gender politics and their struggle to change it in all possible ways—this time, financially.

<31> As the sole male presence in the classroom, I positioned myself this time as a university lecturer who is totally unhappy with his future wife having a job and being financially independent. All female students criticized this narrow thinking, suggesting that it denoted my internal fear of losing balance and familial centrality. They argued that accepting the financial independence of the wife was a prerequisite to matrimonial happiness. Because of the ever-changing nature of modern life and society, men also have to accept the accelerating developments of gender roles. They finally posed these questions: what if the husband was totally incapable of performing his financial duties due to a physical disability? Would this strip him of his masculine identity and social status?

<32> I must point out here that on other occasions such presentations were faced with different reactions. Whereas most of the students were receptive to the proposed questions, others opposed the connections made between nineteenth-century female characters and Palestinian women because they insinuated corruption. However, this educational experience was generally successful and rewarding.

## **Conclusion**

<33> How possible or successful is change in academic institutions such as An-Najah National University when teaching female students gender in nineteenth-century literature in relation to current Palestinian society? I ask myself this question after every lecture I deliver. It seems that all factors required for the creation of a progressive atmosphere that liberates the classroom are present. A good channeling of these factors, such as teachers' passion for open artistic discussion of gender, nineteenth-century literature, Palestinian women, students' enthusiasm, and technology, among other factors, leads to a desired reconstruction of the pedagogy of classrooms. However, this does not mean that teachers' and learners' willingness to embrace gender, which some view as new dubious studies, at An-Najah National University goes uncensored. Thus, the liberation of classrooms is a responsibility that also lies on the shoulders of decision-makers. The contention between scholarly eagerness to adopt gender studies in order to highlight awareness of women's place in literature and society, on the one hand, and the rigidity of patriarchal social reality and reluctance of decision-makers at the university, on the other hand, remains unresolved. Yet, whilst teaching the Novel & Short Story course in particular, I believe that change always has an extra space. Therefore, the liberation of the classroom becomes a true necessity.

#### Endnotes

(1)See Deborah J. Gerner, "Mobilizing women for Nationalist Agendas: Palestinian Women, Civil Society, and the State-Building Process." In Moghadam, Valentine M., ed. *From Patriarchy to Empowerment: Women's Participation, Movements, and Rights in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2007. 17-40 (20). Print.(^)

(2)In the general discussion of women in nineteenth-century literature, gender, and modern Palestinian society, I focus on the West Bank, which is where I am currently teaching at An-Najah National University.(^)

(3)Despite the fact that gender diversity is an interesting addition to the dimensions of discussion in the classroom, I choose to examine an all-female classroom only. My choice can be justified on the basis that the absence of male students allows for the examination of the limits of free speech and in-class interaction as some female students perhaps feel daunted or discouraged by the presence of their male classmates.(^)

(4)Malala's words "I didn't want my future to be imprisoned in my four walls and just cooking and giving birth" can be regarded as the bible of modern gender in which women refuse submissive roles even if living in war zones. For more details, see Mishal Husain's "Malala: The girl who was shot for going to school."(^)

(5)Even though the events of *The Scarlet Letter* historically take place in the seventeenth century when English Puritans first settled in North America, the student mentioned that this is a nineteenth-century novel in which Hawthorne exposes the hypocrisy of the Puritanical system and advocates the liberation of women's voices and actions in his own century, too.(^)



(6) Women's protest against Baradiya's death shows a developing awareness of gender-bias and expresses the need for social reformation. The student quoted Yasmine Alheeh, a 29-year-old Palestinian woman working in a clothes shop saying, "a woman has no personal freedom. It's OK to work, but you can't make personal choices" (Sherwood). The student also noted that Sherwood alerted to the unreliability of statistics of "honor" killing, but on the whole, "there are around 20 such crimes in the West Bank and Gaza each year." ([△](#))

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