Twenty-First Century Arab Feminism: a movement from Islamic to the Secular

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Arab women's rights occupy a good space in Arab and Western feminist thought. In both the East and the West, Arab Muslim women often share contrasting and identical stereotypical representations and discourses which are welcomed by some Arab feminists and rejected by others and accordingly Muslim Arab feminists are divided between pro-western feminism and Islamic feminism. The focus is on the difficult situation of Arab feminism in the twenty-first Century after the 9/11 terrorist attacks as a defining moment for Arab women whose rights become a part of the American war on terrorism as the then First Lady Laura Bush states: "The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women" (Smith. Par. 4). These words have an insightful resonance for a reader who has knowledge of colonial discourse that uses women's right to justify imperial domination as Gayatri Spivak clearly puts it "White men are saving brown women from brown men" (296). Therefore, September 11, 2001 is playing a catalytic agent for westernizing the feminist content that gradually replaces Islamic feminism in the twenty first century especially among the Arab intelligentsia. Simultaneously, it is also noteworthy to know that Islamic feminism is still effective even among Arab women who live in the United States and Europe today. Nouha al-Hegelan, an Arab feminist in the US, argues that one can never ignore the rights of woman given with the advent of Islam when the Arabs used to bury their newly-born daughters alive and the Christian church was still debating the existence of a woman's soul:

> Before Islam, women in the Arabian Peninsula followed the cultural bonds of the tribe...In some instances, women were chattels and men often buried their newly-born daughters alive… Islam liberated these women from such cruel prejudice and gave them the dignity of humanity and the pride of being a woman. Islam projected a woman as being parallel to a man and embodied the philosophy of being both equal and different. Fourteen hundred years ago, Islamic women were given the right to run their own businesses, to keep their financial autonomy after marriage and, more importantly, the right to learn-the key to emancipation (7-8).

As far as Arab feminism is concerned, Islam is seen by the West as a political ideology and an obstacle before woman and her struggle for freedom. Here, a comparison between the terms Islamist and Islamic will make things clear. Islamist government refers to a radical orthodox Muslims who oppose all the western traditions including the notion of women's rights. Caroline Cox and John Marks define Islamism as an ideology: "Islamism' and 'Islamist' are the terms now widely used to refer to radical, militantly ideological versions of Islam, as interpreted by the practitioners and in which violent actions such as terrorism, suicide bombings or revolutions are explicitly advocated, practiced and justified using religious terminology"(6). So, feminist voice for promoting

women's rights is seen as a challenge to male patriarchy. And rejection of these laws would be looked at as a rejection of their heritage, religion and identity. Therefore most of the contemporary Muslim Arab feminists find that a struggle against patriarchal religious authorities becomes a necessity because blind submission to Sharia'a laws, derived from the *Quran* by male, causes more social, political and economic suffering to them.

Contrary to Islamist code of governance, the term "Islamic" refers to the moderate Muslim thought who adopts a reinterpretation of the Quran to modify the Sharia'a law and make it more flexible and compatible with modernity. Hence, the Islamic feminism emanated from this thought does not totally oppose secular feminism rather it tries to become more compatible with it. This movement can be looked at as a Quran-centered reform movement by Muslim Arab women with the linguistic and theological knowledge to challenge the male interpretations of the Quran and offer alternative readings in pursuit of women's advancement and in refutation of both Western stereotypes and Islamist orthodoxy alike. As a general rule, the majority of twentieth century Muslim feminists argue that Islam elevated women's position in society and was successful in ending many traditional practices that undermined women. Further, these Islamic Arab feminists try to transcend and destroy old binaries that have been constructed by a mono-interpretation of religious texts that favors the male. So pioneers of the Islamic feminist movement in Arabia have always had space for secular feminist ideas to make their movement go hand in hand with modernity. Nawal Al Saadawi, a prominent Egyptian Islamic feminist, argues:

> The idea that you can have feminism within a religion is incoherent, should it be Christianity, Judaism or Islam. In the States and in Europe, many Christian women tried to be feminist within Christianity and reinterpret the bible. They said that Christ was a black woman. So as such some Islamic women are reinterpreting the Koran and they can say Mohamed was a black woman or whatever they want. To reinterpret religion is a good; it's positive and in the favor of women, because all the books, the Old Testament, the Bible and the Koran are biased in that they portray women as inferior to men" (qtd Saleck. 12).

Though those feminists were fighting on a daily basis to achieve positive and concrete changes in the lives of women from education, employment, driving to issues of divorce, much of the theoretical debate has focused on opposing certain concepts in western feminism. This old generation is represented by the most known women like Hind Nawfal and Bouthaina Shaban from Syria and Hoda El Sharawi and Nawal El-Saadawi from Egypt. Their effort has been a two-fold one aimed at fighting both male dominancy in Arabia and the western charges against Islam as a religion that denigrates women and treats them as second-class citizens. In pre-Islamic Arab tradition, women were perceived as a disgrace to the family. So in order to avoid having females in the family, burying new born females was common in the Arab society before Islam. From an Islamic feminist point of view, Islam librated the female from the brutality of Arab tradition. The Quran reveals the brutality of this action and links it with horrible signs of the Day of Judgment:

> When the sun is wound round and its light is lost and is overthrown, when the stars fall, when the mountains are made to pass away, when the pregnant she-camels shall be neglected, when the wild beasts are be gathered together, when the seas become as blazing Fire or overflow, when the souls are joined with their bodies, when the female (infant) buried alive (as the Arabs used to do) is questioned: For what sin, was she killed? (81:1-9).

In the *Theory of Modernizing the non-Western World*, Wolfgang Zapf finds that two major factors have been hindering the process of Westernizing the Arab world: first is the communist heritage some Arab countries inherited from the Soviet Union and second is the gradual growing of the fundamentalist reaction to Western colonization. Interestingly, when we look at feminism in the Arab world today, the first idea comes to mind is that women rebel against male dominancy without any adherence to the religious code. Based on the response to westernization, Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilization* theory foresees the new encounter between the West and the Islamic world will take the form of a "Clash of Civilizations": "This centuries-old military interaction between the West and Islam is unlikely to decline. It could become more virulent..... On both sides the interaction between Islam and the West is seen as a clash of civilizations"(Par. 25). This clash begins to manifest more in the twenty first century as Arab feminism comes very close to its Western counterpart and becomes more critical of Islamic code of life. Bernard Lewis observes that Arab women's response to western ideas is the most appreciated influence of western feminism in the Arab world:

> It is clear that irreversible changes have taken place. Even those claiming to restore the Holy Law in its entirety are unlikely to reintroduce legal concubinage, nor is there much probability of a return to polygamy among the educated classes in Middle Eastern cities. Fundamentalist influences and rulers have in many ways changed the content and manner of education for women, but they have not returned them -- nor are they likely to return them -- to their previous condition of ignorance. And while, in Islamic lands as in Europe and America at an earlier age, there are women who speak and work against their own emancipation, the long-term trend is clearly for greater freedom. There are now significant numbers of educated, often Western-educated, women in Islamic lands. They are already having a significant impact, and Islamic public life will be enriched by the contributions of the previously excluded half of the population (31).

This shift becomes manifest among some well-known Arab feminists today. These feminists look at secular feminism as a savior from gender dilemmas in the Arab world due to excessive application of religious dos and don'ts in ordinary life. They loudly articulate their revolt against Arab cultural heritage and Islamic religion as being unfair to them and thus they adopt the Western secular feminism. Wafa Sultan is an Arab Syrian psychiatrist and critic of the Arab patriarchal society who lately moved to America. Sultan feels that both tradition and religion have been oppressors of Arab women for fourteen centuries and distort the concept of honor. The *New York Time* called her an "International Sensation" and after her book *A God Who Hates* was published, she was labeled by *Time Magazine* as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. According to her Arab Muslim society is a savage one when compared to western society:

> As an Arab woman who suffered for three decades living under Islamic Sharia, it is clear to me that Islam's political ideology and Sharia must be fought relentlessly by Western civilization to prevent its application in a free society…When I first immigrated to the US, I learned to my dismay that Islam has been labeled by many as "a religion of peace." But for me, as a Syrian who grew up in an Islamic country, a set of beliefs that insists that women are wicked is an evil set of beliefs (1-6).

Due to the failure of the Arab Islamic feminist movement in the face of the dictatorial and Islamist regimes in Arabia, westernization finds its way to delve into the Arab intelligentsia. Rajaa Al Sanea is a Saudi dental graduate and author of the bestselling novel *Girls of Riyadh* in which she gives a detailed life of Westernized Arab women. The novel deals with issues, love, sexuality, homosexuality, oppression of women, banned in the Saudi conservative society. It becomes one of the controversial texts in many Arab countries and was banned in Saudi when it was first published. The *Times* describes the novel as "A brave one and revolutionary indeed". Al Sanea demonstrates that a Western code of life in an Arab society is more preferable and suitable than the Islamic one. *Girls of Riyadh* is set in Saudi society with a western atmosphere. To an Islamic reader, Al Sanea is a rebel against the Islamic tradition. She opens the novel with a wedding of one of her friends, Gamrah, in which all the young girls call on the groom to kiss his bride in public; "We want a kiss! We want a kiss!" Rashid's mother smiled and Gamrah's mother blushed"(9). Being a conservative society, especially in man-woman interaction, the book creates lots of public disputes. Further, its inclusion of tales of gays, lesbians, women indulging in alcohol and sexuality shows the openness of Saudi women to the western traditions. Alsanea tries to distance her style of feminism from the Islamic and moves close to the western code which she believes more free and fair. Valentine Moghadam, director of Women's Studies Illinois State University, observes:

> The "modernizing women" of the Arab/Middle Eastern region – who have been ignored by Orientalists but targeted by Islamists – are at the center of cultural change and at the forefront of the movement for change. As I have tried to show, they have already accomplished much, although they face numerous obstacles and constraints, and experience some tensions within their own movements. For the region as a whole, the most difficult tension may be that between a national identity based on Islamic civilization and culture, and the call for civil and political rights that may be construed as unduly inspired by Western traditions (66).

As a bourgeois individualist, Al Sanea is in favor of demolishing all the hypocritical restrictions of the obsolete code of sexual and homosexual behaviors. Her *Girls* is a reaction against Arab conservative societies like Saudi Arabia where men do not get exposed to women other than their mothers and their sisters. Al Sanea criticizes the whole way of life in the Islamic Arab societies and contrasts them with the western ones. All her characters are high class Saudi citizens who are exposed to modernization. In an interview with Okeily she states: "My concerns are identical to those of many other women in Saudi Arabia. In fact, I aspire to be the first to signal the beginning of change.

These are social changes that are not connected to religion…Silence is evil. I hate negativity and refuse to wait for others to act on my behalf. It is my duty to myself and to my children in the future (2008). Like most of the Americans, Al Sanea finds that homosexuality is a normal behavior that should be considered by the society:

> She was well aware that even if showing signs of being homosexual might not be considered an illness in America, in Saudi Arabia it was an utter calamity, an illness worse than cancer. She had almost fainted when the doctors told her, at the start of it all, that her son was "defining his sexual identity." Over time, they said, he would choose between masculinity and femininity (112).

Kyla Hakim observes that the American influence on Arab society is perceived by the way the Arabs respond to it where the native cultural resistance weakens slowly. Woman in Arab society begins to appreciate how the male has been dominating her life fully and finds an alternative in the American style. This is largely seen in Zaynab Hifni, another Saudi feminist living in London, who states that her exile from Saudi goes back to the three taboos she deals with in her writings: sex, religion and politics. Hifni argues that oppression of Arab woman has a religious basis related to the anti-woman interpretation of the holy Quran and Muhammad's Hadith (Prophet Muhammad's sayings). She criticizes all the interpretations introduced by males that aimed at subjugating females: "Our problem is that everything in favor of women we consider an unreliable *hadith*, whereas any *hadith* that favors men - like the one that says, 'Women are lacking brains and faith' - is considered a 100 percent reliable *hadith*. Why? Because it harms women. This doesn't make sense" (Jackson.2006). To Hakim, a good number of Arab feminists embark on American feminism for two reasons: first, the American offer is far more generous than the traditional one and second, modernization permits the Arab woman to loosen the clutches of man that prevent her from activities:

> The American national culture largely revolves around the wants, needs and goals of the individual… As one of the greatest superpowers of the time, its influence on the global community towards the focus on the individual is nothing short of inevitable. The movies, clothing and new age mentality of America are sending all people regardless of age, upbringing and locale, into a grand scale social transition. The Arab and Muslim beliefs, traditions and entire state of being are no longer as they were 20 or 30 years ago. The women of the novels, Nadia, Fatima, Umm Saad, Maha, Asya, and Su'ad, each living in various Arab countries with unique situations of their own, are united on the common ground of American introduced ideas and concepts of individualism through such venues as feminism, capitalism, sexism and consumerism which adversely affect their society (1).

It is commonplace to point to Arab woman's dress as the quintessential sign of Islamic oppression of woman in twenty first century Arab feminist movement. This is because, according to Ahdaf Soueif: "In every country, social, cultural and political changes manifest themselves in dress" (3). This dress code is perceived as a means of controlling woman's sexuality and freedom. Many Arab women express their interest in banning veil and headscarf in the Europe. Hend Al-Mansour, a Saudi feminist living in

New York states: "I don't like the idea of giving up my rights; I want to be responsible for my actions…I would like to be able not to wear the niqab [full veil] any more….Above all, the full veil is an instrument of male domination…I completely agree with the French bill that aims to ban the full veil in public places (7). Arab feminists find that the practice of veiling, whether a religious or traditional practice, is a symbol of women's oppression. They condemned Islamist fundamentalism as misogynist and called for secular and democratic political-legal frameworks:

> The women would put on their long *abayas*, head coverings and face veils, while the men stripped off their suits and ties, including the belts that they always tightened under their bellies so that one could see how rippling- full of flesh and fat and curds and whey they were, to return to the white *thobes* that concealed their mealtime sins and the red *shimaghs* that covered their bald pates (Al Sanea. 115).

Judging Arab woman in the light of her beliefs to find out how civilized she is a common western view on Arab woman. Accordingly "If a Muslim woman holds certain beliefs that are uncommon in Western culture, she is described as backward, no matter how highly assertive, educated or independent she is; in other words, women are not judged on how they fit within their culture as much as they would fit in a Western culture" (Eltantawy. 144). This western standard of how a Muslim woman looks like, what relationships she makes, what clothes she wears and how western her thoughts are may not be logical since many liberal Muslim still hold conservative religious opinions that fit their cultural affiliation and lifestyle. In her anthology "*E-mails from Scheherazad*", Muhja Kahf allows her impatience with the Western view on Arab woman to come to the fore without fear of direct confronting the post–September 11 American political landscape: "No, I'm not bald under the scarf…No, I would not like to defect. I'm already American. Yes, I speak English. Yes, I carry explosives. They're called words. And if you don't get up off your assumptions…They're going to blow you away" (39). In *Orientalism*, Said draws a distinction between "unconscious positivity" which he properly names "latent Orientalism," and "the various stated views about Oriental society, languages, literatures, history, sociology," he calls "manifest Orientalism." Said explains that: "Whatever change occurs in knowledge of the Orient is found almost exclusively in manifest Orientalism; the unanimity, stability, and durability of latent Orientalism are more or less constant" (206). Said further notes that it does not matter how Orientalists differ in their treatment of the Orient because such differences are found only on the "manifest" side of Orientalism while the only thing that unifies the Orientalist effort is the "latent" side which is the deeper level of Orientalism that introduces the Orient as inferior.

Thus Samuel Huntington might be correct in suggesting a "clash of civilizations" between the Islamic world and the Western world. This appears clearly in the regular images of Arab woman as oppressed by religion and tradition produced by twenty first American Century literature. If not a clash of civilizations, what then can interpret the recurrent appearance of Prophet Muhammad's wives in this particular time? For instance

in *The Jewel of Medina* (2008) by Sherry Jones, one reads of women humiliated by Prophet Muhammad and his teachings as Jones tells the reader in the preface to the novel:

> Join me in a harsh, exotic world of saffron and sword fights, of desert nomads…We are in seventh-century Hijaz, in western Saudi Arabia…where Bedouin raiders fight for survival and women have few rights, and a religion destined to be one of the greatest in the world has sprung from the lips of a man regarded, until he reached the age of forty, as unremarkable (VII).

Edward Said emphasizes the dynamicity of this discourse, twenty five years after the publication of his *Orientalism* in his "*Orientalism after 25 Years*", that Orientalism is "very much a book tied to the tumultuous dynamics of contemporary history" (3). Therefore, it is commonplace to point to Muhammad's harem as the quintessential mode of American representation of the Muslim woman's oppression and Quran as an oppressive tool fabricated by Muhammad to subjugate women. Jones provides one of the Quranic verses that she tells us to be an oppressive one:

> Do not enter the prophet's home unless you are invited, and leave as soon as you finish your meal…When you ask his wives for something, ask them from behind a curtain. That is purer for your hearts and for their hearts… It is not for you to cause injury to the Messenger of al-Lah, or ever marry his widows after him. To do that would be something dreadful in the sight of God (Jones. 160).

Following in the footsteps of Sherry Jones; Homa Pourasgari leaves Muslim woman in the same position where Jones has left off. First of all, Arab Muslim woman is oppressed, marginalized and silenced by Muslims' absolute power endowed to them by their Prophet. In Pourasgari's *The Dawn of Saudi* (2009), a reader comes across people who resemble their Prophet in oppression and sexuality: "Men preferred their women as young as one year old…The Prophet Muhammad was the model they followed. Aisha became his wife when she was six years of age, and the marriage was when she was nine. The younger a woman married the better. She would be more subservient" (Pourasgari 5). Patriarchal discourse in modern America texts always contrast a "good" woman who is a paragon of the female authority's notion of femininity with a "bad" woman who epitomizes all that is considered unfeminine. If American culture begins its encounter with Islam by representing the Muslim woman primarily as a "bad" woman, this badness is not left irredeemable in the post 9/11 novel. Muslim woman becomes more appreciative of her role in changing the patriarchal forces. Accordingly, the ideal woman is not the one who accepts the oppressive treatment of Islamic culture, but the one who rebels.

Arab feminist movement towards secularizing its thoughts resembles many feminist movements in the third world nations that try to escape the control of tradition, religion and the bourgeoisie grip. In Arabia, in particular, decolonization left either Islamist regimes or dictatorships to establish nation states. No major difference can be seen between the two when it comes to issues like women's rights. Islamists and dictatorships rely on conservative religious interpretations or Arab nationalism that define them and differentiate them from the West and its influence. So secularizing of this

movement comes as a result of huge efforts made by high class Arab women who have access into the western society. The West, especially, US, Britain and France become the destination of many Arab women who seek education, work, tourism or refuge. This exposure to the western environment has the major influence on shifting Arab feminism towards secularization.

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