



***Gender Nation  
and Belonging***

*Arab and Arab American  
Feminist Perspectives*

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# GENDER, NATION, AND BELONGING

## ARAB AND ARAB-AMERICAN FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

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Rabab Abdulhadi, Nadine Naber, and Evelyn Alsultany

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# GENDER, NATION, AND BELONGING ARAB AND ARAB-AMERICAN FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

## AN INTRODUCTION

Rabab Abdulhadi, Nadine Naber, and Evelyn Alsultany\*

Insisting on the pluralities of expressions, identifications, and desires of Arab and Arab-American women, this issue of the MIT EJMES aims at disrupting the dichotomies (private/public, fact/fiction, oppressed/liberated, us/them) that have long marked the study of gender and sexuality regimes and dynamics in the Middle East. Theorizing our own experiences and employing conceptual frameworks from feminist, post-colonial, and critical cultural studies, this issue seeks to bring Arab-American Studies into conversation with American Studies, Middle East Studies, and Ethnic Studies. Collectively and individually, the guest editors and the contributors assert that politically relevant, community accountable, and grounded feminist practices must be situated at the root of social transformation. A grounded, contextualized, historicized and politically relevant intellectual labor of love that accounts for our experiences within and outside of

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our communities and that holds us accountable to our multiple publics is an absolute ingredient in our struggles for justice, dignity, and peace for all.

## BEGINNINGS

The idea for this collaborative project emerged in November 2002 as the three of us sat at Café du Monde in New Orleans, during the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA). We had gathered for a panel Rabab and Nadine co-organized. Focusing on oppositional discourses on race and the refashioning of nationalist discourses on sexuality in Arab diasporas, our panel, “Displacements and Diasporas: Beyond Middle East Area Studies”, sought to problematize the rigid boundaries of Area Studies and to critique the ways in which Ethnic Studies, Middle East Studies, and American Studies ignored the study of Arab diasporas, particularly in the United States. On the one hand, Middle East Studies, not unlike other area studies, has focused exclusively on the study of issues and phenomena within the geographic boundaries of the “Middle East”, in effect reinforcing the notion that Arabs are foreigners to be studied “over there” but not belonging to the peoples who make up the fabric of the United States “over here.”<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Ethnic Studies has centered on African-Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos/as, thus reinscribing dominant paradigms that validate rigid U.S. census classifications, limit the possibilities for exploring the fluidity of racial/ethnic categories and positions, and eliminate the intellectual spaces for the study of communities such as Arab-Americans who have been paradoxically racialized as “white” by the U.S. census and non-white Others by the U.S. state and the corporate media.<sup>2</sup> Our objective was to bring Arab-American Studies into conversation with various academic disciplines, beyond a liberal politics of “inclusion,” to instead offer a feminist perspective that accounted for the relationality between gender and sexuality and colonialism, neocolonialism, and the intensified U.S.-led militarization in the Arab world [or in West, Central and South Asia] as well as the ways in which race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and class structure Arab and Arab-American identities and experiences in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Yet, since AAA scheduled our discussion during one of the least popular time slots and because panels on Arab-Americans were either non-existent or not yet attractive to the AAA crowd, it was not surprising that only a small audience turned out for the panel. As the three of us continued our conversation, we recalled similar experiences we had throughout our academic career that reinforced Joanna Kadi’s argument that Arab-Americans were “the most invisible of the invisibles” (1994)<sup>4</sup>. Nadine remembered being advised by a senior scholar during graduate school that for an anthropologist, specializing in Arab-American Studies amounted to academic suicide. Evelyn recalled a similar experience of being cautioned to pursue Latino/a Studies instead of Arab-American Studies only to be seen after 9/11 as “cutting-edge” in her pursuit of what seemed now to be a relevant and timely topic. Rabab’s experience as an Arab born and raised in Palestine was slightly different. She was advised on a number of occasions “not to lose her accent in order to maintain her legitimacy as an “authentic” representative who could “speak on behalf of Palestinians.”<sup>5</sup>

We were reminded as well of our experience on a listserv set up for contributors to *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating in 2002.<sup>6</sup> The editors intended to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary and honor the legacy of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by*



*Radical Women of Color* (Anzaldúa and Moraga, 1981),<sup>7</sup> which challenged dominant feminist frameworks in the 1980s through the intervention of feminist and queer activists of color. Even though the original *Bridge* did not include any Arab-American feminist voices, it had nonetheless variably and profoundly shaped our feminist consciousness. We were especially excited that twenty years later, a similar volume was to include contributions from 6 Arab and Arab-American women.<sup>8</sup> However, as Nada Elia's essay here makes clear, the e-mail listserv, in particular, and the volume, in general, has put a great distance between the intentions and content of the earlier *Bridge* and the 2002 anthology. We could appreciate that the 2002 anthology was no longer about, on, or by women of color or that it included *men* as well as *women*, *white* as well as *women of color*, *liberals* as well as *radicals*. The most serious implications to the integrity of the project, however, became evident on the e-mail listserv when struggles for the equality of all peoples excluded the Palestinians. What began as a listserv to discuss possible titles and generate excitement about the volume among the 80 contributors, ended up in racist attacks by several contributors against Arabs, as voices supporting the colonization of Palestine were allowed to go unchecked under the pretext of a soft relativism that reduced the asymmetry of power between Israel and the Palestinians to a "dispute" between presumably two equal sides.

During the same time period as the listserv debate in 2001, Nadine co-authored (with Eman Desouky and Lena Baroudi) "The Forgotten 'ism,'" an essay published by the Women of Color Resource Center that speaks to this common experience of the silencing and exclusion that is often faced by Arab-Americans in "progressive" circles where Zionism is the forgotten "ism."<sup>9</sup> In other words, in spaces that organize against racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, Zionism, the 'forgotten ism,' has contributed to the exclusion of Arabs and Arab-Americans from progressive and feminist politics. Here, our contributors have chimed in with several pieces in this issue illuminating the ways in which the normalized power of Zionism that we experienced with *This Bridge We Call Home* plays out in the lives of Arab-American feminists on multiple and shifting fronts. Elia, for example, explores what she refers to as "the wall of censorship" which silences Palestinians and their allies vis-à-vis the dual forces of Eurocentrism and Zionism in public lectures, in the workplace, and among progressive and feminist activists of color. Noura Erakat speaks to the same theme, focusing on how Zionism succeeded in the silencing of the Palestinian struggle among progressive students of color on her college campus. In Ella Shohat's interview, she discusses her experience of political persecution resulting from her critical stance toward Israel and attempts to forge Arab-Jewish perspectives on Zionism. And as she narrates the life of Rachel Corrie, the white American student-peace activist who was killed by an Israeli bulldozer in Palestine, Therese Saliba explores the ways in which white privilege is often ignored in discussions of solidarity with the Palestinians. Saliba also illustrates struggles over coalition building between Arab-Americans and our allies as she traces the search for hope when non-violent resistance is met with militarized force.

Intent on creating more spaces for coalitions that require participants to be consistent in their critiques of the intersecting coordinates of colonialism, racism, gender, and sexuality, even when it comes to the colonization of Arab lands, we were, as Sherene Seikaly so eloquently put it in her essay, looking for a view -- a space from which to express both our feelings of anger, resentment, and joy, and to share the conceptual frameworks we have developed from our lived experiences.

## AMERICAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION 2003—CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK?

As we sat at Café du Monde, we also talked about the intensified silencing of dissent in post-September 11<sup>th</sup> political and intellectual spaces and the challenge this historical moment presents. Strengthened by an atmosphere of xenophobia and anti-Arab chauvinism, McCarthyist monitoring systems like Campus Watch launched a campaign in which they labeled critics of U.S. and Israeli governments' policies as anti-Semitic and anti-democracy. Meanwhile within liberal multicultural discourse, it became permissible to speak out against individual acts of hate crimes and discrimination towards Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians, but unacceptable to criticize the so-called "War on Terror." Such criticism was immediately equated with support for terrorism. Thus, opposition to the War on Iraq; the detentions and deportations of Arab immigrants; the attacks on Arab American civil liberties; or to U.S. support for Israel's war on the Palestinians were more overtly framed as unpatriotic, anti-freedom, undemocratic, threatening to national security, and thus "anti-American." The need to carve spaces from which we can argue for a plurality of approaches to Arab-American Studies became clearer than ever before. We especially agreed upon the urgency to highlight the heterogeneity of Arab-American feminist perspectives in the halls of the academy – the front at which we locate ourselves and from which we struggle for social and racial justice and peace.

We decided to set up yet another conversation, this time with a panel of scholar/activists at an academic conference that promised an "alternative format." The American Studies Association's (ASA) call for papers, focusing on "violence and belonging", had invited formats alternative to the standard conference presentation of reading a research paper for 15-20 minutes. We decided to organize a roundtable discussion on Arab and Arab-American feminisms at the next annual meeting of the ASA.

We contacted all the Arab and Arab-American feminists whom we knew either individually or through our activist and intellectual networks. In our call for papers, we asked potential participants not to present traditional papers; but instead to offer short statements on what the theme of the conference, "violence and belonging," meant to them as Arab-American women. We framed the call for submissions around the following questions:

1. How have you experienced being racially marked in the U.S.? In the classroom? In academic and intellectual circles?
2. What are some of the struggles/tensions around issues of homophobia, sexism, and racism that you have experienced in the different communities to which you belong?
3. What have been your experiences with feminisms in the U.S.? What does women of color feminism mean to you? (Or are there other feminist spaces that have meaning to you?)
4. When you hear "violence and belonging" what do these terms evoke for you?
5. What are some of the resources/spaces that have been relatively safer (if any) for you?

The response to our call was overwhelming. As the number of contributors was settled, we submitted a proposal to ASA to organize one large roundtable discussion with 12 participants that reflected what we sought to contribute:

Arabs and American Studies:

A Roundtable on Race, Gender, and Community

Glaringly underrepresented within American and American Ethnic Studies, this roundtable brings together Arab and Arab-American Feminist Scholars to discuss and analyze our experiences related to race, class, gender, sexuality, violence, and belonging in the U.S. Our aim is to highlight the significance of Arab and Arab-American feminist voices to the field of American Studies, and specifically to the conference theme – violence and belonging. Our format will be a roundtable discussion in which each of us presents a short response to a set of common questions to initiate our dialogue.

The central theme of our conversation is the violence that emerges in struggles over belonging and non-belonging vis-à-vis nation(s) and communities. We, as Arab and Arab-American Muslims, Christians, and Jews, will explore discursive and material forms of violence related to belonging to the U.S. nation as it wages war in our homelands, supports the elimination of Palestine, and racializes Arab men as terrorists and Arab women as pathologically oppressed victims to justify foreign policy. Arab and Arab-American feminists confront these violences as we repeatedly discover that we can never fully belong, unless we remain silent – among our families, within Arab and Arab-American community organizations, among U.S. feminists and U.S. progressives, and/or in academia. As Lara Deeb puts it, “It’s impossible to belong, without silencing something, and there is violence in that act of silencing.”<sup>10</sup>

The Eurocentric racialization of “Arab culture” as inherently backwards, uncivilized, and excessively patriarchal impacts Arab-American feminists within Arab-American communities, marking those who speak about sexism and homophobia as accomplices to Orientalism. Meanwhile, Orientalism among mainstream U.S. feminists defines the domain of “acceptable Arab feminist speech” as veils, harems, and female circumcision, prohibiting discourses on issues outside of this domain – such as the impact of the Israeli occupation on women or the links between U.S.-led economic liberalism on women’s labor. Furthermore, among U.S. progressives the domain of “acceptable Arab feminist speech” defines any and all critiques of the Israeli occupation and expansion as anti-Semitic. As a result, exposing Zionism as a form of colonialism, racism, and sexism becomes impermissible within progressive spaces and our participation becomes predicated on silence.

Exacerbating these exclusions is that we do not fit within the scheme of the “four food groups” of U.S. racialized groups

(African-Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos/as, and Native Americans). Additionally, while the U.S. state and media racialize us as “non-white others” or “the enemy within,” the U.S. census racializes us as white/Caucasian. As a result, we are often perceived as Latinas, Greeks, Italians, South Asians, or not seen at all. All of this is complicated by our diversity in phenotype as some of us are read as white while others are not. This is particularly disconcerting when we are often perceived as “not of color enough” or “simply foreign” among the people/women of color with whom we most closely identify.

As we highlight the violence of belonging and non-belonging, it will become evident through the diverse narratives that there is no singular unified account on Arab experience in the US. In addition, we will explore activist and academic spaces of empowerment, resistance, and alliance building where Arab and Arab-American feminist politics have flourished. Through this roundtable, we hope not only to increase the visibility of Arab and Arab-American feminists within American Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Women’s Studies, but we also hope that this visibility will contribute to new understandings of race, gender, sexuality, nation, and community within the U.S.

Delighted that ASA accepted our proposal, we were surprised by the suggestion of the program committee to split the roundtable into two panels--in effect reproducing the “traditional” format ASA’s call for papers had initially sought to avoid. After negotiations with the Committee, we decided to compromise the format we had originally envisioned by dividing the roundtable into two back-to-back sessions with the intention of carrying on the conversation from the first into the second session. We named the two sessions, “Arab/Arab-American Feminists and American Studies Roundtable I: The Enemy Within: Nation, War, and Belonging” and “Arab/Arab-American Feminists and American Studies Roundtable II: Spaces of Empowerment, Communities of Resistance?”

Yet our attempt to perform an open and relatively free flowing roundtable discussion within a traditional academic setting had all the trappings of a top-down structure that was not set up for collective enterprise but that was crafted in a way that promoted the individual presentation of research and made it impossible to create the interactive, collective, and emancipatory space we sought to carve. Instead, our alternative format of theorizing lived experiences by reading short statements left many of our colleagues feeling devalued, vulnerable, and exposed on a stage that was not propped up for warmth or safety, nor did it proclaim itself to be. Theorizing personal experience and academic production seemed to be irreconcilably at odds, with one clearly privileged over the other. As is often the case with all sorts of political situations (and ours or the academy is by no means an exception), responses to Spivak’s much cited question of whether the subaltern can speak<sup>11</sup> was ambiguous at best and a resounding no at worst: if it can in fact speak, does it remain a subaltern? And if so, at what price? Our ASA experience drove home the point that even when marginalized voices are invited to the tables of power, what they and how they frame it is largely mediated by the extent to which the powerful open up spaces for “inclusion.” This is not to imply that we were completely powerless, or deprived of agency; rather, we want to acknowledge that

participation at the ASA or any other academic conference is accompanied by its own protocol and rules of engagement in which academic and non-academic professional structures are invested in and thus they are difficult to change.

In this special journal issue of *MIT EJMES* (which includes ASA panelists as well as essays by other Arab-American feminists who did not attend the ASA meeting), we resist the formulation that positions individual narratives and theoretical arguments as antithetical and hierarchical. We asked our contributors to theorize from their personal experience not necessarily because we accept at face value the feminist canonical dictum of “the personal is political.” In fact, we share the ambivalence offered by Susan Darraj and Amal Amireh in this issue. Darraj argues that this slogan does not apply to the lives of Arab-American women in the same way as it might for white women. Arab-American women, she argues, struggle on multiple fronts, at home in the private/personal sphere and in the public/political sphere. In contrast, Amireh critiques some white feminist writings on Palestinian women’s suicide bombing, including that of the late Andrea Dworkin, by illustrating how in their analysis of Arab women’s sexual politics, they privilege “culture” over history or politics, privatizing the political instead of politicizing the private. She demonstrates how such writings extract the experiences of Palestinian women from the historical and political context of Israeli occupation and places them exclusively in a cultural context in which “Palestinian women are presented as victims of an abusive patriarchal Arab culture that drives them to destroy themselves and others. Thus their violent political act is transformed into yet another example of the ways Arab culture inevitably kills its women.”

We focus on personal experiences, not because they are necessarily political (which they are), but because we value experience as an important starting point through which it becomes possible to identify, analyze, and understand the frameworks that structure our lives. In each individual narrative, there are echoes of our collective pains and ripples of the effects of our resistance. In the spirit of *This Bridge Called My Back*, this special issue of *MIT EJMES* engages in a “theory of the flesh”<sup>12</sup> constructing our analysis out of our lived experiences—the lenses through which we see the world. This volume is not a collection of academic research, but poetry, short stories, observations, and essays by poets, artists, activists, lawyers, and academics. Together, we believe that the intellectuals that we are must and do play a role in creating social justice.

In the spirit of this volume, we chose not to separate the work that is defined as “fiction” from that which is considered “factual” by social scientists. Our reasons are several and have everything to do with the premise of this volume. First, we do not subscribe to the fact/fiction dichotomy; we insist that no such a thing as universal “Truth” exists. Instead, we subscribe to the school that acknowledges and respects people’s interpretation of their own sentiments and experiences. We also view the intellectual production of Arab and Arab-American women (and by extension, all marginalized groups) as fluid, mixed and inter- and multi-disciplinary. This act of resistance to canonical dogmas, it seems to us, is the only way by which we can express ourselves and defy being boxed in categories.

This issue is also about Arab *and* Arab-American feminisms. While some of us identify as Arab-Americans, particularly a hyphenated identity that is both Arab and American while not fully one or the other, those of us who were born and raised in the Arab world are either citizens of Arab countries or else choose not to identify as Americans. Irrespective of whether we identify as Arab or Arab-Americans, we are as affected by developments “back home” as we are by what

happens at “home”; we live in different areas, identify with a diverse set of communities, and we hold ourselves accountable to the multiple publics with whom we interact. While we understand American to apply to all those who live in the Americas, in the U.S. today the label American implies a certain identification with a hegemonic definition of Americanness, the content of which is inseparable from the destruction of our homelands and the U.S. violence against our people. Some among us who identify as Arab-Americans, then, deploy the term as a political strategy through which to launch resistance to U.S. structural racism. In this sense, we see Arab-American identifications as transnational and counter-hegemonic to the dominant definition of hyphenated American identities that often imply subscribing to assimilation and the long-discredited melting pot theories.

### THE ENEMY WITHIN

In Brooklyn, Yusra Awawdeh, a 16-year old Arab-American student at Franklin D. Roosevelt High School was frisked by a school security guard after wearing a “Free Palestine” T-shirt and a Palestinian flag pin to class. The guard yanked her from Spanish class and took her into the dean’s office. Yusra said that a female school safety officer patted her down and told her to remove her shoes and socks while the dean looked on. Yusra was told to empty her pockets with the guard checking to see if she was hiding anything around her abdomen. “I was really embarrassed,” said Yusra, “They made me feel like I was a terrorist with weapons.” After the search, the dean told Yusra that she could no longer wear the scarf or flag pin and that she must remove the stickers from her notebook. “The only flag I can represent at the school is the American flag,” said Yusra, who was born and raised in Sunset Park. “I am American but I also want to represent my heritage. I felt like they were trying to take something away from me. They never said I broke any rules.”<sup>13</sup>

The terrorizing of Yusra Awawdeh is a function of the post-9/11 consolidation of Arab- and Muslim-Americans as the new enemy within. September 11, 2001, became an opportunity mobilized by the Bush administration not only to save a mediocre presidency; more importantly, 9/11 provided the Bush administration with a justification to invade Afghanistan and Iraq. September 11 also made it possible for Israel to legitimize its war against the Palestinians under the guise of seeming to be engaged, like the U.S., in a “war against terror.” In this context, the U.S. and Israel were jointly portrayed by the media and U.S. government as democracies threatened by authoritarian Arab terrorists.

The intensified criminalization of Arabs and Arab-Americans makes the project of analyzing and explaining the ways that multiple discourses and practices that structure inequality intersect with and shape each other an absolute necessity. As Mervat Hatem argues in her essay in this volume, the legitimizing of the “clash of civilization” thesis, along with “the new mushrooming literature on Islamic terrorism and the old one that dealt with Islamic fundamentalism,” were instrumental in denying Arabs and Arab-Americans a history, and reducing us to “anti-social pathological fanatics and criminals.” Post 9-11, Arab-Americans have experienced a rise in FBI investigations, surveillance, detentions, deportations, hate crimes, and racial profiling. However, while Arab men *and* women were affected (albeit in different ways and in varying degrees), a sizable amount of research and activism on the impact of the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> and Arab and Arab-American communities has framed the discussions in masculinized terms that

overlook the differential, yet relational, racialization of Arab women and men. Feminist scholars and activists have discussed the ways in which Arab and Arab-American women have been marked as passive victims of patriarchal oppression who need to be saved by white American feminists.<sup>14</sup> In addition, only limited research exists on the ways that women who wear hijab have been disproportionately targeted by hate crimes. The intensification of patriarchy and heterosexual patriotism within times of communal crisis, such as the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, is another important site for emerging research and activism related to Arabs and Arab-Americans in the U.S. Suheir Hammad's poem reflects on the impact of militarized patriotism resulting from the U.S. invasion of Iraq:

The photos  
 Women Raped  
 Posed as girls gone wild  
 This is entertainment This is staged This is recorded  
 Men Chained  
 Do words such as humiliation and torture  
 Truly fit the immensity of these acts?  
 What happens to those who survive?  
 What happens to those responsible?

For us, bringing Arab and Arab-American feminist perspectives into discussions on the post-9/11 historical context entails considering the impact of the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> on feminist movements and radical spaces, in general, and Arab and Arab-American women's participation in these spaces, in particular. For example, as Arab and Arab-American masculinities are increasingly marked as hyper-patriarchal, it becomes increasingly difficult for Arab and Arab-American feminists to speak about gender inequality within Arab and Arab-American communities. Cultural nationalist discourses often present the act of speaking out against familial and communal oppressive practices as feeding into the reproduction of racist stereotypes of Arab men and as an act of betrayal to a community under siege. While the hyper-visibility of Arab-Americans in post-9/11 U.S. multicultural discourses has provided a forum to challenge the racist and Orientalist logic that supports the criminalization of Arabs and Muslims, we agree with Jan Attia that such challenges are often limited to gestures of tokenism without a serious dialogue and thus, not all visibility is desirable or productive.

An all-too-familiar colonialist feminist logic of speaking on behalf of, and "saving" "oppressed" Arab and Muslim women from *their* patriarchal cultures have re-emerged in the aftermath of 9/11. Colonialist feminism was particularly legitimized by the Bush administration to justify its invasion of Afghanistan. The Feminist Majority, a major US feminist organization, was a prime example; as Amireh argues in this issue, the veiled and beaten body of the Afghan woman under the Taliban came to stand for Muslim and Arab women generally.

Liberal feminists have also become the gatekeepers of public funds. In the name of coalition building, they appointed themselves as spokespersons for Arab, South Asian, and Muslim communities. Engaging in racist and patronizing practices, liberals targeted communities whom they deemed ultimately inferior and incapable of leading their own struggles or speaking for themselves. In an effort to "broaden their base," some anti-war organizations refused to extend their opposition to the war on Iraq to the Israeli colonization of Palestine even though a

well established argument has shown that U.S. policies in Iraq were part of a regional plan of domination and that the U.S. and Israel were partners in the destruction of Iraq and the exploitation of its oil and other resources. In this issue, Zeina Zaatari criticizes mainstream peace campaigns that often dismissed Arab voices and concerns “as too ‘controversial and divisive’ for open discussion and too obscure and vague to take a stand against or for.” Explaining the mechanics of such exclusion, Zaatari suggests that because Arabs and Muslims are rarely seen as human, they are not imagined to have rights, to claim victimization, or be entitled to love or care.

Alternately, women of color who have historically experienced racism, discrimination, and sexism before Arabs ever immigrated to the U.S. have been particularly supportive of radical Arab and Arab-American women’s struggles. Organizations, such as the Women of Color Resource Center, INCITE! Women of Color against Violence, and scholars/activists at El Centro, El Puente, Schomburg Library, activists and scholars at the women’s Studies programs at Medgar Evers, Hunter, and City Colleges, among others, have organized political education projects to challenge the stereotyping of Arab and Arab-American women and to offer us platforms from which to speak for ourselves. Our allies opposed the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the U.S. occupation of Iraq, and they refused to succumb to pressures to abandon the Palestinian struggle for justice and peace<sup>15</sup>. Making connections between different levels and forms of violence, feminists of color have asserted their principled stands that neutrality is complicity. In this issue, Jan Attia, for example, explains why it is imperative for feminist spaces of color to challenge the segmentation of “invisibility.” Women of color movements that operate according to the assumption that domestic violence and sexual violence are linked to state violence and that the war on terror must be seen as *both* a war against women in the global south (including Iraq and Palestine) *and* a war against women of color living in the U.S. (in terms of the use of poor men and women of color as cannon fodder and the economic budget cuts in the context of social services within a wartime economy) have provided invaluable sites for coalition building between Arab and Arab-American women and women of color feminists in the U.S. Building on this framework, Jan Attia narrates the ways that violence and racism outside the home, in the context of her family’s migration history, has shaped the violence and racism she witnessed inside the home.

The contributors to this special journal issue insist that real coalition building depends on developing an analytical framework that does not denounce one form of inequality (e.g. racism), while justifying another (e.g. heterosexism), but that opposes all forms of violence and exclusive logics and practices. Happy/L.A. Hyder makes links between inclusivity among the “dyke community” and the significance of taking a stance against racism in general and anti-Arab racism in particular. Anan Ameri, a long time Palestinian activist, bases her vision for transformation on an intersectional perspective that reinforces the need for coalition building among Arab-Americans and communities of color and insists on a simultaneous struggle against race, class, and gender oppression. Therese Saliba explores the problematics of coalition building in a post-September 11<sup>th</sup> historical moment. She asks, how are we to extend ourselves beyond the borders of our community when our communities are so under siege? Yet she insists “we need to continue to make the necessary links with other folks that will pull us out of our isolation.” In addition to building coalitions through shared histories of oppression, Saliba suggests considering Arab and Arab-American histories and



experiences of power and privilege vis-à-vis other communities of color. She asks, for example, “How do we speak of the occupation of Palestine and Iraq without attention to Native Americans? And when I read a book about Arab women and globalization, [I] wonder about the lack of reference to other third world women (Filipinas, Sri Lankan, etc.) who are brought to Arab countries to serve as maids or even prostitutes to the Arab elite or US military.” Shohat, in her interview, discusses her attempts to create a multicultural feminist politics rooted in an analysis of Eurocentrism: “The idea of multiculturalism does not mean simply the fact of “many cultures.” It is both a political and epistemological project. Moreover, the concept of multiculturalism has to be defined in *relation* to Eurocentrism. I’m uncomfortable with the image of multiculturalism as just celebrating the many cultures of the world, all dancing around the bush. For that, we can go to Disneyland.” And Zeina Zaatari, in writing about the multiple spaces in which she experiences various forms of violence and non-belonging, states that the space in which she experiences a moment of safety and belonging is at an anti-war demonstration: “I felt safe within a demonstration of 80,000 or more in San Francisco all chanting to end the war against Iraq and to free Palestine. I felt safe when people of all walks of life were marching beside me and condemning aggression against the children of the Arab World. I felt safe at a Women of Color meeting where a poet identified my aggressor and connected it/him/them to her aggressor. Those new anti-war peace and feminist movements with progressive politics [...] are the only locations in the US where I could feel safe, where my belonging could start to take shape.” The authors included here do not only articulate a variety of challenges we face as Arab and Arab-American women, but also a vision for transformation.

Addressing our commonalities and differences requires a thoughtful analysis of what feminism means in our varied locations and how struggles are understood and circulated depending on where we come from. While the contributors to this journal collectively articulate an array of Arab-American feminist issues, we have unfortunately failed to include more diverse Arab-American voices, such as those from Algeria, Morocco, or Saudi Arabia. Our contributors tend to be of Palestinian, Lebanese, Egyptian, Iraqi, Jordanian, and Syrian descent – Muslims, Christians, and Jews. We attribute the greater number of Palestinian contributors to our journal issue to a larger historical context in which Palestinians have been among the most vocal and active Arab and Arab-American writers, scholars, and activists, in part, due to their position as direct recipients of European and U.S. imperialism in the Arab world for over fifty years and to the greater number of Palestinians in the U.S. compared to Arab-Americans from other countries of origin.

### **SPACES OF EMPOWERMENT, COMMUNITIES OF RESISTANCE**

As Arab-Americans increasingly engage with U.S. debates on race and ethnicity and as we become more visible, a certain set of assumptions remains in place. Some of our colleagues, for example, have marveled at what they saw as the emergence of Arab-American identity after 9/11, as if we didn’t identify with some aspects of Arabness before or that we had one single and monolithic identity. Others, unaware of the many decades of Arab-American activism in this country as well as scholarship by and about Arab-Americans that has been produced,

commented in amazement at how Arab-Americans organized for the first time. Such assumptions about the newness of Arab-American histories and identities not only erase decades of history and struggles waged by Arab-Americans, they also negate the need to account for Arab-American experiences in the U.S. social fabric and by extension in ethnic and American studies. The assumption that Arab-Americans are new immigrants who have recently come into a racial and political identity and activism simplifies the ways in which racialization operates, and it also incorporates Arab-Americans within a troubling logic of victimology in which one marginalized group is ranked above all others on the oppression scale at a particular historical moment, thus fostering competition where cooperation should exist and antagonism in place of alliance building.

Paradoxically, this moment of hyper-visibility opens up many possibilities for repositioning Arab and Arab-American Studies within larger conversations about race and ethnicity in ways that take the transnational processes by which U.S.-led imperialism in the Arab world shapes the gendered-racialization of Arabs and Arab-Americans in the U.S seriously. Yet while we have benefited from the post-9-11 hyper-visibility of Arab Americans, we insist that 9-11 was a turning point as opposed to a beginning in Arab American histories. Arab-American activism, for example, did not begin on September 11, nor is Arab-American feminism a new phenomenon brought about by the benevolence of the United States government post-9/11. Diverse groups of Arab and Arab-American women have been leading community building efforts and organizing for social justice on multiple fronts. Examples abound: the development of an Arab immigrant women's magazine, *Al Hoda*, in the early 1900's; the Syrian Ladies' Aid Society of Boston (founded in 1917); the Union of Palestinian Women's Associations in North America (1980), the Feminist Arab-American Network (1983); Al-Najda (1983); the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, North America (1999), the Radical Arab Women's Activist Network (2003); and Arab Movement of Women Arising for Justice (2004).

In addition to being inspired by the many Arab-American feminist activists who organized before us, this collection of essays would not be possible without the cumulative contributions of Arab-American feminist scholars who have previously set the groundwork. We include here Joanna Kadi's *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* and Evelyn Shakir's *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States*.<sup>16</sup> We also acknowledge the work of May Seikaly, Suad Joseph, Leila Ahmad, Alixa Naff, Yvonne Haddad, Hala Maksoud, Helen Samhan, Fadwa El Guindi, Mohja Kahf, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Diana Abu-Jaber, Elmaz Abinader, Naomi Shihab Nye, Barbara Aswad, Laura Nader, Patricia Sarrafin Ward, Etel Adnan, Kathryn Haddad, Barbara Nimri Aziz, all the women who have contributed to this journal issue, and many others.

Reflecting on and acknowledging the invaluable writings of women such as these, Amal Abdelrazek discusses how Arab-American women writers, such as Suheir Hammad, Mohja Kahf, and Diana Abu-Jaber name their experiences and use their writing as a form of resistance. As Abdelrazek points to the power and significance of Arab-American women writers, Darraj brings the reader into conversation with Mohja Kahf and other Arab-American feminist writers, such as Evelyn Shakir, Lisa Suhair Majaj, and Nada Elia.

The essays assembled here resist the American imagining of Arab culture as frozen in time, immutable, and static. Jan Attia highlights the myriad of misunderstandings that non-Arab youth of color hold about Arab-American

histories and cultures and the many possibilities for alliance building between Arabs and Arab-Americans and other communities of color. Noura Erakat's piece exposes the misconception that "strong" Arab women do not exist which, to her peers at UC-Berkeley, meant that she must have been Latina. In her narrative, Happy/L.A. Hyder sees her commitment to belly dancing as a feminist act that dismantles colonial representations of Arab women. In defining belly dancing on her own terms, Hyder links her art to her cultural and familial history as well as to lesbian performance. The effects of transnational networks and connections to the homeland is clear in the interview with Anan Ameri who explains that her activism and feminism have been shaped by events in Palestine as well as by negative images of Arabs in the U.S. media. For many of our contributors, engagements with misconceptions, hostility, and racism have crystallized their politics and set the stage for their community organizing and activism.

### SEXISM, RACISM, AND EXILE

We hope this journal issue will present our readers with situated and contextualized readings of a slice of the complex gender sexuality regimes that have circumscribed and empowered our lives. In speaking about "Arab patriarchy" in the U.S., for example, a situated and contextualized reading might highlight the ways that patriarchal cultural nationalist ideals about sexuality are intensified upon immigration, as communities struggle with the pressures of racism and assimilation, and cultural leaders promote the idea that sexual dissidence and/or feminism constitutes cultural loss or erasure. It might also show how the homophobic discourses that constructs the category "queer Arab" as an oxymoron takes on a particular form among Arab immigrant communities when queer Arabs are marked as "American(ized)", no longer Arab, and traitors to their people. Attia promotes bringing the categories "Arab" and "queer" together instead of having to pick between certain parts of her identity. Like Attia, Happy/L.A. Hyder opens up new possibilities for queer Arabs. By narrating her experience of coming out to her mother from a radical feminist perspective, she links her lesbian identity to her family history and also her re-appropriation of belly dancing to her memories at community picnics among the "church ladies."

In this special issue, there is no single site of Arab-American feminist struggle. Our contributors reflect on multiple, intersecting axes of power, privilege, and oppression shape identities, as well as the sites and methods of resistance. In the writings of those born and raised in the U.S., in bi-cultural Arab-American families and communities, and of those who are born and raised in the Arab world, displacement and an ongoing travel between diverse cultural and political locations emerge in varying forms. Noura Erakat, born and raised in the U.S., constantly travels between her Palestinian community and her progressive student of color community context. For Emanne Bayoumi, displacement in her story about a queer working class Arab-American woman living in the U.S. far from her family in the Middle East reveals a yearning for home, safety, and belonging. For Sherene Seikaly, multiple travels between the U.S., Lebanon, and Palestine – and not always in that sequence – provide a context for considering the ways that transnationalism and transnational travel are constituted by relations of power and inequality: Who can travel and who is not allowed exit or entry through borders? As a U.S. citizen she can go to the birthplace of her parents and earlier ancestors. But as a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon, neither she nor her parents could cross the impenetrable

borders Israel constructed to keep away those who belonged from the land--seized for others who were not allowed to belong. Ella Shohat speaks of multiple displacements. As an Iraqi-Jew in Israel, she grew up in an environment where Arabic language and culture were suppressed and denied. She reflects on her work on the Arab-Jewish dichotomy, transnational feminism, Eurocentrism, and multiculturalism.

Our positionality at the intersections of sexism within our communities and racism in U.S. society is a recurring theme throughout this issue. As the title of one of Youmna Chala's poems remind us, our actions are "entangled" in the web of sexism, racism, and exile, within and outside our community's. Alia Malek suggests that our location within and between multiple and shifting coordinates of power places us in "alternating defensive postures." Similarly, Noura Erakat situates herself between the "dual struggle" against Zionism, on the one hand, and sexism within the Palestinian National Liberation Movement, on the other.

As with other migrant communities under siege, sexism and the control of female sexuality are devices employed by conservative forces and institutions to draw communal boundaries. Another major preoccupation among authors in this volume lies in the pressure families exert to steer their daughters to higher education and career advancement while coveting their virginity. In Malek's perspective, obtaining an education operates as a modern day convent, keeping Arab daughters away from sexual relationships by pushing them to focus on education and career advancement. As for Nathalie Handal, access to education in exchange for virginity and the expectation of fulfillment of marriage to a Palestinian man, was the unspoken deal in her family that she realized as she came into her feminist and sexual consciousness. Handal traces her personal trajectory of sexual liberation: from seeing sex as dirty and her body as belonging to men, to allowing herself the right to desire and pleasure.

While discussing sexism is difficult in some of our communal spaces, it is not our intent to gloss over patriarchal structures and practices among Arab-Americans. Yet, it is impossible to disentangle ourselves from the larger context of a hegemonic U.S. discourse that interprets all things Arab as oppressive or "backwards." Arab women's experiences with sexism are often exaggerated, sensationalized, and used against us, just as the Bush administration has used the rhetoric that Afghan women were the most oppressed in the world to justify the U.S. invasion or the reports on the number of Iraqi women who voted in the recent Iraqi elections to justify U.S. colonization.

We encounter similar challenges as we confront homophobia. As Joanna Kadi explains, September 11<sup>th</sup> has made it increasingly difficult to publicly talk about homophobia in Arab communities without reinforcing anti-Arab racism. But this context, in fact, has also intensified the need to work with allies in developing an anti-racist and anti-homophobic analysis of oppression that is dialectically linked to discussions of sexism, exploitation, militarization, and the war against our communities.

"The nameless faceless veiled woman" is another stereotypical image several contributors have had to regularly contend with, as Darraj states. Constantly approached by others with "her" in mind, Arab and Arab-American women are often cornered and almost coerced to talk about "the veil", which is seen as symbolic oppression. Head covering becomes a defining presence in our lives, regardless whether it is relevant to this particular woman's life or not. Many of us are often expected to speak only to issues deemed by others as detrimental to our

progress as women and as people. The “veil”, “female circumcision”, and “honor” crimes are but three examples that have become the standard litmus test by which our feminism is measured and evaluated, and the basis for which we get hired and fired, granted monetary rewards for our projects, or granted native informant<sup>17</sup> passes to national feminist gatherings. We collectively and individually insist not to play to the tune of such reductive, ahistorical, and de-contextual framing of our struggles as liberal feminist crusaders refuse to acknowledge our right to define our agendas or to name our concerns on our own terms. As Amira Jarmakani puts it so well, invoking the hijab usually displaces other struggles in which Arab and Arab-American women are engaged. Jarmakani suggests that “the mythology of the veil is so powerful and so prolific that it is virtually impossible to talk about the realities of Arab and Arab-American women’s lives without invoking, and necessarily responding to, the looming image and story that the mythology of the veil tells.” Calling this forced constant engagement “the politics of invisibility”, Jarmakani argues that this politics doubly silences Arab and Arab-American women “by the very categories that claim to give them voice.”

Islamophobia is evident in dominant American perceptions of “the veil” and “Arab culture” which are presented as exceptionally oppressive to women. Hegemonic U.S. feminisms often construct Islam as antithetical to feminism, assuming that one cannot be both a Muslim and a feminist. Similarly, such binaries (secular=modern; religious=backwards) can be reproduced within and among Arab communities. Mervat Hatem challenges such feminist dogmas: “When did Arab and/or Muslim women start believing that their observant counterparts were less critical or liberated? Should not Arab women in general, whether they are secular or religiously observant, have the right to choose their politics?” Also engaging the question of religiosity and secularity and their relationship to feminist thought and consciousness, Moulouk Berry and Lara Deeb question the religious/secular dichotomy from opposite sides although with as strong an insistence on rejecting problematic simplifications. Describing how dominant feminisms have a tendency to secularize the sacred, Lara Deeb criticizes secular feminists who proclaim the feminist label for themselves while denying it to other women whom they deem “unfit” as feminists because of the latter’s religiosity. Moulouk Berry, on the other hand, continues the discussion from what seems to be the opposite direction--that of a secular professor who teaches a course on the Qur’an to mostly religious Muslim students. However, like Deeb and Hatem, Berry argues against intolerance and tendencies to monopolize the truth, pushing her students to question the authority of knowledge on Islam. Just like Berry’s students, the women Deeb interviewed share a belief in essential differences between women and men. However, one major difference between the two groups lies in that the Lebanese women Deeb interviews did not see such essential differences as a cause for reinforcing gender hierarchy; Berry’s students on the other hand, advocated the most conservative notions of religious commitments. The focus on religiosity in the essays of Deeb and Berry in particular, might be reflective of the legacy of the Lebanese civil war and how the wounds of the war were deepened by a growing distance between home and diaspora.

The pedagogical questions Berry raises resonate among several contributors. Like Berry, Hala Nasser views teaching as a site of struggle. As she traces the challenges of teaching about Arabs, the Arab world, and Arab literature, Nasser discusses how “American” students are particularly resistant to changing their stereotypes of Arabs, even when presented with alternative evidence and

information. In crafting alternative ways of teaching and thinking about Arab and Arab-American communities in the U.S., our contributors resist speaking of “Arab patriarchy” when it is constructed as an anomaly or an exclusively “Arab” experience that can be reduced to a fixed and unchanging cultural phenomena inherent to Arab people and isolated from history, politics, economics, displacement, militarism, colonialism, and war. As Handal points out, sexism is not exclusive to Arab culture. As she compares her experiences with that of her peers in Latin America and France, Handal suggests that patriarchy exists everywhere, although it takes on different forms in different contexts. It is our hope that the essays assembled here will be read in classrooms to illuminate some of the diverse experiences of Arab and Arab-American women.

As we view Arab American feminisms as an ongoing process that builds on the cumulative struggles by many before us, we do not offer conclusions. Instead, we hope that together, the essays gathered here will defy neat and linear categorization and will speak articulately, theoretically, and experientially to the diversity of Arab-American women and our ideas, desires, emotions, and strategies for survival. We hope that this journal issue will illustrate that there is no monolithic Arab woman; that the geographic boundaries between Arab homelands and diasporas are fluid and overlapping; and that Arab-American feminisms have existed, on multiple fronts, simultaneously, within our families and communities, in struggles against racism and colonialism, in debates over spirituality and the divine, within progressive and feminist spaces, in academia, and amongst each other. We envision a future that includes more possibilities for alliance building between U.S. women of color who share histories of oppression by the U.S. state, and diasporic women from countries that the U.S. has been invading, and women in other parts of world who struggle for justice and peace. We envision a radical feminist politics that insists on the simultaneity of racial justice, gender justice, and class equality; demands sovereignty for colonized women and men “over here” and “over there”; and engages in the arduous process of crafting alternatives to exclusionary, hetero-masculinist nationalist politics. Inspired by Sudanese poet Amal Fadlalla’s, our vision for transformation claims subaltern histories and links us to our lands. It refuses the binary of homelands and diasporas, confronts sexism and militarism simultaneously, and opens up new possibilities for solidarity from the Sudan to Palestine, from Iraq to Mexico, among young working girls, white American allies, and beyond.

women the color of ebony and wheat  
 pregnant  
 pregnant with history  
 with authority that divides lotus berries among the poor  
 naked women  
 naked clothed naked clothed naked  
 dancing on the streets of Boston  
 ‘al-lawl, al-lawl ya lawlia  
 they’ll bewitch you my Ethiopian beauty’  
 and they liberate America  
 and they plant a seed of Karbala.....

Sweet and generous Nile?  
 sweet and branched out for miles

wash my features with your water,  
 release my wings and my hands,  
 scatter my history with your rain,  
 in the heart of the West Bank,  
 break my bracelets and my chains,  
 turn me into a sandalwood powder rubbed in a kaffiyeh  
 for Rachel under the tank  
 facing a bullet and a platoon  
 and open a Mexican street  
 for the girl going out to her shift.<sup>18</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For a critique of disciplinary boundaries, see Ella Shohat “Area Studies, Gender Studies, and the Cartographies of Knowledge,” *Social Text*, 72 (Fall 2002), p. 67-78; Shohat, “Area Studies, Transnationalism and the Production of Knowledge,” *Signs*, (Summer 2001), p. 1269-1272; and Shohat, “Introduction,” to *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, (Cambridge: MIT Press in collaboration with the New Museum, 1998). See also Minoo Moallem’s, “Middle Eastern Studies, Feminism, and Globalization,” *Signs*, (Summer 2001), p. 1265-1268.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the ambiguous racialization of Arab-Americans, see Nadine Naber, “Ambiguous Insiders: An Investigation of Arab American Invisibility,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 23, no. 1 (2000), p. 37-61. Also see Evelyn Alsultany, “From Ambiguity to Abjection: Iraqi-Americans Negotiating Race in the United States,” *The Anguished Scream: Studies on the Arab Diaspora*, eds Zahia Smail Salhi and Ian Richard Netton (London: Routledge, Forthcoming 2005).

<sup>3</sup> For more on transnational feminism, see for example, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Anna Russo, Lourdes Torres, eds. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991); Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan, eds. *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Chandra Talpade Mohanty and M. Jacqui Alexander, eds. *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat, eds. *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Ella Shohat, ed. *Talking Visions* (Boston: MIT Press, 1998); and Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Minoo Moallem, eds. *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Joanna Kadi, ed., *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (Boston: South End Press, 1994) is one of the first anthologies on/of Arab-American and Arab Canadian Feminists.

<sup>5</sup> In her essay, “Where Is Home? Fragmented Lives, Border Crossings, and the Politics of Exile,” in *Radical History Review*, no 86., (Spring 2003), p. 89-101, Rabab Abdulhadi discusses the problematics of post- 9/11 passing for a non-Arab and a non-Muslim and reflects on the transnational ties between home and homeland for someone who is born and raised in Palestine.

<sup>6</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, Eds., *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press: 1981)

<sup>8</sup> Five of the contributors to *This Bridge we Call Home* have contributed to this journal issue; the fifth, Reem Abdelhadi, Rabab’s sister, permanently lives in London, which excludes her by definition of her geographic location from participating.

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<sup>9</sup> Nadine Naber, Eman Desouky, and Lina Baroudi, "The Forgotten '-Ism': An Arab American Women's Perspective on Zionism, Racism, and Sexism," in *Time to Rise*, eds. Maylei Blackwell, Linda Burnham, Jung Hee Choi., (Oakland, CA: Women of Color Resource Center, 2004)

<sup>10</sup> From Lara Deeb's statement presented at American Studies Association Annual Conference 2003.

<sup>11</sup> In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" South Asian feminist and post-colonial scholar, Gayatri Spivak asks a salient question to those who are waging struggles for liberation. Spivak does not suggest that the subaltern, or the colonized, do not speak for themselves; rather she argues that the way structures of power operate, even when colonized people do speak or act, their own words are either not heard or their actions are misunderstood or reframed to mean something completely different from what the subaltern intended to convey in the first place. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 1988)

<sup>12</sup> Cherrie Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back*, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> *New York Daily News*, November 22, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others", *American Anthropologist*, v. 104, no. 3, (September 2002)

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of how Zionist activists have historically subverted the inclusion of Palestinian rights in U.S. peace movement mobilizations, see Rabab Abdulhadi, "Activism and Exile: Palestinianness and the Politics of Solidarity," in *Local Actions: Cultural Activism, Power, and Public Life in America*, eds. Melissa Checker and Maggie Fishman, (Columbia University Press, 2004)

<sup>16</sup> Joanna Kadi, ed. *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (Boston: South End Press, 1994); Evelyn Shakir, *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1997)

<sup>17</sup> See Trinh Minh-Ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 79-118.

<sup>18</sup> Excerpted from Amal Fadlalla's "The Memory of your Hands is a Rainbow" translated to English by Khaled Mattawa in this journal.



**LIVING WITH/IN EMPIRE—  
GROUNDED SUBJECTIVITIES**

## BEYOND WORDS

Suheir Hammad\*

1.  
Where has my language gone?  
The poet searches for words to wrap around these times  
Make them sense Make them pretty Make them useful

Words from the past haunt our conversations  
Empire and Crusade  
Plans and Centuries  
All these words cleared understanding before  
Fall heavy now  
And weightless into this abyss of bad news

I have seen the photographs  
Again words Prison Torture

Desperate for words I can write  
That are not profane That are objective Read as rational  
So people will not stop reading this self-conscious poem  
So my parents will not be embarrassed  
So Americans will demand the return of their own

Desperate for words I can write  
So I can keep from becoming something hard and unforgiving

Language has failed me

I am told to believe nothing I read  
Then everything I read

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\* **Suheir Hammad's** poetry has appeared in numerous periodicals, including *The Amsterdam News*, *Essence*, *STRESS Hip-Hop Magazine* and the *Middle East Report*; and in anthologies including *Listen Up!*, and *Sing, Whisper, Shout, Pray!: Feminist Visions for a Just World*. She has authored two books: *Born Palestinian*, *Born Black* and *Drops of This Story*. She has performed her poetry on HBO's "Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry," and at universities, prisons, and other venues.

I am given my own face to be wary of  
 I am told to fear colors as alerts  
 I am told over and over  
 Iraq is not Palestine  
 Kabul is not New York

The photos  
 Women Raped  
 Posed as girls gone wild  
 This is entertainment This is staged This is recorded  
 Men Chained  
 Do words such as humiliation and torture  
 Truly fit the immensity of these acts?  
 What happens to those who survive?  
 What happens to those responsible?

Haiti is not Chechnya  
 Chiapas is not East L.A.  
 Iraq is not Palestine  
 Over and over I am told

I am given a vantage point and a lens and instructed  
 Do not move Do not look up Do not look down

I am falling

2.  
 No connections here  
 No illuminated parallels  
 Two different histories and two different peoples  
 Make no links  
 Do not confuse the issues

Only confuse the people

For 56 years Israel has legitimized  
 This type of behavior  
 Sanctioned violence in the name of a god  
 Who does not have enough love for us all  
 A god who chooses sides  
 A god who has favorites and chosen ones  
 A god who cuts deals and shuffles souls  
 The type of god who does not answer prayers  
 Who understands only one language  
 A god who does not worry his beautiful mind with  
 Such ugliness  
 I am told this is America's god

The photos from Rafah Palestine  
 It is 1948 and 2004 in the same frame

Their eyes say to the camera  
 What will you do with this pain?  
 Where will you take it?  
 Can you take it from me?

This space between the lens and the subjects  
 Is concentrated with pleas for witness  
 With promises of cycles unbroken  
 With children's bicycles under the rubble of once were homes

Another level of exile is being constructed

And I am falling

Aaagghh, ya Phalesteen  
 What is it about us they hate so much?  
 This face? These eyes? This obstinate refusal to die?  
 How much trauma can one nation endure with the world staring?  
 Some mouths open in shock  
 Others silent and sneering  
 While women scream at a frequency the living cannot hear  
 Again? Again ya Phalesteen?

3.

How fucked up is it that I have to choose between ending  
 One occupation or another?  
 Partition my time and portion my information

I have to make Nice Play Fair and Polite  
 When I want to tear open my chest to void it of this emptiness  
 This ache has eaten into my head and wears down my dreams  
 My friends worry I am not eating enough  
 Am taking too much on Too much in  
 I find nowhere to rest this responsibility

If I say nothing I am complicit  
 If I say something I am isolated as extreme  
 As a theorist in conspiracy  
 As if war is ever a coincidence  
 As if genocide simply happens

This is about oil and land and water  
 This is about illusion and the taking on of airs  
 The poor once again the munitions in rich men's cannons

This is about light and dark  
 There is no black and white in humanity

I am told  
 Venezuela is not Cuba

Rwanda is not Kurdistan

I am not the woman kneeling  
 In front of soldiers and their cameras and their weapons  
 I am not the child shot in the head by the Israeli Defense Forces  
 I am not the starving AIDS inflicted mother  
 Praying I live longer than my children  
 So they will not be orphaned and sick and have to bury me  
 I am not the child who watched  
 Her family chopped to death in Lebanon in Sudan in Nicaragua  
 I am not the father who leaves his children so as not to hear their  
 empty Bellies call out Baba, where is the bread?

I am the woman whose taxes outfitted this tragedy  
 The American the Authority does not speak for  
 The Arab the Arab leaders do not speak for  
 The woman whose shouts of Not in My Name  
 Were spit back at me as a slogan of the misguided at best  
 I am the girl from Brooklyn told to mind her business  
 I am the poet in search of new words  
 And a new world Not Mars

4.  
 We use antiquated terms that cannot stretch enough to touch this  
 truth  
 We have not learned from the past enough to not repeat it

I am told it has always been this way  
 War and Pillage  
 Rape is older than prostitution  
 And prostitution is the oldest politic  
 The way the world has always been  
 The pimps and those they pimp

The human race has always left  
 Those who fall behind

If I am to survive then  
 I learn from the present  
 From the future promised

We learn to live with madness  
 One cannot be healthy in a sick world  
 Only navigate illnesses Only medicate wounds  
 Pray you are not contagious  
 Try to hurt no one

My elders say dissent has always been watched  
 Radical ideas have always been recorded  
 But even those who have lived on the margins admit

Under breath It has never been this bad

Not everyone is suffering True  
 Most thirst  
 A few swim in pools that fake connection to seas  
 Most starve  
 I throw away meals I have no appetite for  
 You can shop from your couch and eat food fast  
 And never think about anything other than your credit card debt  
 And the next hour's purchases  
 Shop and stop asking questions  
 I have envied this stupor  
 Even knowing it is the least honorable suicide  
 Even knowing its apathy is another kind of murder

5.

Sometimes all you can do is inhale and exhale  
 Life a shallow version of its potential  
 Sometimes all you can do is search for life where you are  
 In the city A flash of yellow on the basketball court  
 The divine geometry in the pattern of a girl's hijab

For a week I have been cleaning and knifing enough  
 Parsley for tabbouleh to feed hundreds  
 I pray over the green  
 That what I make will feed those in need of a meal

There is still love in us  
 The proof is that we are watching it die  
 There is still hope in us  
 Hope is there in my sisters' eyes  
 There is still enough resistance in us  
 To create a world where there is no  
 Your people or my people  
 But our people  
 Our people who kill Our people who are killed

I somehow know love will save us  
 The proof is in the stories not broadcast  
 The poems not published  
 The truth between the lies  
 The stories whispered in the dusk of this day

I know somehow love will save us  
 Though I can't find the passion or desire in my body to make it  
 There is still a source for peace deeply embedded in this chaos

I know love will save us  
 Though words fail to point out how

Amazingly I still pray  
To a god I envision to be larger than any nation Any religion

And I still hunt for language to gather into a poem  
That I pray will feed those like me  
In need of proof they are not alone

# CLASS EQUALITY, GENDER JUSTICE, AND LIVING IN HARMONY WITH MOTHER EARTH

## AN INTERVIEW WITH JOANNA KADI

By Nadine Naber

Joanna Kadi is the editor of *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* and author of *Thinking Class: Sketches from a Cultural Worker*. For more information on Joanna Kadi and her work, visit her website: [www.joannakadi.org](http://www.joannakadi.org)

**Nadine Naber:** Your edited anthology, *Food for our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab American and Arab Canadian Feminists* was ground breaking. It challenged the invisibility of Arab American and Arab Canadians and produced a key shift in feminist studies by providing a reference point for understanding some of the issues that impact Arab American and Arab Canadian women's lives. Can you tell us about the vision behind the book?

**Joanna Kadi:** I love reading. Ever since I was a kid I'd lose myself in books. It's one of the ways I survived my childhood. Later, trying to make sense of the world, I again found myself lost in books, this time written by feminists/working-class people/queers/Arabs/other people of color. It was so healing and liberatory. These writings helped me make sense of the world, and they helped me figure out how to understand my life in relation to social/cultural/political structures. Feminist literature in particular just blew my mind. In the early 80s I was married to a man who was abusing me, although abuse was so normal for me that I didn't really notice. During that time, I connected with other feminists who shared with me the writings of bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Dorothy Allison, Chrystos. Wow – talk about opening up my world. I especially loved the anthologies written by women of color, such as *This Bridge Called My Back*. I found that the anthologies offered this amazing diversity of voices, this wild array of history and culture where



pieces both connected with each other and stood on their own. I would always think ‘Gee, I wish we (i.e. Arab feminists) had an anthology like that!’ At a point in the late 80s several women, who had the same desire, encouraged me to take on the task. And I, starry-eyed, innocent, and naïve as I was about the world of writing, publishing, and editing, said ‘OK!’ I was completely – and I do mean completely – clued out about what it would mean, and how much work was involved, and how many people would carry grudges against me for years because I rejected their piece! I have to laugh about it now. I would never have taken on the project had I understood what was involved.

**NN:** The book impacted me tremendously by validating my experiences and providing a tool for teaching about Arab American femininities in a context in which literature on Arab American women is limited. Can you tell us more about the impact of the book? How do you think it has impacted feminist thought or feminist studies in the U.S.? How has it impacted Arab American women's lives?

**JK:** It’s hard for me to answer this question in any kind of accurate way. I only know when people seek me out and tell me what the book means to them. Occasionally someone will take the time to write me a letter. Sometimes South End Press tells me that a professor in such-and-such a place is using it as a course textbook. Other times people will come up to me at readings, and let me know how positively the book has impacted their life. But there is no way for me to track the book’s impact except through these sporadic exchanges. I will say, though, that when people write to me or come up to me after a reading, and tell me the book has given them something meaningful, that is a precious gift.

**NN:** A great deal has changed since 1994 when *Food for our Grandmothers* was published. In your view, how have some of the issues the authors who contributed to *Food for our Grandmothers* spoke to changed since then? How would you frame an anthology on Arab American and Arab Canadian Feminists if you were going to publish it today?

**JK:** Have the issues changed? Basically, I do not believe so. We are still battling very tough anti-Arab racism in this country, we are still battling stereotypes and beliefs that the larger society carries about passive, downtrodden Arab women and brutally-oppressive, demonized Arab men. Issues of sexism, classism, heterosexism, and ableism in our own community are still prevalent and need to be challenged. However, within these basic frameworks, I believe the oppression we experience has intensified and deepened since the attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001, and since the U.S. invaded Iraq (perhaps I should say: since the U.S. attacked Iraq in a more forceful and violent way than it had during the years of the embargo).

If I was going to take on the task of editing another anthology (goddesses forbid!) I would need to address that. I would also want to make the book more diverse than *Food For Our Grandmothers*, by ensuring there were more immigrant women, queer and/or trans women, working-class women, Muslim women.

**NN:** Despite the fact that many Arab American feminists use the framework of "intersectionality" (which tends to refer to the links between race, class, and gender), there has been little written on socio-economic class. You have written an entire

book entitled, “Thinking Class.” What would you say the significance of socio-economic class is to the study or practice of feminism in general and Arab American feminisms in particular?

**JK:** As a working-class person who thinks a lot about class and perceives the way it impacts us in our daily lives, I simply cannot stress the importance of this issue enough, and the need for all caring, thinking people to take this issue seriously. Right now we are seeing a terrifying assault on working-poor and working-class people in this country. The rates of homelessness have skyrocketed – the average age of a homeless person in this country, the richest country in the world, is 9 years old. The middle class is disappearing. The gap between rich and poor is heightening. I live in rural Wisconsin, which is, as all of rural America is, economically depressed. Most people work shit jobs for shit wages. They juggle two or three jobs and have no health insurance. Friends of mine currently have their heat turned off or are without phones because they simply cannot pay their bills – and these are people working more than 40 hours a week. It is a national disgrace. We need campaigns for living wages; we need national health care; we need decent jobs that do not harm the environment. I shudder when I think about the impact of another four years of Republican rule in this country. Their contempt and hostility toward working-poor and working-class people are so clear and obvious and will simply run rampant in the coming years.

**NN:** You have also critiqued homophobia during a historical moment in which few Arab American writers have raised LGBT issues. Where do LGBT issues fit in the way that you think about the words, “violence” and “belonging?”

**JK:** There’s a lot of homophobia within the Arab-American community. Absolutely. And yet, I have to add: there’s a lot of homophobia within American society; our community is no different than the larger society. I usually say these two statements together because there’s so much anti-Arab racism right now that if I were to simply say the first statement and not add the second, I would be adding fuel to the fire of racism. As in, one of the ways anti-Arab racism works is that our community is tagged as more homophobic than the white mainstream culture held up as the norm.

It’s such a mindfuck to always have to qualify these things. If I were simply having a conversation with you, the editors of this journal, a group of Arab-American women, I would be able to say “There’s a lot of homophobia in our community.” You would understand what I mean and nod in agreement, and we’d have a discussion about our community with all of its flaws and grace and infuriating qualities and goodness. But if I’m talking to non-Arabs (and I don’t just mean white people here!), and I say “There’s a lot of homophobia in Arab-American society,” the nodding would be of a very different quality. The nod of ‘Oh yeah those really fucked-up Arabs. They’re totally homophobic, and they’re so misogynist. You poor woman! How do you put up with it?’

I hope you’re following me here. What I’m trying to say is that many of us inside the community are operating from a holistic understanding of the community, but pretty much nobody else is. So we always have to explain, to contextualize our words and ideas. Which isn’t a totally bad thing. I mean, clarity is good, explaining

things fully in their proper context is good. On the other hand, it does get a bit tiring!

**NN:** What have been your experiences with feminisms in the U.S.? What does women of color feminism mean to you? (Or are there other feminist spaces that have meaning to you?)

**JK:** My experiences with different feminists have pretty much run the gamut, as I expect all of ours have. I have experienced great support and inclusion as a woman of color from different white women and different women of color, and I have experienced disrespectful and painful dismissal by different white women and different women of color. Sometimes feminists have argued that ‘Arabs aren’t people of color;’ others exhibit absolutely abysmal ignorance about Arabs generally; others actually believe the crap about ‘Arab men are the most sexist men of all!’ and ‘Arab women are the most oppressed women of all, and gee it’s lucky your husband let you come to this event, and why aren’t you wearing a veil?’ Rather mind-blowing.

I always state there is a wide array of responses to Arab women within feminist circles, and that I have, over my 20-odd years as part of this movement, encountered many feminists who are supportive and concerned about my community. I am very disturbed by the current mainstream media discussion of feminism, in which the women’s movement is continually painted as a very white movement that is very racist. In my own experience that is an inaccurate portrayal – I have always participated in a multi-racial women’s movement that actively fights racism. This inaccurate portrayal has filtered down to progressive young women, both white and of color. I have, several times in the last few years, found myself talking with a group of young white progressive women and have had to dispel their notion of a completely racist women’s movement made up solely of white women.

**NN:** What are your visions for transformation? What I mean is that if you could create a different world, a world without oppression, what would it look like? What do you think needs to change? And what do you suggest that we do differently in order to get there?

**JK:** Wow, in 100 words or less. That’s tough. I care so much about transforming our society, our world, into one where social justice, active participation, and sustainability are the cornerstones and foundational building blocks. I do have to say, though, that my absolute priority vision is that my species – humankind – live in harmony with Mother Earth, and take care of her. Currently, I feel incredible pain and grief about the degradation we heap upon Mother Earth every day as we continue to poison, rape, destroy, and clearcut her. I want to live in a world where such activities are unthinkable, where the value/belief/attitude of caring for our Mother is simply a given, never questioned, never discussed because it is so core, so deeply embedded into our psyches and bodies and actions.

In rural Wisconsin I catch glimpses of this vision, because many of us are attempting to live that way. Many of us are restoring the land and bringing back the indigenous prairie grasses and flowers that once covered the vast majority of the state of Wisconsin. A small but viable group of farms are farming organically. In general, I find people connected to the land out here in ways that don’t tend to

happen in the cities. These connections, I believe, are what will allow us to move into my vision.

I wonder if I might close with the last stanza of my poem “Relatively Small Pieces of Land” that express some of these ideas:

Each day I make the choice to stay  
on, with, by the land.  
Is it the ruffed grouse, or my heart? The  
coyote’s howl of anguished desire, or mine?  
Who shed her skin last night,  
transformed by the light of the  
moon? Who called to the night sky? Who  
embraced with her whole heart? Who risked  
it all, for love, simplicity, a precious  
small piece of bluffland in a driftless region?

# ARAB AMERICANS AND ARAB AMERICAN FEMINISMS AFTER SEPTEMBER 11, 2001:

## MEETING THE EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL CHALLENGES FACING OUR COMMUNITIES

Mervat F. Hatem\*

In this short paper, I reflect on the effects that September 11 had on my own writings, specifically the desire to examine the impact they had on Arab and Arab American communities, the location of gender issues and concerns in this discussion and the way the so called transnational loyalties and identities associated with a global world continue to be rooted in national communities and agendas. Next, I direct my attention to the national history of Arab American organizing in the U.S., how it combined international and national issues and agendas that shaped their important political relations with the African and Jewish American communities, and how September 11 left its imprints on them. Finally, I will examine some of the ethnic and political tensions that surfaced in the Arab American communities in the post September 11 period that had gendered implications.

### I. SEPTEMBER 11 THROUGH ARAB AMERICAN AND FEMINIST EYES

The events of September 11, 2001 presented complex challenges to American society and its citizens. These challenges were deeply felt in Arab American communities who found themselves in a unique position. Like the larger American community, Arab Americans were horrified by the massive loss of civilian lives that resulted from the use of airplanes as weapons to attack the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as symbols of American economic and military power. At the same

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time, most members of Arab American communities were keenly aware and critical of the general contempt for Arabs and Arabness in U.S. culture and the very negative role that American foreign policy played in the Middle East especially its support of conservative authoritarian Arab governments and Israeli repression of the Palestinian struggle for national self-determination. This ambivalent position vis-à-vis U.S. national and international policies isolated Arab Americans from the larger community that closed ranks and became unified in the demand for retaliation against national and international groups associated with the perpetrators.

The fact that the September 11 attacks were led by Arab Muslim men from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates led to the general suspicions of Arabs, Arab Americans, and American Muslims who were seen by the larger public as homogeneously complicit in these brutal acts. As a result, members of these distinct but overlapping communities bore the brunt of the early attacks by an angry American public. It is worth noting here that Arabs and Arab Americans trace their national roots to the 21 member states of the League of Arab states: Egypt, the Sudan, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, U.A.E, Oman, Yemen, Djibouti, Somalia, Eritrea, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania. Ethnically, they include Muslims (Sunnis, Shiites, Alawites and Ismailis), Christians (Protestants, Catholics, members of the Greek Orthodox Church as well as member of regional churches like the Copts, Caldeans and Assyrians, and Maronites) and Jews. American Muslims represented a much larger diverse national group that included Arabs, African Americans, Africans (from East, West and Southern Africa), South Asians (from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), Indonesians, Turks, and Iranians. Whereas the size of the Arab American community was estimated to be between 2.5-3 million, the American Muslim community was estimated to be about 7 million. According to one recent source, South Asians represented 32% of the community, Arabs 26%, African Americans 20% with the remaining numbers coming from other countries.<sup>1</sup> The ethnic diversity of Arab Americans and American Muslims was not appreciated by those who committed hate crimes against members of the communities in the U.S. leading to the indiscriminant assaults on Muslims, Christians, and even a Sikh who was confused for a Muslim because he wore a turban.

Next, private and governmental U.S. groups began a sustained attack on the major institutions of Arab American communities, including their schools, charitable organizations, and mosques, as breeding grounds for terrorism and terrorists. This paved the way to the broad violation of the civil and citizenship rights of Arab Americans and American Muslims.<sup>2</sup> The precariousness of the civil status of members of these overlapping communities was brought home to me when a family member whose name revealed his Arab and/or Muslim ancestry was consistently denied employment during this period adding a personal dimension to the concept of a "community under attack".

With the passage of the Patriot Act, the massive random imprisonment of Arab Americans and American Muslims, and their maltreatment in captivity provided other graphic examples of the increasing violation of the civil rights of these groups. In response, one's political energy was instinctively channeled into the defense of the community. Intellectually, I switched my research focus from the primary study of gender and politics in the Middle East and in the U.S. to an exclusive preoccupation with the U.S. policies on the war on terrorism and homeland security that presented new specific representations of Arabs and Arab Americans as external and internal enemies.<sup>3</sup> My goal was to embark on a systematic critique of

the official U.S. government discourses as well as the conventional academic ones, which treated these populations, their cultures, and their national, political, and social projects as homogeneously suspect providing justification for continued attacks. The clash of civilization thesis, the new mushrooming literature on Islamic terrorism, and the old one that dealt with Islamic fundamentalism converged to provide multiple justifications for denying Arabs, Arab Americans, and specifically Muslims complex histories and decontextualizing the complex political and economic crises in the Middle East and the U.S. of which they were a part. The resulting powerful representations treated them as anti-social pathological fanatics, terrorists, and criminals with primitive motives that did not deserve historical or political analysis.

Because U.S. policies and discourses on the war on terrorism and homeland security pitted an abstract “good” Western civilization against an “evil” Islamic one, I found it important to counter these constructions with a discussion of how September 11 was part of the expanded political challenge that the Palestinians and the Islamist movements in the Middle East mounted against the U.S. influence and policies in the region. U.S. support of continued Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and authoritarian Arab states like Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf principalities contributed to widespread condemnation of U.S. policies and its local allies who became frequent targets of attacks waged by the representatives of political Islam as a major oppositional force in the region.

Because the discourse on the war on terrorism objectified Arab and Muslim women as victims that needed the U.S. to liberate them, it was important to couple a critique of that condescending construction with parallel critiques of the secular nationalist discourses that circulated in the region, which attacked Islam and Islamists as the causes of the backwardness of Arab/Islamic societies and their women, as well as the Islamist ones that attacked the gains made by women in postcolonial societies offering more conservative definitions of their roles. Because U.S., Arab nationalist, and Islamist discourses used the discussions of women and their roles to settle political scores with each other, students of gender relations needed to avoid that trap by simultaneously recognizing how these groups offered complex external and internal challenges to Arab men and women. Here, I found myself agreeing with Fouad Ajami, the conservative Arab political theorist, in rejecting an approach he characterized as “Arab victimology” with its simplified analysis of U.S. global dominance as the only source of problems facing the region, its populations, and its women. Unlike him, I do not limit my analysis of the problems facing Arab societies and their women to internal actors like Arab states and Islamist groups, but add to the discussion the role played by external actors, like the U.S., that have simultaneously contributed to the degraded representations of Arab societies, Islam, and women using gender agendas to give their projects political legitimacy.<sup>4</sup> In making these political projects and gendered discourses part of an Arab and an Arab American critical enterprise, my goal was to deconstruct them, neutralize their political effects on these communities, and develop an independent intellectual space where Arab and Arab American men and women can develop voices that are clear about their enemies within and without.

While in the above reading, the importance of gender in the discussion of U.S., nationalist, and Islamist policies and discourses was maintained, equal attention was given to the war on terrorism, homeland security, and the substantive discussion of the intersection of international, regional, and local conflicts and alliances. At some point, I wondered if this meant that I now agreed with the position taken by some

male theorists of national struggles, like Frantz Fanon,<sup>5</sup> who highlighted the importance of the national defense of the community subordinating gender issues and concerns to it. As if to support this fear, a feminist journal that reviewed a conference paper I submitted on the U.S. war on terrorism and how it dealt with the Arab, Muslim, and the gendered “other” suggested that I cut the sections that discussed Arab and Muslim marginalization in the U.S. focusing instead on how Muslim American women, who were the early victims of anti-Muslim attacks in the U.S., were affected.

This leads one to ponder the following question: must the attempt to juggle the understanding of the impact that powerful government policies have on the Arab and Arab American communities with that of gender be necessarily seen as an abandonment of the feminist agenda and acquiescence to a more nationalist standpoint? Conversely, can women simultaneously rise to the defense of the community without betraying their gender interests? I think that the dichotomous perspective on the multiple identities and concerns of women needs to be reconsidered if one is to offer more complex answers to these questions. It left the door open to past and present Egyptian nationalists, with whose history I am most familiar, to charge feminism with dividing and weakening the national community. It also discouraged many Egyptian women interested in the exploration of the connections between the national and the gendered from embracing narrow definitions of feminism that rigidly privileged the later over the former. I do not see any reason why Arab and Arab American feminists should not embrace the role of being national speakers and/or representatives of the community without betraying their gender interests. In this new role, one can expect them to combine an understanding of the international and national challenges facing their communities with an appreciation of their distinct gender implications. At the present historical/national moment, it is crucial that Arab and Arab American feminist theorists have intellectual room to freely articulate different constructions of the intersection of the national and international with the gendered.

Those who argue that in view of the global context of the war on terrorism, transnational identities and concerns have superseded national ones ignore how the former continue to be rooted in national agendas. For example, the U.S.’s response to the war on terrorism, which was defined as a war without borders, has been largely focused on homeland security.<sup>6</sup> U.S. national interests have clearly guided the war on terrorism and have superseded those of other partner nation-states in that military effort. The U.S.’s definitions of its enemies within and without have also been national. They have reinforced the national bonds that tie Arab American communities in the U.S. with their Arab counterparts in the Middle East and opposed them to the U.S. and its national agendas. The responses that each developed to U.S. global policies have also been shaped by their national location and the dictates of their national scenes.

## **II. THE NATIONAL CHALLENGES FACING ARAB AMERICANS BEFORE AND AFTER SEPTEMBER 11**

As Arab Americans politically organize to defend themselves against the attacks that use the war on terrorism and homeland security as justifications, it is important to integrate our historical understanding of the international and national challenges that shaped their experiences in the US before September 11 and how they influenced the post September 11 political landscape. In this section, I will



begin with a discussion of how the centenary celebrations of Ralph Bunche's birthday provided an opportunity to examine the early relations among African, Jewish, and Arab Americans in the 1940s and the 1950s and how they have changed since then. Bunche's long international career provided insights into the history of Arabs and/or Arab Americans with African and Jewish Americans whose struggles in the U.S. mirrored each other's, but also brought them into conflict. It provides historical and political depth to the relations of these different groups and how they continue to be pivotal after September 11. I will also examine other sources of tension within the Arab American communities and how they add new dimensions to their political agendas.

*A. Ralph Bunche, the Arab Israeli Conflict and Early Relations among African, Jewish, and Arab Americans:*

Ralph Bunche, a distinguished African American political scientist, who founded the political science department at Howard University of which I am a present member, also participated in the founding of the United Nations (UN) as a new international organization in 1945. One of his earliest assignments at the UN was to facilitate the work of the UN Special Commission on Palestine that eventually recommended the partition of Palestine.<sup>7</sup> Bunche also worked with Count Folke Bernadotte, the UN Special Mediator in Palestine following the outbreak of the first Arab Israeli War, who was assassinated by Jewish extremists and terrorists. He replaced him and, in that capacity, successfully negotiated the armistice agreements between Israel and the other Arab states which participated in the 1948 war for which he was awarded the Nobel peace prize in 1950.

While Bunche served US and UN international policies, his experience as an African-American academic and state functionary in a racially segregated U.S. government in the 1940s and the 1950s shaped his personal views of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. He acknowledged that the UN partition of Palestine was not an ideal solution, but the only one realistically possible under the circumstances. In the very few public speeches and comments he made on the conflict, he emphasized that the Palestinians paid the price of this resolution dictated by power relations that reflected the asymmetry of the political resources available to Palestinians and the Jews in Palestine and the world community.<sup>8</sup>

Bunche's experience and knowledge of the African-American struggles in the U.S. mediated his views of the Israelis and the Arabs in other ways. His sympathy for Jewish aspirations in Palestine was shaped by the long history of discrimination against them in the U.S. and the alliances between them and African-Americans as representatives of visible minority groups allied in the struggle for civil rights during that period. His views of the Arabs were equally complex. Given his study of African national struggles, he sympathized with the regional plight of the Arabs as people going through difficult anti-colonial struggles. He also was quick to note how American political discourses produced racist representations of the Arabs reflecting a general ignorance of their history and culture.

Bunche's Nobel peace prize in 1950 did not mark the end of his interest in the region. He continued to be involved with the UN peacekeeping efforts in the Middle East throughout the 1950s and the 1960s. In the aftermath of the 1956 Suez war that launched a tripartite aggression by Great Britain, France, and Israel against Egypt in retaliation for the nationalization of the international Suez Canal Company, he organized the UN peacekeeping forces that were placed on the borders between Egypt and Israel. He took pride in this successful experiment of UN peace keeping

and his frequent visits to inspect and refine its operations provided him with opportunities to continue his interest in the region and to develop close working relations with its political leaders. The war of 1967 put an end to this successful peacekeeping experiment and Bunche's involvement in that part of the world.

*B. The Linkage of the International and the National in the Development of Political Rivalry Between Arab and Jewish Americans and Alliance with African Americans in the 1970s and 1980s:*

The war of 1967 transformed the Palestinian-Israeli national conflict into a regional conflict. Israel occupied territories that belonged to Egypt (Sinai), Syria (the Golan Heights), and what was left of Palestine before the 1948 war (the West Bank and Gaza). The resulting convergence of Arab territorial, political, and nationalist concerns coupled with attacks against Arab Americans in the U.S. during and after the war created a new climate that shaped the political relations among Arab, African and Jewish Americans in some significant ways. The civil rights struggles of the 1960s had the effect of encouraging Arab Americans to form their first important national organization: the Association of the Arab American University Graduates (AAUG) in 1967. It was to represent the pooling of the intellectual resources of the community for the "purpose of warding off the intense and often indiscriminant attacks against [the community] and against the old homeland".<sup>9</sup> Even though the AAUG was a middle class professional organization, it acquired nationalist credentials through its commitment to the "goal of producing first rate literature on the Arab world [in the US] and in this way challenge the Zionist [representation of the Arabs and the Arab-Israeli conflict]".<sup>10</sup>

The goals of the AAUG affected relations between some of the members of the Arab and Jewish American communities who became engaged in a battle to inform American public audiences about the issues involved in the Arab Israeli conflict. The AAUG stimulated the organizing dynamic within the Arab American community, which expanded in the 1970s and 1980s, reflecting the other needs of other segments of the community. In 1972, the National Association for Arab Americans (NAAA) emerged as a political lobbying group, the American-Arab Anti Discrimination Committee (ADC) followed in 1980 to fight against the prevalent public defamation of Arab Americans in the US, and finally, the Arab American Institute was established in 1985 to increase Arab American participation in electoral politics.<sup>11</sup>

In the 1980s, Arab Americans' increased interest in electoral politics contributed to the building of new alliances and the intensification of old political rivalries. The attempt on the part of some Arab Americans to maximize their leverage within the Democratic Party contributed to a significant alliance with African Americans who supported Jesse Jackson's presidential campaigns in 1984 and 1988. The alliance with Arab Americans challenged those within the Democratic Party who questioned African American interest in international issues and conflicts, like the Palestinian conflict, where race was not an issue. For Arab Americans, the alliance with African Americans allowed for a deeper discussion of Palestinian statehood, following the outbreak of the first intifada, in the Democratic Party platform in July 1988. This new alliance between Arab and African Americans contributed to the development of triangular tense relations with Jewish Americans: relations between political segments of African and Jewish Americans became strained and relations between organized Arab and Jewish Americans within the Democratic Party became more competitive.

Equally significant, the important gains made in this party convention reflected improved Arab American grassroots organizing signaling a new political balance between the national with the international interests and concerns.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the AAUG and ADC during the late 1980s and the 1990s witnessed a significant switch in the definition of Arab American agendas, stressing the American national agendas of the community that focused on the needs of women and the younger sections of the community and the deepening of civil rights.<sup>13</sup> Reinforcing that new development, some Arab American and American Muslim groups became publicly critical of the way the Palestinian and/or international issues were used to define the community and its concerns.

### *C. Political Challenges in the Post September 11 Period:*

September 11 contributed to the reversal of this process of political integration that sought to give greater emphasis to the national agendas of the community. It contributed to a return to the use of international concerns, the war on terrorism, in the definition of the citizenship rights of Arab Americans. Not only did this affect existing political rivalries with some Jewish Americans, but it also affected the alliance between Arab and African Americans. In this hostile political climate, the marginalization of Arab Americans was manifested in the widespread and gross violation of their civil rights. Paradoxically, the new climate also offered potential opportunities for coalition building and the further nationalization of the community agendas.

While the collapse of the Oslo accords in the summer of 2000 contributed to a greater polarization between some Arab and Jewish American groups, September 11 added fuel to that process. The Israeli government was successful in presenting the second Palestinian intifada as a continuation of the terror that was inflicted on the US in 2001. The result was the negative reinforcement of the connection between Arabs, their interest in Palestinian rights, and terrorism. Next, some conservative American Jewish groups began a coordinated attack on the alliance between Arab and African Americans, which Arab Americans had sought to strengthen as a means of addressing the political attacks on their civil rights after 9/11. In 2002, a conflicted triangular relationship developed among the politicized segments of African, Jewish, and Arab Americans with Arab and Jewish Americans supporting different African American congressional candidates for the same seats in some parts of the South. A good example of one such political race was the one occupied by Representative Cynthia Mckinney, the black congresswoman from Georgia, who had emerged as a vocal critic of the Bush administration's policies after September 11 and a supporter of the protection of Arab American civil rights. While some Arab American groups financially supported her reelection bid, other Jewish Americans supported her African American opponent who eventually unseated her. The result contributed to complicated divisions within and among the politicized segments of these three minority groups.

Racial politics represented another challenge to potential alliances between Arab Americans and other minority groups on civil rights issues. Before September 11, major Arab American organizations paid limited attention to the extensive use of racial profiling against African and Latino Americans. When Arab Americans became the latest victims of the practice, some of the previous African and Latino American victims reported a temporary sense of relief from the harassment of law enforcement agencies. The expanded use of this practice in the post September 11 period against Arabs and Muslims made it a potent civil rights issue that potentially

unites the members of the Arab, African, and Latino American communities who remain its main victims.

Finally, the influx of Muslim immigrants from different parts of the Arab world in the 1970s and the 1980s contributed to the diversification of the political voices within the community. The secular Arab nationalist discourse that dominated the discussions of community issues including the Arab Israeli conflict during the 1960s and the 1970s fractured in the wake of the Camp David Accords (1979). Nowhere was this made more clear than on the many university campuses where the different branches of Arab students' organizations, which used to bring Arab students together irrespective of nationality, were gradually replaced by smaller national organizations that appealed to students in the name of nationality. The only large organizations that emerged to fill the vacuum left by the demise of Arab nationalism represented by the old Arab Students organizations were the Muslim Students Associations, which appealed to students' faith irrespective of national divisions. They brought together Muslims from the Arab world with American Muslims be they African, African American, or South Asian.<sup>14</sup>

While some of the new Muslim voices tended to be socially conservative, some were not. The result was power struggles between the old secular voices and the new religious ones and between the conservative and liberal voices within the Muslim or Christian communities. Within the larger American Muslim community, there were also power struggles between the representatives of African American Islam who identified themselves as the indigenous Muslims versus immigrant Muslims from the Middle East and South Asia (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh). Some African American Muslims go as far as describing these immigrant Muslims as "white" in their privileged socio-economic status and definition of community and political agendas. They view immigrant co-religionists as socially backward and unfair to women. They also accuse them of ignoring African American Islamic history and not acknowledging the contributions made by African American Muslims to the religion.<sup>15</sup>

Last but not least, there are tensions that divide Muslim immigrants from South Asia and their Arab counterparts. South Asian Muslims consider those who come from some parts of the Middle East, especially the Gulf region, to be more socially "backward" and resent the imposition of the question of Palestine, as a contentious political issue, on the Muslim agenda.<sup>16</sup> In short, religion and nationality/national origin have contributed to the fragmentation of Arabs and Muslims as transnational groups within the U.S.

#### *D. September 11 and Contested Definitions of Feminism*

Immediately after September 11, Muslim women emerged as the earliest targets of anti Muslim and anti-Arab violence and the first to successfully organize against it. They used their Muslim attire, which gave them away, as a means of educating Americans in general about their experiences and their religion. The initial response to the attacks in the U.S. came from some Muslim scholars, who issued edicts that justified the taking off of the hijab,<sup>17</sup> the Islamic mode of dress including the head covering. This was shocking to some Muslim women who felt that their dress was once again used by Muslim and non-Muslim men as the major marker separating Muslim and Western cultures. As American Muslims, they felt that their hijab was legitimately part of the American cultural landscape. The paternalist religious recommendation that women take off the hijab ignored the religious feelings of some Muslim women who considered this expression of their faith to be much

more important than self-protection. For some, the hijab acquired more importance after 9/11 as an expression of their pride in a religion that was increasingly maligned in the country. It also served to affirm the rights of American Muslim women to exercise their freedom through dress.<sup>18</sup>

In response to these attacks, Muslim college women embraced hijab days as a way of promoting solidarity with the group during this difficult period.<sup>19</sup> At the University of Michigan Campus, a coalition of peace activists and Muslim women declared Fridays to be days in which Muslim women would give away hijabs at a central part of campus to those who wanted to put them on as an expression of solidarity that effectively confused those who were targeting them. No one was turned away and this act of solidarity provided means of communication between Muslim and non-Muslim women about their dress and their experiences after 9/11. In these exchanges, some lesbian women articulated their sympathy for Muslim women who were attacked because they too were frequently attacked because of the way they dressed and looked. For other non-Muslim women, who put on the hijab, this served as an eye opening experience of how Muslim women were viewed and treated by other Americans just because of how they were dressed.

One of the organizers of hijab days at the University of Michigan explained how the event was not without its challenges from outside and within the community. The following was her description of these challenges:

Some of the critics were self-identified Arab feminists who saw the veil as a symbol of the oppression and misogyny in the Middle East [which was] used to repress women. They were adamantly opposed to the event and the irresponsible use of the symbols we were promoting. A number of non-Arab, non-Muslim feminists objected as well.

Some men asked if they could wear the veil, which we did not permit explaining that it would be seen as making a mockery of the Muslim community as opposed to the purpose of the event that was to show solidarity to it in this difficult time. We provided wristbands for them instead.

Finally, some Muslims, both men and women, raised concerns about the Islamic and legal use of hijab [which is a form of worship] as a political symbol. I explained that in Islamic history, non-Muslim women had worn the hijab, that promoting modesty was a general Islamic ethic and that all over the world non-Muslim women, particularly in the countryside, cover their hair as do nuns and that this was not seen as some kind of blasphemous act.

These arguments were augmented by the authority of the local ulema, who agreed that there was nothing inappropriate about this and who were consulted early in the process.<sup>20</sup>

The above showed an interesting convergence of opposition to the hijab from within and outside the community in the US. Arab/Muslim and non-Muslim/American secular feminists rejected it as an unacceptable symbol of political solidarity. Both clung to the old orientalist definition of the Islamic mode of dress as a symbol of oppression: imposed on women and denying them active participation in society. For American Muslim college women, who chose to wear

the hijab, this orientalist view of their dress did not represent who they were. As active women in their communities and society, the continued devaluation of their dress by Arab secular Muslims and American non-Muslim women reflected the political agendas of these groups who were incapable of thinking of difference as other than subordination. The continued condemnation of the hijab served to silence this religiously observant minority which behaved in ways that contradicted widely held assumptions about Muslim women.

Finally, this group of Muslim women responded confidently to conservative critics within their community who were opposed to their political activism. These critics advocated a very narrow definition of women's dress as a religious duty and opposed its appropriation of by activist women as a symbol of pride and a means of forming coalitions with non-Muslim women. The activist women were, in turn, not willing to cheapen this religious symbol by having men put it on. At the same time, they showed themselves to be politically savvy in successfully channeling male solidarity through an alternative symbol i.e. the use of wristbands. Finally, this group of women worked successfully with the representative of religious authority in their community, getting their approval, enjoying their support, and making responsible decisions regarding the particulars of that event. All of this suggested that this group of American Muslim women emerged as active members of their community, challenging the very dated views and assumptions that Muslims and non-Muslims alike made about devout women.

As a result, it is fair to say that Arab American and American Muslim communities are witnessing a new power struggle between the representatives of a secular and an Islamic feminism. Up until now, Arab, American and Arab American secular feminists have dominated the debate on women's rights. More recently, religious Muslim women (*al-Muhajabat* or those who wear the hijab/Islamic mode of dress) have claimed their legitimate right and interest to participate in this debate. Unfortunately, some Muslim, Christian, and Jewish members of the community look down on this group, view them as socially backward, and refuse to deal with them as equals in the debate on women's rights. I find this to be an alarming development that reflects the internalization of Orientalist views of Islam and Muslim women within large segments of the community including Muslim ones. When did Arab and/or Muslim women start believing that their observant counterparts were less critical or liberated? Should not Arab women in general, whether they are secular or religiously observant, have the right to choose their politics? The *apriori assumptions* that religious Muslim women are conservative and backward and that only secular ones are liberal and progressive lay at the heart of the split between Western vs. Oriental and Muslim vs. Christian. For some Arab Muslim women to internalize these assumptions about their more religious counterparts is alarming and may explain that what one is dealing with is not a religious division, but rather a political one that should be addressed.

Here, I want to share personal experiences I had a couple of years ago, which made the politics of these attitudes simultaneously personal and intellectual. I fell sick in 2002 and lost all my hair. Wearing a wig was not something I was comfortable with, and so I ended up wearing a beret and/or scarves. The experience was an eye-opener about my own response to being perceived as a *muhajaba*, i.e. someone who is religiously observant and adheres to the Islamic mode of dress that instructs women to cover their hair and bodies (i.e. to dresses modestly/conservatively) and how that influenced the attitudes of people I encountered in the professional and academic arenas. As I prepared to present a

paper at the World Bank, I found myself thinking about whether I could tolerate people thinking that I was becoming more religiously observant or if I should tell them about my illness as an explanation of why I was covering my hair. The assumption that I was making was that becoming more observant was automatically a reflection of political and social conservatism and that I needed to deny that charge! While I ended up sharing my illness with an Iranian scholar who was also a good friend, I left all others wondering about the meaning of my beret and then scarf. Initially, the Bank professionals, both Arab Muslims and non-Muslims, seemed puzzled about my beret and its political symbolism. Only after I delivered my paper could I see the equivalent of a sigh of relief on their faces.

This experience was augmented by another encounter that I had with a Jordanian Ph.D. candidate who asked to see me. She e-mailed me saying that she used my work in her dissertation, was in town and would I take the time to see her. We agreed to meet at a Starbucks near my house. When I walked in with a scarf on my head, she immediately identified me even though we had never met. This, of course, indicated the extent to which the Islamic mode of dress had become widespread among women in the region. As we chatted away, she told me that she was a Christian. We spent more than an hour talking and during most of that time her eyes remained transfixed on my scarf. I debated while we sat there if I should say something about my scarf, but I did not, hoping that our nice meeting and the ability to easily exchange views about different issues and ideas would be more important in determining how she felt. Was my scarf a disappointment? I like to think that she walked away thinking that it was possible for a Christian woman and a muhajjaba to share positive encounters and that religious differences did not have to be an obstacle that prevented either from sharing similar views or extending support to the other.

Finally, I gave a draft of this presentation to an Egyptian colleague, Dr. Omaima Abou-Bakr, who is a professor of English at Cairo University, a good friend who is a muhajjaba and whose work on Islamic feminism promises to change our understanding of both Islam and feminism.<sup>21</sup> I wanted to see what her response would be to the thoughts that I have expressed about my unease at being identified as a muhajjaba. She was not surprised at my discomfort and reported that she experienced similar discomfort to that which I felt whenever she appeared in secular gatherings that automatically treated her with suspicion with people attributing to her conservative and illiberal views because of her mode of dress. Islamic dress, though, did not necessarily make her more comfortable in Islamic circles. Their views did not correspond to hers, and they too assumed that just because she was muhajjaba she would denounce feminism and take a more apologist position on Islam and women.

She also reported feeling equally uneasy about women munaqabat, who in addition to covering their hair and bodies chose to cover their faces, leaving only their eyes uncovered. In her view, their conservatism went beyond what was required. She also suspected that they discounted her hijab as a chic fashion statement that was not truly Islamic. This whole discussion has made me aware of the connection between dress and a modern definition of femininity. In addition to dress as a means of self-definition, I am reminded of John Berger's suggestion that when women look at themselves, they are also conscious of the way others see them.<sup>22</sup> As representatives of minority women in the US, Muslim women know that men and women judge them without really knowing much about them as individuals. Rather than use different modes of dress to reproduce power relations

that exist within society at large, I have tried to destabilize them encouraging the women I encountered to tolerate others whose self-definition and self-image are different and to fight the powerful urge to make them into clichéd others

## CONCLUSION

I have attempted to offer my own take on the important external and internal challenges facing Arab American communities and their women. My research interests and professional training as a political scientist have shaped my perspective. There is an urgent need to openly articulate, discuss, and theorize the internal religious, political, gender, and national differences that distinguish segments of Arab and Arab American communities from others with the goal of building bridges across them. Similarly, there is an equally urgent need to form coalitions with minority groups whose histories and experiences are different, but who share our concern for civil rights in the post September 11 political system.

One can choose to treat religious, class, sexual, ethnic, and gender differences within and between communities as sources of strength or division. The questioning of the dichotomous orientalist categories that counter pose the muhijabat vs. the assertive/independent Arab, American, or Arab American needs to be considered through this same intellectual lens. It needs to be part of an ongoing debate about the impact that these constructions have on the community and whose interests they serve at a time when the collective mobilization of important human resources is needed to meet the serious national and international challenges that September 11 produced.

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## ENDNOTES

Evelyn Alsultany, Rabab Abdulhadi and Amaney Jamal have read different versions of this paper and offered valuable suggestions for revisions. The responsibility for the views expressed here, however, is mine.

<sup>1</sup> Bukhari, Zahid, "Demography, Identity, Space: Defining American Muslim," in *Muslims in the United States*, eds. Philippa Strum and Daniel Tarantolo (Washington D.C: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003), p. 9. It is worth noting here that some of the estimates offered of African American Muslims are much higher than those offered by this author.

<sup>2</sup> Mervat F. Hatem "Racial Profiling in the Pursuit of Arabs and Muslims in the US," in *It's a Free Country, Personal Freedom in America After September 11*, eds. Danny Goldberg, Victor Goldberg and Robert Greenwald (New York: Nation books, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Mervat F. Hatem, "Discourses on the "War on Terrorism" in "The US and its Views on the Arab, Muslim and Gendered "Other"" in *Arab Studies Journal*, XI & XII (Fall 2003/Spring 2004), p. 77-103.

<sup>4</sup> Mervat F. Hatem, "In the Eye of the Storm: Islamic Societies and Muslim Women in Globalization Discourses," *Beyond the Boundaries of the Old Geographies*, ed. Ali Mirsepassi, (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Fanon, Frantz, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1965)

<sup>6</sup> Mervat F. Hatem, "Homeland Security in a Global World," in *Democracy and Homeland Security: Strategies, Controversies and Impact*, ed. Nawwal Ammar, (Kent: Kent State University, forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> Brian Urquhart, and Ralph Bunche, *An American Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), chapter 11.

<sup>8</sup> Ralph Bunche, "Introduction," *The Near East and the Great Powers*, ed. Richard Frye (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1953), p. 4, 116.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Suleiman, and Baha Abu Louban, "Introduction," *Arab Americans: Continuity and Change*, ed. Michael Suleiman and Baha Abu Louban, (Belmont, Mass.: AAUG, 1989), p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Elaine Hagopian in Boston on March 7, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Suleiman and Abu Louban, *Arab Americans*, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Helen Hatab Samhan, "Arab Americans and the Elections of 1988: A Constituency Come of Age," in *Arab Americans*, p. 245.



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<sup>13</sup>Mervat F. Hatem, "How the Gulf War Changed the AAUG's Discourse on Arab Nationalism and Gender Politics?" in *Middle East Journal*, 2 (Spring 2001), p. 290-296.

<sup>14</sup> Interviews with former students who were active in the Arab Student Organizations on the University of Michigan campus in the 1970s and those who were active in Muslim Student Associations in the 1990s in April 2002. Both preferred to remain anonymous.

<sup>15</sup> Aminah Beverly McCloud, "A Challenging Intellectual Heritage: A Look at the Social and Political Space of African American Muslims," in *Muslims in the United States*, eds. Philippa Strum and Daniel Tarantolo, (Washington D.C: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003), p. 91-92.

<sup>16</sup> Conversations with Rosina Hassoun and comments made by Nadine Naber during the discussion section of the panel on "Arab/Arab American Feminists and American Studies", American Studies Association meetings, October 18, 2003, Hartford, Connecticut.

<sup>17</sup> I am grateful to Amaney Jamal for pointing out this important development.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with a participant in the University of Michigan's hijab days who preferred to remain anonymous on March 24, 2002

<sup>19</sup>According to one of the participants in hijab days in Ann Arbor, the universities of Chicago and Wisconsin also organized several days to express solidarity with Muslim women. In contrast, the universities of Texas and New Mexico joined this solidarity movement by organizing a single hijab day on their campuses.

<sup>20</sup> Personal E-mail communication with Zareena Grewal , one of the organizers of hijab days at the University of Michigan campus (October 6, 2002)

<sup>21</sup> Omaima Abou-Bakr, "Islamic Feminism: What's in a Name? Preliminary Reflections," *Middle East Women's Studies Review*, XV & XVI (Winter/Spring 2001), p. 1-4.

<sup>22</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Hamondsworth, Penguin, 1972)

# DISLOCATIONS ARAB JEWS AND MULTICULTURAL FEMINISM

## AN INTERVIEW WITH ELLA SHOCHAT

By Evelyn Alsultany

Ella Shohat is a Professor in the departments of Art and Public Policy and Middle Eastern Studies at New York University. She has lectured and published widely, both nationally and internationally, on issues having to do with postcolonialism, transnationalism, multiculturalism, and gender, including *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives* (co-edited with A. McClintock and A. Mufti), *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, and the award-winning *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (co-authored with Robert Stam)

**Evelyn Alsultany:** Could you talk a little bit about your Arab-Jewish background and your family's migration from Iraq to Israel? Where were you born and raised? What was your family's experience of living as Iraqi-Jews in Israel?

**Ella Shohat:** I was born into a situation of displacement: my parents were refugees from Iraq and didn't exactly find a home in Israel. Colonialism as well as the rise of nationalism, both Jewish and Arab, resulted with disastrous consequences for diverse minorities. Given the violent geopolitics of the region, communities were uprooted overnight. My family was ejected from Baghdad, where we lived for millennia, due to the Arab-Israeli conflict. In Israel, partly because of racism and partially because theirs was the culture of the enemy, my family felt out of place. My parents used to say: "In Iraq we were Jews, and in Israel we are Arabs." Our Arab culture was taboo. Yet, even if we tried, we could not easily escape the mark of otherness. It was written all over our bodies, looks, accents. My parents didn't dare put the Arabic name they gave me, Habiba, on the Israeli birth certificate. My grandparents had communicated in Arabic until they passed away. For years I was their everyday translator. I was raised among people who felt a great sense of loss due to the sudden move out of Iraq. Their powerlessness only added to their sense

of alienation. But what was rather anomalous about this situation was that we were expected to define this exilic condition as a natural home. In my own writing, I described this feeling by inverting the Biblical phrase—“by the waters of the Zion, we laid down and wept when we remembered Babylon.”

**EA:** Given your Iraqi-Israeli-U.S. history, what is your sense of home? Where might that be for you?

**ES:** Being raised between Arabic and Hebrew was far from being a situation of happy bilingualism. It was a conflictual linguistic experience, where my school language was at war with my home language, which we were expected to forget and erase. This schism nourished my fantasies of an elsewhere. Israel may have been a land of many immigrants and displaced people, but it was not a multicultural democracy. It was a centralized nation-state dominated by the ideology of modernization that permitted only Eurocentric narratives of belonging. In 1981, I moved to New York, where I found a place inhabited by diverse dislocated people. In this fragmented space, belonging to multiple geographies was not out of the norm. Being at home for me could no longer be easily bounded by geography. Iraq was out of bounds, but at the same time, I opted out of Israel, insisting on reclaiming the part that was denied me— my Arabness. New York, in a strange way, afforded me a breathing space out of a virtually schizophrenic existence.

**EA:** When you came to New York, did you identify with U.S. racial or feminist movements or scholarship?

**ES:** I grew up in a situation where we were called “blacks” and ended up actually claiming this term as a positive signifier. I learned about the American Black Panthers movement, because we were empowered by the Israeli Black Panthers movement that names itself after the American movement. Not simply gender but race and class became dramatic marks in my life. I was labeled “retarded” when I was 6 years old, and the teacher wanted to send me to a “special school.” It was similar to what was done (and still is done) with Blacks and Latinos in the U.S. Upon my arrival in the U.S., I immediately found myself occupying the space of the Third World immigrant of color, and because of my history, I identified with women of color. I can say that my work comes out of that identification.

When I am asked where I am from, I can never give a simple answer. That my family is from Baghdad, and that they are also Jews, startles many Americans. I usually have to go through the same detailed explanation about my origins. In the U.S., where the Arab-versus-Jew discourse exists, it has been virtually impossible for me to insist on the hyphen, that I am an Arab-Jew. It provoked me to write a series of critical essays on the subject.

Yet, I also suffered political persecution in New York due to my critical stance toward Israel. My first book, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, was a subject of attack in Israel that traveled into the American academic context. My article published in *Social Text* entitled “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims” partially dialogues with Edward Said’s article entitled “Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims,” (both were published originally in *Social Text* and reprinted in *Dangerous Liaisons*.) Said focused on the

Palestinian perspective on Zionism, projecting a homogenized view of Jews. While endorsing much of the Palestinian critique, I also deconstructed the idea of a homogeneous view of “Jewish History.” Ironically, I felt that critical discourses were falling into the paradigms of Zionist historiography. I wanted to create an intellectual and political space that would address Arab-Jewish and Sephardi-Mizrahi perspectives on Zionism.

When I moved to the U.S., I had a B.A. in Philosophy and Comparative Literature, and I began my graduate studies. In the humanities, the dominant feminist discourse then was feminist psychoanalysis. I felt completely erased within such approaches since there was no place to address race, class, and national stratification. When I wrote my first explicit critique of the Eurocentrism of feminism (“Gender and the Culture of the Empire” in the late 1980s,) it was in part a response to feminist film theory. The essay proposed alternative methods for feminist analysis. For example, I looked for submerged racial presence in all-white films; or I examined tropes of empire, for example Freud’s notion of the “dark continent of female sexuality,” which I contextualized within archeological and geographical discourses of empire. It was fascinating to later see that feminist film theorists who never previously addressed race were also beginning to address Freud’s metaphor vis-à-vis the question of race. Yet, because the emphasis was gender, rather than seriously unpacking the historical intersectionality of race and gender, many such feminist writing ended-up diluting the materialist aspects of this intersection.

**EA:** What were you trying to accomplish in *Talking Visions*?

**ES:** In *Talking Visions*, I tried to provide a space for many constituencies and for many discourses concerning the intersection of race, gender, nation, and sexuality. The book came out of a conference that I organized at the New Museum of Soho, New York, in many ways, a white urban space. It was precisely my point to bring different artists of color to that space to present alternative work and vision. The book is not an essentialist celebration of identity and difference, with a Latina contributor speaking for “the Latina woman” or a black contributor speaking for “the black woman.” We cannot reduce any community to one representative, speaking on its behalf. The book’s purpose, in any case, wasn’t simply to include representatives of different origins, but representations of multiple issues at stake.

**EA:** Can you elaborate on the subtitle of the book, “Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age?”

**ES:** The subtitle calls attention to issues that tend to be segregated and not addressed in-relation to each other: feminism in relation to both multiculturalism and transnationalism, and also transnationalism in relation to multiculturalism. It does not exalt one political concern (feminism) over another (multiculturalism); rather, it highlights and reinforces the mutual embeddedness between the two. By tying the two terms together, the volume refuses the hierarchy of class, racial, national, sexual, and gender based-struggles, highlighting instead the “intersectionality” (Kimberly Crenshaw) of all these axes of stratification. The term “multiculturalism” tends to be associated with issues of race addressed within the North American context that usually doesn’t take into account transnational and cross-border perspectives. “Transnationalism” is associated with a debate about

globalization, immigration, and displacement that is not usually associated with issues of race in the North American context. And both of these debates do not necessarily address issues of gender and sexuality. In *Talking Visions*, I was trying to create a multiple debate.

The subtitle also reflects my effort to go beyond the zoning of knowledges according to cartographies, which have been invented, by and throughout the colonial project. The circulation of goods and ideas, of images and sounds, and of people is not a new phenomenon, but it has been intensified over the past decades due to new technologies and new modes of capitalism. This volume assumes, in other words, that genders, sexualities, races, classes, nations, and even continents exist not as hermetically sealed entities but rather as parts of a permeable interwoven relationality. Instead of segregating historical periods and geographical regions into neatly fenced off areas of expertise, it highlights the multiplicity of community histories and perspectives, as well as the hybrid culture of all communities, especially in a world characterized by the “traveling” of images, sounds, goods, and people. As a situated practice, multicultural feminism takes as its starting point the cultural consequences of the worldwide movement and dislocations of peoples associated with the development of “global” or “transnational” capital; like national borders, disciplinary boundaries too are out of synch with such transnational movements. I felt that even if the major point of reference in the book is the U.S.—since that is the context of the production of the book—the book isn’t nationalist in scope. In fact, in my introduction, I criticized certain modes of multicultural and queer works that often have an implicit U.S. nationalist agenda; just as I critiqued a certain tendency in transnational and postcolonial studies in the U.S. to detach itself from issues of race within the U.S. *Talking Visions*, attempts, in this sense, to place diverse gendered/sexed histories and geographies in dialogical relation in terms of the tensions and overlappings that take place “within” and “between” cultures, ethnicities, and nations.

**EA:** Your work suggests that we should move from identity to identifications. Can you elaborate on how you conceptualize this as a means to social change?

**ES:** In *Talking Visions*, I tried to go beyond issues of identity to identifications. That’s why in the introduction I stated that this is not a book about women of color but about multicultural feminism as a political, social, and epistemological project. At the same time, I said that it’s not a coincidence that multicultural feminism was largely produced by women of color because their experiences at the intersection of oppressions have generated their pioneering work towards a different kind of knowledge. In a sense, multicultural feminism is an inclusive space, but this is not to suggest that there are no contradictions. I was also hoping to articulate those contradictions. I wanted us to be more conscious of what’s taking place and why it’s so hard to actually do coalitionary work. Perhaps there are different interests at stake; perhaps there are different utopias, social desires and political visions.

**EA:** How do you see feminism in this context? Can you elaborate on what you find to be the limits of feminism, particularly in the case of Arab women?

**ES:** It depends on how we narrate feminism. This is precisely why I find multiculturalism quite central to feminism. *Talking Visions* offers a critique of the

linear master-narrative of how feminism started, and it is usually a very Eurocentric narrative, which imagines women's fighting to empower themselves in the "west," and, then, spreading to the "backward" world. What is elided in this modernizing narrative are the "other" women around the world struggling in other battles but who are disqualified as feminists because they did not label themselves as such. Take the anti-colonialist movement in Algeria. How can one not call it a feminist struggle when Algerian women were fighting to empower themselves within the anti-colonial movement? Can we not call it feminism just because we have been using this word in a very narrow, Eurocentric sense? But, this type of anti-patriarchal, and even, at times, anti-heterosexist subversions within anti-colonial struggles, remains marginal to the feminist canon, because, unfortunately, one kind of feminism retains the power of naming and narrativizing. I am arguing that we need to redefine what we mean by feminism, to broaden its significations to include a variety of battles.

We cannot see Muslim women just as victims. We need to understand them also as women who have exercised certain power. Women's right to pleasure and orgasm is posed in Islamic law. But, to reduce Muslim culture to one term, "fundamentalism," is to miss a more complex picture. Let's take the case of clitoridectomy. We all react very strongly to this practice because it denies women's pleasure, reinforces the ideology that women are impure, excludes women from marriage if they don't practice it—and so forth. Yet, many women around the world practice it and initiate one another into that practice. Also, the book tried to look into contradictions generated for feminist practices. When women participate in oppressive practices—how should we react to them as feminists? The issue gets more complicated within a human rights perspective and international border-crossing. In principle, these women can apply for asylum as refugees in the U.S., claiming they are suffering gender oppression (clitoridectomy.) However, they can apply for entrance to the U.S. only if the "barbaric" nature of their culture is being reinforced under Western eyes. Eurocentric feminists fight to rescue Arab and African women in a way that reproduces the colonial discourses about the Middle East and Africa.

Simply discussing clitoridectomy as barbaric erases the struggles of women in Kenya or Egypt who are against such practices and elides the complexity of African cultures, which cannot be reduced to this practice. The problem then, is not only the practice but also what narrative we deploy to resist such practices. The challenge is to avoid the rescue fantasies—that take us back to colonial narratives. I am reminded of the film *Around the World in 80 days* where David Niven rescues an Indian princess (Shirley McLaine) from *sati* (the burning of the widow). Today, it is Eurocentric feminists who play the heroines of modernizing narratives. Implicit in this rescue narrative is the assumption that the "West" has overcome its own gender oppression without ever questioning non-patriarchal and matriarchal cultures outside Europe. So, my point is that the question for us is not simply whether we should or not condemn a specific practice but how to talk about it, how to represent it, and in what context. Feminist analysis is confronted with, and must situate practices within, a complex local/global economic, social, political, and cultural context.

One problem I have with feminist colleagues who write about gender and colonialism is the assumption that patriarchy and homophobia existed everywhere at all times. I find such statements to be very ahistorical. For instance, among Native Americans there have been different traditions, which have not been homophobic, which have not been patriarchal, which have been marked by egalitarian structures, and where the question of gender identity has been very fluid. When colonizers arrived to the Americas, not only did they occupy indigenous land, they also imposed new structures that were patriarchal. Annette Jaimes Guerrero in *Talking Visions* addresses this imposition; the colonizers would not negotiate with indigenous women who had the right to represent their people.

**EA:** In your view, does the concept of multiculturalism provide us with theoretical and political tools to problematize dichotomies, including the local-global one?

**ES:** The idea of multiculturalism does not mean simply the fact of “many cultures.” It is both a political and epistemological project. Moreover, the concept of multiculturalism has to be defined in *relation* to Eurocentrism. I’m uncomfortable with the image of multiculturalism as just celebrating the many cultures of the world, all dancing around the bush. For that, we can go to Disneyland. This is a caricature of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism has been attacked not only in the U.S. but also in Brazil and France. For example, in an article a year or two ago in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, the sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant, argued that multiculturalism is not a concept, is not a theory, and is not a social movement, while claiming it to be all of the above. They wrote that multiculturalism is a product of the Anglo-American hegemony; that it is a tool of globalization and of American imperialism. Robert Stam and I are presently writing a book about the reception of multiculturalism in different international contexts, pointing out how the U.S. multicultural debate has been used and abused outside the U.S. We, too, criticize certain versions of multiculturalism (for instance, the focus on racial issues within the U.S. that neglects U.S. global policies). But having said that, we need to be aware how the attacks on multiculturalism by leftist intellectuals serve to reproduce Eurocentric premises and power. These attacks on multiculturalism are very dangerous; as they spread globally, they help silence diverse “local” resistances. If it’s a Black movement or a feminist movement, for the antagonists of multiculturalism, these are all American importations! If North-Africans in France are fighting for their rights, it will be said that they are importing an American trend (and “American” means, often, white Anglo-American)—often forgetting the fact that in the U.S. multiculturalism began as a movement of people of color. Of course Benetton used the logo “United Colors of Benetton,” but in itself this does not disqualify multiculturalism’s radical criticism. You can be co-opted, but every political movement faces cooptation.

Other critics of multiculturalism argue that it has nothing to do with the “real world,” that it is restricted to the academy and the debates about curriculum innovation. What these critics do not realize is that these curricula are designed for a large number of people and that it *does* matter how students will study history, geography, anthropology, and literature! Besides, if the academy is shown to have little impact on public debates, it might be because we, critical academics, are often pushed out of the public debates in the U.S. context by a corporate culture that

limits access to the media for its critics. But in any case, pedagogy in academia and schools is very much part of the real world!



**ACTIVIST COMMUNITIES  
REPRESENTATION, RESISTANCE, AND  
POWER**

# THE BURDEN OF REPRESENTATION

## WHEN PALESTINIANS SPEAK OUT

By Nada Elia\*

*“We must be specific, and we must be the people whose voice, whose proposals, whose values are considered by the international community to provide an end to war, to unceasing violence and to endless devastation.”* Edward Said, memo to PNC, 1983.<sup>1</sup>

*“Please do not bring up Palestine in your speech. This is a women’s conference, not a political conference.”* Betty Friedan to Nawal El Saadawi, at the UN International Conference on women, Nairobi, 1985.<sup>2</sup>

On November 12, 2004, one day after Palestinian President Yasser Arafat passed away, the *New York Times* published five articles of analysis about him. Not a single one was by a Palestinian. As Hugh Sansom correctly pointed out in a letter to the *Times* editor, no other culture is so often spoken for by others, denied a public forum to express itself.<sup>3</sup> But this silencing occurred in the hegemonic media, and I, for one, know better than to expect the *New York Times* to allow for Palestinian self-representation. My essay here addresses the silencing of Palestinians that occurs in places in the United States where we are supposedly welcome, given a chance to speak for ourselves, rather than be (mis)represented. For while diaspora Palestinians are finally breaking through the wall of absolute censorship that once gagged us in mainstream Eurocentric discourse, many of us still regularly find ourselves in very hostile circumstances, where we are indeed invited to speak, but where what we say, as we denounce our oppression, proves too jarring to our audience. In public lectures, in our workplaces and classrooms, in open floor discussions with “progressive activists”, in email discussions with

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“transformative spiritual activists,” or at conferences on “collective historical wrongs”, Palestinians and their supporters are, at long last, making themselves heard, eloquently demystifying “the Middle East question”, speaking truth to power about oppressor and oppressed in Palestine, and many in the audience are objecting very loudly. Betty’s Friedan’s patronizing comment to Nawal El Saadawi, made a full 20 years ago as I write this, still echoes today in various forums around the world where privileged and disenfranchised meet, supposedly to engage in productive dialogue.

A recent example of such silencing, or rather attempt at silencing, on a global scale, occurred at the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa. There, the United States accused the pro-Palestinian contingent of “hijacking” the conference, because it insisted on having Zionism viewed as an unacknowledged form of racism. Yet surely, had a discussion of Israel’s brand of racism and racial discrimination been welcome at this conference, the Palestinians would not have been accused of “hijacking” it. Nor did the Palestinians “hijack” the conference, as was obvious to all but Israel and its long-time champion, the United States. “This conference presents a unique opportunity for the nations of the world to define, condemn, and remedy racism and racial discrimination,” said Reed Brody, advocacy director of Human Rights Watch, emphasizing that the question of Israel’s treatment of Palestinians is only one of many before the conference. “This meeting is about the millions of refugees who are fleeing racism but who find intolerance, about the so-called untouchables of South Asia, about how HIV/AIDS disproportionately affects people of color, about the unique ways racism and sexism interact, and about racism in the application of the death penalty.”<sup>4</sup> But the United States, self-proclaimed defender of freedom and democracy for all, staged a joint withdrawal (with Israel) from the international conference, when it became clear that a significant number of delegations were also critical of Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians. Then-Secretary of State Colin Powell explained that the U.S. delegation was leaving because the conference was bound to contain hateful language against Israel and that “negotiations would be futile.”

However, as was obvious to most participants worldwide, there was an additional layer to the cynical exploitation of the Palestinian tragedy going on at this conference, for the “Palestinian hijack” accusation provided the U.S. with an excuse to opt out of the conference, thus avoiding any discussion of reparations for slavery, which Africans were hoping to engage in. As Ibrahim Ramey put it: “Most of the NGOs in Durban suspected that the real reason for the [U.S.] withdrawal was the reluctance of the government to confront the issue of systemic racism within the U.S. itself, and the African-American case for reparations.”<sup>5</sup> Thus the United States avoided any discussions of the issues Brody mentioned (racism in the death penalty, world responsibility for the AIDS epidemic, etc.) as well as reparations for the descendants of enslaved Africans, by claiming Palestinian “hijacking” of the conference. This move could have hindered coalition building among international pro-justice activists, were it not for the already-tarnished image of the U.S. government in the world.

When the world’s bullies continue to blame the victim, using any available pretext to avoid addressing the crimes they are committing, we need to keep in mind Audre Lorde’s ever-pertinent observation, that we were never meant to survive, that our silence cannot protect us, because “the machine will try and grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak.”<sup>6</sup> Lorde explains that only death

can come from silence, whereas death, pain, fear, but also, hopefully, change, can result from speaking out, and it is that last possibility that makes speaking out imperative. Would the U.S. have addressed Israeli racism against the Palestinians, had the Palestinians not brought it up at the conference? Obviously not. For decades, the U.S. has paralyzed international criticism of Zionism's violations of the Palestinian people's inalienable human rights, by vetoing every United Nations resolutions condemning Israeli policy or actions. Would the US have stopped its financial, military, and political support of the Israeli juggernaut, bent on the utter destruction of Palestinian society, had social justice activists not clamored that this oppression be named for what it is? As American politicians from the neo-conservative right to the neo-conservative left vie for "the Jewish vote" by proclaiming endless support to Israel, it is obvious to Palestinians that they have few allies in this country, and that we must persevere in educating the left as well as the wrong.

Our silence cannot protect us. Indeed, when U.S. politicians speak of courting the "Jewish vote" by flaunting their support of Israel, they are demonstrating the Manichean reductionism that is characteristic of the simplistic American worldview, a reductionism we must speak against. In the U.S., "Jews" are equated with "Israel." This erroneous equation leads to the equally flawed conflation of "criticism of Israel" with a "dislike of Jews"—anti-Semitism. Palestinians, then, face a double challenge: They must resist their occupation, as well as the unfounded but crippling charge of racism. The Algerians fighting for independence from French colonialism were not called "anti-white," nor were the Blacks in South Africa accused of "reverse discrimination," in fact, no other colonized people rising against their occupier have been accused of racism. But because the hegemonic discourse in North America equates "Jews" with Israel, Palestinians who seek an end to their oppression are vilified here as anti-Semitic.

Below, I discuss three incidents I have personally experienced which illustrate the ongoing silencing of pro-Palestinian activism. I have chosen three different types of "progressive spaces" where such incidents occur: international academia, cyber-space, and a suburb of Seattle, to show how widespread the censorship is. Additionally, in my discussions with numerous social justice activists who support the Palestinian struggle for freedom and self-determination, I know that this censorship occurs consistently, all across the country. The examples I give must therefore be seen as no more than a minimalist sampling of the intolerance we still face among progressives.

In October 2004, I was an invited panelist at an international conference in Montreal, Canada, discussing historical wrongs, collective traumas, and communal healing and recovery.<sup>7</sup> The conference, modeled upon the Durban UN World Conference Against Racism (as indicated in the registration packet), opened on a Wednesday evening with two keynote speakers. The first, from an Eastern African country, spoke of the universal duty to remember slavery, which has been affecting hundreds of millions worldwide, for centuries, and the legacy of which is lived by hundreds of millions all over the world today. With regards to the slave trade, this speaker correctly pointed out, it is still premature to speak of forgiveness, as the full implications of this historical wrong remain unacknowledged to this day. The second keynote speaker, an Indigenous chief, spoke of the ongoing legacy of the colonization of the Americas, again indicating that the wrong is not over and done with, as its repercussions are lived on a daily basis by Indigenous peoples today. The Chief was adamant in his opposition to "sanitizing language," arguing that we

must name the wrongs for what they were: ethnocide and cultural genocide. Both speakers spoke of the poverty, unemployment, diseases, depression, violence, and incarceration rates that still plague people of African or Indigenous descent in various African and American countries, North and South. Clearly, both keynote speakers were addressing wrongs of a global scope, with ongoing consequences, detrimental to the victims, preferential to the victimizers, and the need to acknowledge those consequences. Amnesia is too convenient, said the African, as the Indigenous chief again urged the conference participants not to mince our words, not to sugarcoat reality, for only when one acknowledges the magnitude of evil, rather than attempt to minimize it, will one seek to adequately redress the consequences.

I was elated. At the opening ceremony, both keynote speakers had reminded the audience that we all need to speak the truth about the ongoing misery inflicted by racism, colonialism, slavery, and imperialism. Tomorrow, I thought to myself, we will grapple with these issues that have for so long been swept under the rug, we will finally discuss, as victims and victimizers together, some of the world's historical wrongs as we are experiencing them in the twenty-first century.

The euphoria was short-lived. The next day, during the opening panel, which was supposed to engage with the key issues of memory, recovery, and healing, we had three white scholars, who spoke at great length of "Europe's diseased memory"-- diseased in that it still has not gotten over the Holocaust. And as the conference was winding down, by Friday afternoon, it was painfully clear to me that something was seriously amiss. The keynote speakers had urged us to grapple with the ongoing consequences of slavery and colonialism. But the "experts" had presented us with an academic discourse so Eurocentric it placed Germany at the center of the contemporary world's memory of any and all wrongs. Germany must be taken as the "starting point of any discussion of the contemporary world's memory", one of these European expert asserted, in a sweeping dismissal of such momentous developments as the emancipation of enslaved Africans throughout the Americas, the advent of communism in Asia and Eastern Europe, decolonization (62 countries gained their independence from Britain alone), an end to Apartheid in South Africa, and to legal segregation in the US. All of these events, and many more of equal import, inform the memory of the majority world, if not necessarily Europe's.

Imbued with an unflinching sense of entitlement and privilege, the academic "experts" had spoken beyond their allotted time, giving the other participants absolutely no opportunity to dispute their claims. So, when I finally had the floor, on Friday afternoon, as the conference was winding down, I neglected my own prepared essay to denounce the pervasive Eurocentrism of this international gathering, arguing that Europe does indeed have a diseased memory, if the only wrong it can acknowledge is the Nazi Holocaust, without so much as a passing reference to colonialism and slavery, despite the urgent reminder, the previous night, to finally address these crimes. (Clearly, they had not deemed it important to rework their prepared talks so as to respond to the plea made by the keynote speakers). Then I went on to critique the fact that the panel of "experts" on historical wrongs and traumas was all white, and apparently incapable of comprehending the crimes so many millions of victims have experienced. I added that since these experts had only addressed the Nazi Holocaust, and how that episode has affected Germany, and divided the French, and how Europe as a continent had still not overcome the trauma, they were clearly not talking to us, but

at us. For two days, we had discussed our pains and traumas, as colonized peoples who had lost our languages, our countries, indeed, in the case of the Indigenous Peoples, our whole continents; we had talked about the immediacy of our circumstances—the fact that we remain dispossessed today, with alarming unemployment, poverty, and incarceration rates. We had talked to the descendents of colonizers and slaveholders, to white Europeans, Canadians, and Americans, about the differential of power and privilege resulting from these historical wrongs. But the Euro-experts did not engage in a dialogue with us. The Nazi Holocaust is a stain on Europe's memory, involving as it did the genocide, by Europeans, of fellow Europeans, hence it remains the greatest wrong in Eurocentric discourse, and Germany becomes “the launching pad” of any discussion of global memory in the contemporary world. Colonialism, imperialism, and genocide *outside of Europe* apparently need not be addressed, for they are not traumatic to Europe and its descendents.

As I finished talking, having intentionally spoken less than my allotted time, to allow for discussion, it became immediately clear to me that the organizers were extremely upset with me. One of them actually shouted his anger at me, only inches away from my face, as soon as we stepped out into the hallway. The other organizer simply walked away from me as I was approaching her to say goodbye. As she stood there, smiling and shaking hands with everybody else, she looked away whenever I managed to make eye contact with her, until I figured she clearly was unwilling to talk to me. Additionally, one of the “experts” I had criticized called me stupid, to my face, but without addressing me. “A chaque conference, il y a un moment de bêtise, [at every conference, there is a moment of stupidity]”, he said to his fellow European panelists, while looking at me, as I stood a mere foot away from their group. Just as I had pointed out in my own critique of the conference—that critique which so infuriated the “experts”, this particular expert was talking at me, about me, but not to me, despite his full awareness of my presence. I must presume he felt that I was no worthy partner for dialogue, no reliable partner for any peace attempt. I had not valued his (Eurocentric) expertise above mine. I had claimed agency, and I had denounced his bias.

The gender dynamics of this academic confrontation were truly interesting: when I criticized the format of the conference, the male organizer, an Arab, spontaneously expressed his anger, while the white woman “ignored” me. Similarly, the only man among the Euro-experts I had criticized actually insulted me to my face (which I take as a validation of my critique), while the rest of the panelists, all female, would not acknowledge my presence amongst them. Privileged men feel that they can confront a woman they perceive as a threat to their authority, while women, even when in a position of relative power or equality, adopt the “feminine” strategy of evasion. I wonder, in retrospect, how the response to my talk would have differed had I been an Arab man, saying exactly what I had said. Would the men who raised their voice against me have refrained from doing so, viewing me as an equal? And if not, would we have gotten into a shouting match, for I, too, would have considered it my prerogative to raise my voice in response? Would the women I had offended have nevertheless smiled at me, instead of completely avoiding eye contact? Interestingly, both conference co-organizers told me, while I was still in Montreal, that they had read my paper (which we were required to submit ahead of time in order to facilitate the process of simultaneous translation) and thought it provocative, powerful, and incisive in its analysis of global racism. They assured me that they would publish it, and the Arab

man who had been vocally angry at me even told me I could address the conflict that had happened, in a brief preface, before submitting the edited version. But the woman organizer, who had the final say in the publication of the conference proceedings, eventually rejected my submission. In the final analysis, the silencing, the betrayal had come from a white woman, not an Arab man...

Since I had been invited as an Arab American feminist, a Women's Studies professor, and a member of a number of feminist organizations, were there any unspoken expectations, that maybe I would denounce "Islamic fundamentalism," when in fact I spoke out against my other oppressor, racism, in both its Zionist and Eurocentric manifestations? For in truth, a Palestinian woman's dignity, her individual rights, her freedom, are denied her by Israel, not her Muslim next-of-kin. Thus, Arab women speaking out against their oppression must of necessity speak out against racism, both Israeli and American, colonialism and imperialism (once mostly British and French, but today also Israeli and American), and overall Western intervention in our countries' politics. Why had my brief talk provoked so much anger?

It was Friday night in Montreal, a city I love. I had the evening to myself, and I absolutely cherish evenings to myself. And yet I felt miserable, deeply troubled by this experience. I tried to walk it off. I walked for close to three hours that evening, trying to shake off the gloom that had descended on me as I absorbed the reaction to my critique of the conference's Eurocentrism. Why was I giving so much weight to the anger I had caused, even as I remain convinced that my own criticism was absolutely justified? Why couldn't I focus instead on the women who came up to me and thanked me for speaking out? Was this not the master's tool at work again? Much later, back at home, I looked up my copy of Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, and read:

Those of us who stand outside the circle of society's definition of acceptable women . . . know that *survival is not an academic skill*. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which all can flourish.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the superficial veneer that makes me an acceptable woman, I had clearly not been successfully tamed; I had not assumed that my duty consists of patiently, laboriously educating my audience, over and over again, about the most basic fact, namely, that the colonized have been wronged by the colonizers. As the chokehold around the livelihood of my people gets tighter by the day, I can no longer devote my energy to pointing out, on a map, where Palestine *should* be... I expect allies with a sense of justice to do the necessary work of unlearning racism enough to reach out a helping hand where it is most needed, rather than have the colonized, the oppressed, the wretched of the earth, explain to them why our circumstances are unacceptable. To quote Lorde again:

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns. . . . This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought.<sup>9</sup>

I went back to my hotel room, determined not to let this setback paralyze me any longer. And yet, the disappointment was an all-too familiar feeling. One memory haunted me, as I lay down, exhausted yet sleepless: the experience of the Arab-American contributors to *This Bridge We Call Home*.<sup>10</sup>

My own piece in *This Bridge We Call Home* addressed how the first collection, *This Bridge Called My Back*, had completely erased the existence of radical Arab feminists, since it was supposed to be by “all women of color” and for all women of color, but did not include a single Arab voice. To their credit, it must be said that the co-editors of the second edition, AnaLouise Keating and Gloria Anzaldúa, had actually accepted not one or two, but all of six Arab and Arab-American contributors. However, I also know, from conversations with a number of contributors, that many of us were unaware this edition would not be a “women of color” anthology, but would include white women and men, some of whom would not acknowledge any privilege, while others actually celebrated their privileged status. In her preface, Keating claims “we had made it clear in our call for papers that we were interested in receiving work from men.”<sup>11</sup> Actually, the call for submissions said, simply: “We welcome work by people of all colors and genders”, while repeating, five times in a 260-word announcement, that this anthology, initially titled *This Bridge Called My Back, Twenty Years Later*, was to pick up where the groundbreaking volume had left off.<sup>12</sup> How could we have assumed that the follow-up collection would stray so far from the spirit of its parent, that it would now include white men who acknowledge their privilege only to dismiss it in the most cavalier manner? Thus one contributor, Max Valerio, for example, acknowledges the privilege that comes from the fact that he passes for white, despite his mixed-race background, but dismisses it with two simple words: “Privilege aside,” he writes, “and contrary to what some people may assume, I have never liked being so light, and only accepted it with great effort over time.”<sup>13</sup> How were we to know how *essentially* different this new anthology would be?

But the betrayal did not come from the white male contributor(s). The new anthology had essays by some 70 contributors, and the editors formed a listserv to communicate with us all about formatting, deadlines, and other such technicalities, but also to get input about the title of the projected collection. Because Anzaldúa was already very weakened by the disease that would soon claim her life, Keating was the listserv owner and did most of the communication with the contributors, although she explained that all decisions were taken jointly by Anzaldúa and herself. Ideally, we all wanted a title that closely echoed the first edition’s while indicating that this was not a reprint. Naturally, the listserv quickly developed into a political forum, as many contributors suggested titles, presenting the rationale behind their choice, while others responded. Occasionally, someone would forward a message from a progressive activist organization they were affiliated with, calling for action about specific causes. The overall tone of our communications was extremely jovial, we were all excited to be part of this wonderful project and fed off of each other’s enthusiasm, and all was going very smoothly, until one of the contributors posted a message inquiring whether the contributors to *bridge* wanted to issue a collective statement condemning the latest Israeli violence against Palestinians. This was during the Second Intifada, and Israel was once again engaging with impunity in the massacre of civilians. Suddenly, the tone on the listserv changed dramatically, as that contributor was called racist, anti-Semitic, a hatemonger who should not even be included in the anthology.



The hostility quickly escalated, as the other Arab contributors (many of whom did not know each other at the time) participated in the discussion, explaining that a critique of Zionism is a critique of a political project and could not be conflated with anti-Semitism or racism of any sort. At no point was our criticism directed at some homogeneous “Jewish community”, but very specifically at Zionism, a political movement that some Jews, as well as a growing number of Christians, embrace.

Zionism, the establishment of a settler-colonialist Jewish state in historic Palestine, achieved through the dispossession and displacement of that land’s Indigenous people, is indeed a form of nationalism that cannot be dissociated from racism. 450 Arab Palestinian villages, out of a total of 550 in Palestine in 1948, were destroyed to allow for the creation of the Jewish state, and 82 percent of the Arab Palestinian population was displaced in that historic tragedy Palestinians call *Al Nakba* (the catastrophe). Today, 70 percent of the Palestinian population are denied the right to return to their homes, so that Israel can secure its exclusionary status as a “Jewish state.” And Palestinian women are without any doubt more oppressed by Israel and Zionism than they are by their fellow Palestinian men, for a Palestinian woman’s freedom of movement, her right to an education, her right to vote, her right to work, her right to live where she wants, her right to sufficient food, clean water, and medical treatment in her own homeland, are not denied her by her fellow Palestinians, but by the illegal occupying power, Israel. And yet, when Palestinians denounce this political system, which privileges one perceived ethnicity and religion over another, they are called racist themselves.

Every pro-Palestinian email on that listserv was met with a barrage of accusations from Jewish contributors who charged that we were blind to the continuing oppression of Jews and that we had zero-tolerance for “the Jewish perspective.” We tried to explain Jewish women’s privilege vis-à-vis other women of color in general, and Palestinian women in particular, but the Jewish contributors saw their Jewishness exclusively as a site of oppression, never privilege. At no point was there so much as the dismissive gesture, a statement such as “Jewish privilege aside, we have to confront numerous stereotypes...” Clearly, those supposedly radical women were incapable of comprehending multiplicity, even as they lived it in the flesh, for many of them said they were Latina Jewish, Jewish lesbian, Jewish Native American. But they could not conceive of “Jewish oppressor”, “White/Jewish privilege”, or “non-Zionist Jew.” Hence, they were accusing us on the basis on their own blindness, their own failure to go beyond George W. Bush’s Manichean “either you’re with us, or you’re with the enemy.”

Despite our most articulate arguments, we were unable to bring the Jewish contributors to an understanding that the Palestinian denunciation of the Zionist policy of illegal occupation, dispossession, and racial discrimination did not stem from anti-Semitism, but from women of color’s desire to be free of multiple sites of oppression. The anti-Arab rhetoric kept coming, unprovoked, until we finally contacted the editors, urging them to intervene and put an end to what had become a hate-list, with zero-degree tolerance for Arab voices. They did not.

As with the Canada conference, here too, the dynamics of censorship and silencing were fascinating. As the discussion evolved, every time a pro-Palestinian message was posted, Keating (and Anzaldúa, presumably) immediately reminded us that the list had been created to communicate about the book and must not be turned into a political forum. (So much for that basic tenet of feminism, “the personal is political”!) But when an anti-Arab message was posted, it was generally

followed by numerous others supporting whatever ugly accusations had just been made, without the immediate reminder that this listserv was not meant as a political forum. Such consistent oversight on an editor's part can only come from complete socialization into the privileging of one party over another and closely resembles the dynamics that made it possible for the "experts" at the conference on historical wrongs to devote their whole panel to anti-Semitism, even as speakers from Peru, Argentina, Algeria, Palestine, Djibouti, and numerous First Nations had discussed how they had been impacted by racism, colonialism, slavery, and sexism.

Towards the end of this debacle, one contributor accused the Arab contributors who had expressed criticism of Israel of being so racist that we were in league with the Ku Klux Klan. Once again, we were categorized based on the hegemonic discourse's failure to see the world beyond the binary of "good guys and bad guys." The KKK hates Jews, we are critical of Zionism, therefore we must be in league with the KKK. But this wrong inference fails to take into account many important variables. Not all Jews are Zionists, but that apparently is a very challenging concept for Americans to comprehend. Not all non-Zionist Jews are self-hating Jews. Not all anti-Zionists are racist. I would even contend that since a critique of Zionism is a critique of racism, in all likelihood an anti-Zionist is anti-racist. As a matter of fact, Klan members are anti-Semitic, but not anti-Zionist. Shouldn't progressives understand that?

The hatred continued, until the entire book project was threatened, as contributors indicated that they were considering withdrawing their piece. Then, and only then, did Keating finally shut down the listserv. The centrality of the Palestinian issue to women of color generally—namely the fact that we are a colonized people seeking to break through the distorted hegemonic narrative that either completely erases or totally misrepresents us—was once again pushed to the margins, as Keating suggested creating another listserv, where whoever was engaged in the political discussion would have the opportunity to continue that debate, without hindering the *bridge* project. By doing so, she was contributing to our further marginalization, our erasure, as she took away our opportunity to engage in a meaningful discussion with our potential allies, simply because one group of contributors had accused us of being racist.

We asked that the editors address the "behind-the-scenes" hostility in the introduction to the collection, and were seriously disappointed when the book finally came out, sanitizing the hatred beyond recognition... Here is what Anzaldúa wrote about the email discussion in her preface:

I recalled the internal strife that flared up months earlier in the postings on the listserv we set up for our contributors. I think the listserv conflict also masked feelings of fear—this supposedly safe space was no longer safe. The contentious debates among Palestinian women and Jews of Latina, Native, and European ancestry churned a liquid fire in our guts.

Conflict, with its fiery nature, can trigger transformation depending on how we respond to it. Often, delving deeply into conflict instead of fleeing from it can bring an understanding (*conocimiento*) that will turn things around. In some of the responses to the heated discussions, I saw genuine attempts to listen and respond to all sides. With generous conciliatory

responses a few contributors tried to heal the rajasuras split open by mistrust, suspicions, and dualisms.<sup>14</sup>

I would venture that the contributor who accused us of being in league with the Klan was not making a “genuine attempt to listen.” On the other hand, those few contributors who were trying to heal the rift, saw their efforts curtailed by the decision to move the discussion elsewhere. And I must assume that the editors did not feel that this conflict was worth their delving into, for the understanding and healing that could come of such an effort was clearly not part of the transformative work their anthology would facilitate.

However, it was also obvious to us, Arab American contributors, that we had transformed ourselves, despite the attempt to silence and marginalize us. We did not accept the offer to join an alternative list. We have given ourselves permission to narrate “center-stage”, and we are not going to fade away, even though we are experiencing immense backlash. We are shouldering the burden of representation, and once again, we are reminded not to assume that those claiming to follow in the footsteps of “radical women of color” will necessarily bear some of the weight with us. Twenty years ago, Betty Friedan, beacon of the second-wave feminism, had tried to silence Nawal Saadawi at an international conference on women, and contributors to *This Bridge We Call Home*, as well as its editors, had shown little progress in terms of understanding the dispossession of Palestinians. And yet, we must continue. “For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive”<sup>15</sup>

In October 2004, in a suburb of Seattle, I was moderating a sophisticated political discussion, with most participants eager to learn about specific actions they could engage in, ahead of the US presidential elections. The last question raised during the discussion was: “So how does John Kerry compare to George W. Bush on the Palestine question?” I responded that there was absolutely no doubt in my mind that Kerry was significantly better on U.S. women’s issues, civil rights issues, and environmental issues, but that if I were to think in terms of Palestine, then he fares no better than Bush on Palestinian women’s issues, civil rights issues, and environmental issues. I explained that anybody who believes an Apartheid Wall can bring about peace, anybody who approves of Ariel Sharon’s policies, cannot possibly be supportive of the Palestinians’ basic human rights.

I can’t claim ignorance. Kerry had made one pro-Zionist statement too many. A smart man-- for we must sadly acknowledge that “smartness” is not to be taken for granted as an attribute of a U.S. presidential candidate--Kerry had proactively responded to the argument that criticism of Israel is not necessarily racist, explaining, on his website, that anti-Semitism is “often masked in anti-Israel rhetoric”, thus also implying that he would not tolerate anti-Israel rhetoric. “John Kerry and John Edwards believe that anti-Semitism – often masked in anti-Israel rhetoric -- is a dangerous trend threatening both Israel and Jewish communities around the world”, proclaims Kerry’s presidential campaign website, which reproduces the usual American politician’s statement of unending, unquestioning, unfaltering support for Israel.<sup>16</sup>

I explained that, as a Palestinian, I cannot look my own mother in the eye, and tell her I voted for Kerry. My mother, just like my father, is a native of Jerusalem, both were displaced in 1948 and have never been allowed to return to Palestine. My father had since died, in the Diaspora. I explained that I could not

tell my mother: “Mom, I looked up Kerry’s election website, read about his support for Ariel Sharon, and for the ‘security fence,’ as he chooses to call the Apartheid Wall, and about his pride in having consistently voted for continued financial, political, and military support for Israel, throughout his nineteen years as senator. But Mom, forgive me, I voted for Kerry, because he believes American women should have the right to terminate an unwanted pregnancy, and that Pacific salmon should be placed on the endangered species list.” The Palestinians are an endangered species themselves, I added, and for us, a vote for Kerry would be almost equivalent to a Jew voting for Hitler. This was the final question, and as we prepared to leave, one woman came up to me, warmly congratulating me on my eloquence, my composure, my knowledge, etc. “But you just blew it, at the end”, she added hastily. “For me, everything you said lost all validity after you claimed that Kerry and Bush are two sides of a coin. As a Jew, I really resent what you said.”

Following the 2004 elections fiasco, progressives did come out and say that Kerry was perhaps more pro-Israel than Bush and would have continued to crush the Palestinians.<sup>17</sup> But when I had suggested that, for me as a Palestinian, a vote for Kerry based on his electoral statements would be almost equivalent to a Jew voting for Hitler, I was told I “lost all credibility” with my audience, for how dare anyone, whatever their circumstances, compare anyone with Hitler. It is indeed extremely revealing of the Eurocentric mindset that even as Saddam is demonized beyond any and all humanity, he is not compared to Hitler. I presume that can only be because his victims were not European.

*The New York Times*, the editors claiming to be midwives of social transformation and activism, and this participant in the discussion in Seattle are unfortunately representative of the problem with the American “left.” Incapable of fully comprehending multiplicity, they fail to address a historical wrong that is obvious to the rest of the world, a wrong perpetrated by a victim turned victimizer. Yes, one can acknowledge the continued presence of anti-Semitism, while denouncing the fact that Israel itself is a racist state, in its own way an apartheid state. Progressive Palestinians and their allies who are ever cautious never to be associated with Neo-Nazi organizations do so because they know that such organizations are racist and that our critique of Zionism is political. It is really not so complicated, and yet, as we are accused of “being in league with the KKK”, it is painfully obvious that the U.S. needs much education. Isn’t it sad that no “progressive” Eurocentric expert finds it outrageous that, today, it is the Palestinians who hold on to the dream of “next year, in Jerusalem?” Instead, when I explain that both of my parents are from Jerusalem, but that my mother is denied the right of return, I am told that it would be “inconvenient” to grant Palestinians the right of return. Inconvenient for whom? Has anyone asked the Palestinians if they find it inconvenient to return to their homes? “But it would present a huge problem”, I am told, and again, I need to respond with some basic questions: a huge problem for whom? Would it be a huge problem for the Palestinians to be allowed to return to their homes? And what if it were a huge problem? Do we not have a huge problem now, and wouldn’t the solution, difficult as its implementation might be, actually solve the problem?

Protesting voices are not soothing. It is not in their nature to lull the listener to sleep, comfort them, reassure them that all is fine. Protesting voices must shake the listener out of their slumber. And yes, that is discomforting for the listener. I do wish I had a fairy tale to share, a story with a happy ending. I would

like to be able to tell such a story. I would like to tell my own son, a third-generation Diaspora Palestinian, such a story: And then the Palestinians got their land back, and were able to go back to their homes, and everyone lived happily ever after in freedom and dignity. And yes, I do firmly believe that when Palestinians have their freedom and dignity back, *everyone* in Palestine and Israel will live happily ever after, as the Israelis (who will not be pushed into the sea, whatever the fear mongers say), also finally break free from the burden of occupation and the resistance to occupation.

So until I can tell such a soothing story without lying, I am bound to raise my protesting voice. So long as there are worldwide denunciations of every known or potential genocide except that of the Palestinians, I will continue to speak out. So long as there are efforts to prevent the forced displacement of any community from its historical home, except for the Palestinians, I owe it to the world and my people to speak out. I will seize every opportunity to call attention to the massacre of Palestinians in such hostile places as international conferences against racism and racial intolerance, “radical women of color” listservs, and the suburbs of “progressive” cities like Seattle. So long as anti-war activists denounce the U.S. occupation of Iraq, but not Israel’s occupation of Palestine, I will keep drawing the parallels. I don’t like having to do so. I wish I didn’t have to. I wish I didn’t have to face hostile audiences at the various “progressive” events I go to. And yet, I feel that I must go on, I must continue to speak out. That is what is euphemistically referred to as the burden of representation.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Edward Said: *A Critical Reader*, ed. Michael Sprinker, (London, New York: Blackwell, 1992), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> AWSA, SF, “The Forgotten’ism”, Preface.

<sup>3</sup> Samson, Hugh, Letter to New York Times editor, available on [www.electronicintifada.net/v2/article3315.shtml](http://www.electronicintifada.net/v2/article3315.shtml)

I would contend that numerous oppressed peoples are actually more under-represented than the Palestinians, but that none are as mis-represented, because while underrepresented cultures rarely make the news, Palestinians do so very regularly, but in an overwhelmingly negative light—as aggressors, terrorists, etc.

<sup>4</sup> [www.commondreams.org/news2001/0903-04.htm](http://www.commondreams.org/news2001/0903-04.htm)

<sup>5</sup> [www.forusa.org/fellowship/nov-dec\\_01/ramey\\_elephant.html](http://www.forusa.org/fellowship/nov-dec_01/ramey_elephant.html)

<sup>6</sup> Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press Feminist Series, 1984), p. 42.

<sup>7</sup> I have refrained from identifying the conference itself to safeguard the privacy of some of the speakers and participants who have since communicated with me on email, saying that they too felt that the format had been problematic, and thanking me for speaking out, even as they expressed reservations about being openly associated with “my” point of view.

<sup>8</sup> Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” in *Sister Outsider*, p. 112.

<sup>9</sup> Lorde, “The Master’s Tools,” p. 113

<sup>10</sup> Since this anthology is now in print, with the editors actually mentioning, in the preface, the conflict I am discussing here, I feel that I can identify the book itself. However, since there were over 70 contributors to the anthology, not all of whom signed up on the listserv, and many of whom used nicknames, I cannot identify specific individuals who participated in the heated discussions that ensued. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, eds. *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*. (New York: Routledge, 2002)

<sup>11</sup> Anzaldúa and Keating, *This Bridge We Call home*, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> This is the actual text of the call for submissions for the collection that became *This Bridge We Call Home*.

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This Bridge Called My Back, 20 Years Later -- Call for Submissions  
From: AnaLouise Keating

Gloria Anzaldúa and I are co-editing an anthology, THIS BRIDGE CALLED MY BACK, 20 YEARS LATER. We'd welcome contributions (essays, poems, personal narratives, fiction, stories, artwork, etc.) that addressed the impact of recent technology (the Internet, etc.) on BRIDGE-related issues, such as the following (#1 & #2 seem especially appropriate):

1. New Issues which have arisen since THIS BRIDGE's publication What new issues confront us today, almost twenty years after THIS BRIDGE's publication? (Environmental issues? Issues related to aging & healthcare?)
2. Envisioning Change Where do we go from here? What can the political visions, the calls for revolutionary change, and the desire to create new forms of coalition articulated in THIS BRIDGE teach us as we enter the 21st century? How might THIS BRIDGE help us to envision change?
3. Influence What impact has THIS BRIDGE made on individual women, on feminist/womanist theorizing, on ethnic studies, on queer theory, on the academy, on US feminisms, on feminism in other countries, on the development of an international feminism?
4. The current status of issues raised in THIS BRIDGE To what extent have the challenges BRIDGE contributors made in this groundbreaking anthology been met? To what extent do the challenges remain unfulfilled? How much progress have we made?

We welcome contributions from people of all colors and genders. Papers (approximately 10 to 30 double-spaced pages for essays by August 31, 1999. Send two copies of all submissions, a short bio, & disk versions of both (wordperfect or microsoft word).

<sup>13</sup> Max Wolf Valerio, "Now That You're a White Man: Changing Sex in a Postmodern World—Being, Becoming, and Borders," in *This Bridge We Call Home*, p. 247

<sup>14</sup> Anzaldúa, and Keating, *This Bridge We Call Home*, p. 4

<sup>15</sup> Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence," p. 42

<sup>16</sup> [www.johnkerry.com](http://www.johnkerry.com)

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Stephen Zunes, "Is Kerry Really More Open than Bush to Alternative Foreign Policy Perspectives?" at [www.commondreams.org/views2004/0915-13.htm](http://www.commondreams.org/views2004/0915-13.htm)

# TAKING POWER AND MAKING POWER RESISTANCE, GLOBAL POLITICS, AND INSTITUTION BUILDING

## AN INTERVIEW WITH ANAN AMERI

By Nadine Naber

**Anan Ameri**, Ph.D., founding member and former president of the Palestine Aid Society of America (PAS), is the Cultural Arts Director at the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) in Dearborn, Michigan. She is also the Director of the Arab American National Museum, opening in Spring 2005, co-editor of the *Arab American Encyclopedia* (1999), and co-author of *Arab Americans in Metro Detroit: A Pictorial History* (2000).

**Nadine Naber:** In addition to your history as a scholar, you also played a key role within the Palestinian women's movement in the U.S. What was the vision behind this movement and what were your contributions to these efforts?

**Anan Ameri:** My vision was, and continues to be, that Palestinians in the diaspora have a moral responsibility to support the national struggle of the Palestinian people for liberation and independence. As a woman myself, who lived in both Jordan and Lebanon at the time of the 1967 war and the 1973 war, I witnessed first hand the determination and strength of Palestinian women to organize, to contribute to the steadfastness of Palestinian people, and to deliver in a tangible way. Palestinian women in the occupied territories and Lebanon played a leading role in organizing and in leadership. They were especially instrumental in sustaining non-governmental organizations.

In the late 1970s, I, along with other Palestinian activists, men and women, established the Palestine Aid Society (PAS), a non-profit tax-exempt organization with the objective of supporting women's organizations in the Palestinian occupied territories and in Lebanon. Our approach was to support vocational and educational organizations that promote women's education, training, and economic

independence. We believed that women's economic independence is critical to equality. One cannot talk about women's equality when women lack education, job opportunities, and economic independence. In the U.S.A., we also promoted women's leadership and participation in the organization. Although PAS is not a women's organization, from the first year of its establishment, women played an important and leading role. Unfortunately, with the current political situation, here and in the Palestinian occupied territories, the organization lost a lot of its momentum.

**NN:** You have also played a central role in the process of increasing the visibility of Arab American people, ideas, and institutions, locally and nationally. What are the ways that gender struggles have played out within your work among Arab American community organizations? What I mean is what have been the gender issues that have emerged within your work among Arab American communities? And how do gender struggles play out among community organizers and leaders?

**AA:** When I came to the U.S.A. in 1974, I was struck by the level of hostility towards Arabs. I was especially struck by the stereotyping and negative images of Arab women that unfortunately continue in this country. That of course made me angry, and I felt that I had a responsibility to prove them wrong. I would say that two major events shaped my identity and, consequently, my work. First, the 1967 war brought my Palestinian identity to the forefront; second, coming to the U.S.A. and realizing the extent to which Arabs are portrayed negatively and how little people in this country know about us, as Arabs, as Palestinians, and as women. While the 1967 war pushed me to activism on the Palestinian issue, coming to U.S.A. pushed me to activism on Arab issues, especially Arab women's issues. That is how I became an activist and feminist.

When I was young, I thought that I, along with a few who believe in the same causes as I did, could change the world. As I grew older, I came to understand that good will and good work is not enough. I came to realize that what we need here [in the U.S.], in Palestine, and in the Arab world are institutions. Although I understood this early enough, it has not always been easy.

Now, if we were to examine non-profit organizations in the U.S.A., or any place in the world, we would realize the significance of women's roles in these institutions. They not only work in non-profit organizations in large numbers, but they are often the founders, executive directors, and board members. Non-profit organizations are very important institutions in all societies and often address critical needs of the underdogs -- the poor, the immigrants, and all those who are marginalized because of their race, gender, physical and mental challenges, age, or any other factors. In other words, they fill a vacuum, or needs that governments and corporations choose not to address. Unfortunately, we have to recognize that part of the reason women dominate the non-profit world is because it pays much less than other professions-- otherwise we might find more men working in the non-profit world.

Gender is always an issue in the Arab world and in the non-Arab world. Yes, I did reach leadership positions, and, at one time, I was the only woman who was the executive director or president of an Arab American national organization. I was the only woman from the U.S.A. who was a member of the Palestinian National



Council. I have to admit that, for the most part, I was treated with lots of respect and appreciation. That does not mean that once in a while a male would not challenge my leadership.

**NN:** Your contributions have also extended to the broader realm of U.S. multiculturalism as you have worked with various communities of color and in the context of white middle class cultural contexts. Have you dealt with struggles over gender and race in the process of working with non-Arab communities?

**AA:** I believe that sexism and racism are alive and well among Arab communities, as in other ethnic communities and among mainstream America. You only have to look at the U.S. congress and the corporate world, where power and money are located, to find out that we still have a long way to go. In general, European Americans continue to be the privileged class and today we hear a lot of people in power complaining that Affirmative Action is reverse discrimination. What they fail to mention is that this country had 500 years of Affirmative Action that favored European Americans, which put them in control of government, corporations, educational institutions, and media.

If white America has higher levels of education, income, and health, it is because of all these years of racism and anti-immigrant laws that institutionalized these practices. For that reason, European American women have made more progress on gender issues; they are, simply put, better equipped to fight for their rights as women. They are also better equipped to fight for more resources for their children's schools, and for their "right" to go to Ivy League universities. This not-so vicious circle had been, and continues to be, in their favor and in favor of their male and female children.

As a woman of color, and as a person who fights for Affirmative Action and who believes in the power of collective, I think that Arab Americans need to work with African Americans, Hispanics, and other minorities. We at ACCESS' Cultural Arts program have used the arts as a way to bridge different communities. Of course, there is a lot more that needs to be done.

**NN:** What is your view of feminism? Do you identify as a feminist? What does the term feminist mean to you?

**AA:** I simply believe in equality regardless of gender, race, religious beliefs, or nationality. As a result, I believe in equality of women, and their right to equal education, equal access to jobs and promotions, and equal access to resources, be it power or money. Meanwhile, I know that we do not live in a perfect world, far from it. In all societies everywhere, women are not equal to men. For me, feminism means working for an end to all forms of gender based discriminations toward women. However, my priorities might be different from the priorities of other feminists. I believe also, that women of color and women from Third World countries have different agendas than women in more advanced societies. Women in war zones also have different agendas and concerns. So, I do get frustrated sometimes by some feminists who try to impose their agendas on others or try to dictate to other women what they should be concerned with.

**NN:** As you work towards putting an end to various forms of oppression, what does your vision of social change look like? What do you think are the key elements necessary for ending global oppression?

**AA:** In the world that we live in today, there are those who have and those who don't. The gap globally, as well as within each country, between the poor and the rich is rapidly increasing. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, some were optimistic and were talking about the peace dividend. Now that the enemy is gone, we should spend our money on food and development of the less fortunate people, those in the Third World countries. The U.S. corporations, and those with political power, saw the vacuum created by the end of the Cold War as a new opportunity to expand their hegemony, and to increase their control over the resources of the world, hence all the trade treaties that were primarily responsible for allowing U.S. expansion without any control and creating the most unfair system of economic exchange. The economic boom of the 1990s was the immediate result of this expansion. In my view, global oppression is economic oppression. My view of social change entails more equitable distribution of resources between the rich and the poor, among nations, and within nations.

# IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

## STRUGGLING FOR NON-VIOLENT BELONGING

*Zeina Zaatari\**

Questions about belonging and non-belonging, identities created and remade, spaces for empowerment and action strike at the core of our existence, as people of color or as Arabs and Muslims, in the United States or, at least, in a world dominated by U.S. hegemony. How does belonging to an imagined community inflict violence on those who do not belong, those who refuse to belong, or those who refashion belonging in their own image, in their own imagining? The following essay is a critical narrative of my belonging/non-belonging, of growing up in South Lebanon during war times and thriving in the Belly of the Beast. The essay takes the approach of ‘carrying history in my pocket’ as an emblem to understanding subjectivities made and transformed, processes of feminist engagements by Arab and Arab Americans, and the violence of non-belonging. Oppressed communities find it necessary, at times, to redefine the labels bestowed upon them by the imperial other by way of reclaiming, redefining, and entering the arena of public and political discourse as empowered subjects. Personal experience and writing, therefore, become powerful means of empowerment. My understanding of myself as an Arab feminist is a product of personal struggles<sup>1</sup> and translations of national and public experiences. The following pages are reflections on that experience and attempts at theorizing a journey and the struggle of an everyday life.

Foucault<sup>2</sup> argues that subjectivity is created at the intersection of a number of dominant discourses and practices. As an Arab residing in the United States, my experiences of racialization and discrimination are colored by my own experience of growing up as a product of war and occupation in a country grappling with its post-colonial identity, Lebanon. My experience was also affected by the historical moments (mid-nineties) at which I entered racial space in the United States.

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Eagerness not to fit the stereotype can translate into naïve attempts to make the other see you as a human being, a willingness to be the token Arab or the token Muslim. Experience, social context (i.e. the difference between living in the Midwest or in the West of the U.S.), historical changes, and political contexts (wars) transform one's consciousness, and a different engagement with the dominant racist society results. This is an engagement that, today, still attempts to dismantle the stereotypes for a better dialogue, but one that is politically aware and often times angry. Here, I aim for a more in-depth exploration of these transformative processes through reflections on personal experiences (mine and others) and the different communities of Arab and Arab Americans they produce. Racialization and discrimination may be most reflected in our marginalization, as we become the margins of the margins, in our invisibility as a subject, and in our denial a space of self-determination. Silencing comes from a neocolonial, imperial, and paternal attitude on behalf of professors, students, and community as well as activists. Arabs and Arab-Americans and Muslims and Muslim-Americans are rarely seen as fully-fledged human beings by the dominant society and by many in progressive circles. We, thus, have no right to even claim victimization, discrimination, as well as love and care. We cannot expect things like freedom of speech to include our speech but only to protect the speech of our offenders. While we are denied access to a platform to speak about discrimination against Arabs and Muslims, racist discourses against us are deemed 'sacred' by Fox and a variety of media outlets. As community members and activists, we have come not to expect an administration (be it a government or a university) to protect our rights and to make us feel safe even when we are attacked on a daily basis. However, it is evident how administrations across this country are attempting to create safe environments for our oppressors by eliminating us.<sup>3</sup> We do not 'belong' to this nation, but our oppressors do.<sup>4</sup> If anything, it seems that the 2004 elections reaffirmed this non-belonging.

The discourse that takes place in the larger community is often also duplicated, though in different ways, within feminist and activist circles. Neither can escape the history of images and representations that we have inherited from Orientalist and colonialist material relations. The paternalistic attitude of activists mostly white, as well as some of those on the margins,<sup>5</sup> seeking to 'empower' Arab and Muslim women is another 'veiled' racism that requires deeper internal reflection for the possibility of a more nuanced and true 'sisterhood.' For many of us, violence is a daily reality that is experienced on multiple levels, in sympathy with and worry for our families, brothers, and sisters living under military rule in Palestine and Iraq and in being exposed to bumper stickers, news shows, and TV screens that parade a convoluted sense of patriotism that can only exist by literally wiping out the other, Arabs and Muslims, those who 'do not belong', us.

### **BEGINNINGS: CARRYING HISTORY IN MY POCKET**

Stories have beginnings that inform, link, and set the stage for what is to follow. I trace my beginnings to 1982. 1982 was the year my memory was born; 1982 was the year my consciousness emerged; 1982 was the year that defined my 'belonging' and 'non-belonging'; 1982 was the year during which my city was invaded by Israel. Like many in my generation in Lebanon, I was born into conflict. My earliest memory that preceded 1982 is of myself, with my mother and my baby brother, watching a city on fire from the balcony of our first floor apartment to the

east of Saida.<sup>6</sup> It was 1975, the year when the civil war in Lebanon started, and my father, at the time, was in the city that was aflame. A loud noise, I still hear sometimes, made me afraid. I recall that I ran and hid behind the couch. I was two years old at the time. Although we can assign a date to when the Lebanese civil war began, my region had been in turmoil since at least the turn of the century with the famines, uprisings, and divisions culminating with 1948, the creation of the state of Israel and the expulsion of Palestinians into neighboring Arab countries including Lebanon.

What does it mean to be a product of war and conflict? An underprivileged position I have been told, which strikes me as a curious positionality since I always thought of myself as privileged: I came from the South and had the ability to intimately know and understand my oppression and the oppressor's world very concretely. Marx and Gramsci<sup>7</sup> argue that the exploited always knows more about the conditions of his/her exploitation and the life of the oppressors than those who oppress them. As Joanna Kadi puts it: "We lived it. We had our reality, the bosses had theirs, and we understood them both."<sup>8</sup> Theorists of color, such as W.E.B. DuBois, wrote about double consciousness or the conditions that characterize the way in which African Americans understood their reality and that of white people at the turn of this century. This position of understanding is a tactic used by the oppressed to leverage some power over the oppressors. It is this tactic that I perceive of as privilege, as I would rather know than afford to be blind. This tactic can enable survival and empower a maneuvering of spaces and belonging during war and other conflicts.

Psychology defines war as a traumatic experience. Trauma, however, has been mostly assumed to be individual and personal. What happens, then, when a whole nation experiences the same trauma? My experiences during the war were by no means unique or extreme. Often times I was luckier than others; after all, I made it out alive. Perhaps what may be specific is what I decide to do with these experiences, how I see them shaping my identity, my political consciousness, and how they informed my everyday life. All experiences are transformative. Certain watershed events, however, have the potential for being more transformative of our consciousness than most. It is dominant discourses, at particular historical moments, and how one experiences them that are then embodied in the way we think, feel, desire, and act; in other words, in the way one becomes a subject and enacts one's subjectivity. Social structure and the materiality of subjectivity are emphasized by Bourdieu's theory of practice and habitus.<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu's subject is shaped and made by a material world in which perceptions and ideas are experienced and enacted through practices performed at specific moments in time and space. In addition, feminists of color, including bell hooks,<sup>10</sup> emphasize multiple subjectivities through experience. "The multiple nature of subjectivity is experienced physically, through practices which can be simultaneously physical and discursive."<sup>11</sup> Hooks has argued throughout her writings that this subjectivity translates itself onto the bodies of women as they are able to know oppression intimately in ways that makes the mental or the symbolic and physical inseparable. This personal experience, then, is transformed into political positionings and theorization about the world we live in.

The women activists of South Lebanon whose life history I collected remembered the transformative moments of their lives very clearly. The events that marked their existence were often called by scholars 'public political landmark events.' However, these events were intertwined with the domestic and the personal

on a deep level. It is in the best interest of those in positions of power and privilege to maintain a particular version of history that rarely comes to terms (at least in the U.S.) with slavery, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and internment. This constitutes an attempt to erase history and a consistent and collective amnesia about the 'forefathers' and the 'discovery of America.' Similarly, in Lebanon, the dominant history taught at schools and written in books is of the center of Mount Lebanon and rarely that of the marginalized South or of women. By contrast, the women I interviewed talked about their birthdays, love, marriages, and schools. And in the same breath, they talked about major political events such as the Balfour declaration of 1917, the fall of Palestine (1948), the 'Million Martyr War' (1954-62) for the liberation of Algeria, the Sykes Picot Agreement, the Nakba, Nasser, the Baghdad Accords, and Eisenhower<sup>12</sup>. They saw their lives as deeply intertwined with that of their people in a style not much different from the text of Wilma Mankiller's<sup>13</sup> autobiography. Several African American feminist authors have written about their lives in the same vein<sup>14</sup>. This is not to say that people of color have a history and white folks in the U.S. do not; rather, I want to underline how a position of privilege and power makes that pretense possible and sometimes 'necessary' for continued exploitation. Engaging with history on a personal level, having history that is alive in every bite and in every breath of air that you take, is a burden as well as a privilege. Carrying history in one's pocket makes one conscious of where one comes from and of what social structures attempt to define her existence. It is about recognizing the roots that ancestors have laid for us. This process entails the assessment of one's role in that history, of seeing clearly my positionality today in relation to the random and purposeful events that preceded my existence in this world. The question that precedes it immediately concerns my exact place in this history and its future and what am I going to do about it. My work in the community as an Arab feminist, who is trying to help create a space for Arab Americans of safe belonging and to create gender conscious institutions that cater to the needs of our youth, is partly a response to this question.

Obviously, not every person of color in the United States confronts her history and carries it around in her pocket. Hegemonic amnesia is also meant to make quiet, silence, assimilate and appease the majority of people of color, to buy into the American dream of 'try hard and you can make it', 'try hard and you can recreate your individual self without any ties, attachments or history', 'try hard and be proud to be independent autonomous and an individual.' These "American illusions of autonomy, American delusions of individuality", as June Jordan<sup>15</sup> puts it, aim to erase history and pretend that every citizen or even individual (including 'aliens' and immigrants) starts from point zero and, by working hard, can achieve it all. Some Arab Americans tried this path, renamed their children WASP names, spoke English to them and tried hard to hide the smell of humus, baba ghannouj, and kibbe. Such an approach, though, pushes people to be ashamed of their history, as if they were the perpetrators of the injustices against them or their ancestors or as if they deserved this injustice. As June Jordan puts it:

As though the horror and the dread of lynching and Jim Crow translated into something shameful about the victims, something the victims must keep secret, terrible years passed before these parents, mine among them, realized that they must publicly proclaim and publicly protest all of the injustice that their worn hands, slumped shoulders, and lowered eyes made clear. And even more time passed

before these victims recognized the need to act, collectively, against that outside evil force of hatred.<sup>16</sup>

Even those Arab Americans who tried to fit in and assimilate were eventually pushed back into facing that history with every new war between the U.S. and the Arab World (1967, 1982, First Gulf War, Second Gulf War) and more recently with Satellite television and the targeting of Muslims and Arabs under the pretext of waging a ‘war on terror’ and protecting ‘homeland security.’ The 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the public discourse that accompanied it, made a Lebanese immigrant question his ‘belonging’ to this U.S. nation. Believing himself to have ‘assimilated’ by using an American name, living and working in the U.S. for over 25 years, achieving his version of the ‘American Dream’ by becoming the model minority (apolitical, uninvolved, and hard working), this immigrant was shocked to suddenly realize that he still did not belong. He said: “We will never become an inextricable part of this society. They will never accept us.”<sup>17</sup> The war on Iraq, as the most recent example of wars involving the U.S. and the Arab World, made him a suspect even to his long-time friends and neighbors. The discourse of ‘cells’ and ‘terrorists within’ transformed every Arab and Muslim into an automatic suspect and a potential enemy.

## SECOND BEGINNINGS

As an Arab woman living in the U.S., I was at a loss as to which box I should fit into and whether I belonged. Not too long ago, at a panel on Arab Women, I was asked whether I identify as an American-Arab, an Arab, or something of the sort. When does one become an immigrant? When does one become hyphenated; when does an immigrant move from being an Arab to being an Arab-American? Is there a difference between being an Arab-American and being an American-Arab? Which aspect of one’s identity do we ‘choose’ to highlight and at what moment in time? What aspect of an identity can one wear or remove at will and are there identities that cannot be revoked nor denied? What does belonging to an ethnic group within a ‘nation’ mean?

Historical and political circumstances influence our ideology, behaviors, inclinations, and the choices we make. I arrived in the US in 1995 in the middle of winter to a Midwestern college town in Iowa. For me and other Arabs, the nineties was the decade of the decline of student activism in campuses throughout the United States. In contrast to the nineties, organizing in the 80s was fueled by the Intifada of 1987 in Palestine as well as the struggle for South Africa and the divestment campaign. The first Gulf war, and then the signing of the Oslo agreement, had led to a sense of defeat. It also fragmented collective Arab organizing on Palestine. My experiences as an Arab student in the United States were thus framed by this backdrop of political activism. Nonetheless, I knew the moment I stepped off the plane that I was intent on making change; I was carrying my history in my back pocket, but I soon found out that it had no place in this country. I was bound to remain on the margins even if I were to pursue an academic career. My representation of myself was to remain subordinated to a hegemonic Orientalist discourse.

## THE RACIAL SPACE

As an Arab student, I stepped not only into the ethnic space but also the racial space of the U.S. My experience of racialization spans racism against people from Latin America, women of color in general, Third World people, and Arab and Muslim women. When people saw me, their immediate reaction was to assume that I was a Latina. The de-facto referent 'other' that is not clearly black or Asian was Latino/a. Even though this may make more sense in California with its colonial history, the number of migrant Latino workers in the Midwest working on farms and factories had been on the rise. I was visible as a member of a minority group, presumed Latina, but invisible as an Arab woman. Since women in the U.S. are categorized into white, African, Asian, and Latina, my invisibility as an Arab meant that to make sense of me, the dominant culture had to fit me within the racial scheme that it understood.

Naber<sup>18</sup> argues that Islam has become a racial category in the late nineties. This transformation became clearer as I moved to California in the fall of 1997. My middle name includes 'Mohamad', which makes it almost impossible to escape my identification as a Muslim. In the Midwest, I was often made to feel like a foreigner, but an interesting one, one that has made it out of the 'jaws' of patriarchy back home. I often had to be the spokesperson for Arab women. I was eager to 'represent' the 'good side', the 'non-stereotype,' the 'we are just like you' side. At the time, not fully understanding the complexity of race relations along with the social conditions associated with a long history of Orientalism and Orientalist representation, especially of women, I complied with telling my story to curious middle-class women in Iowa. A sense of shame towards those images and stereotypes so dominant in Western media of the 'oppressed Arab and Muslim women' led to a feeling of responsibility to 'change them' to 'prove them wrong.' I attempted to assert my Muslimness, even though it had not been an important aspect of my identity before. Naively thinking, like many before me and after me, that seeing a Muslim woman who was not 'veiled' and 'oppressed' might be a transformative experience, leading Americans to change their attitudes towards Arabs. After moving to California, and being bombarded with imagined and convoluted notions of multiculturalism, I started to better understand this sort of 'showcase' syndrome. I realized more so than ever that I was being treated as a 'Third World person'--someone to be patronized and looked at approvingly: "You've tried hard and you made it."

## THE HALLS OF THE ACADEMY - THE 'ENLIGHTENED'

I felt the most discrimination within the walls of academia and in the classrooms of graduate schools. I expected to find more enlightened people, yet most were acting in dangerous patronizing ignorance laden with power. Those were supposedly the experts and the intellectuals. Silencing was probably the strongest form of racism I experienced. In classrooms discussions of the Middle East or the Arab World were muted and silenced. When students dared to breach the domain of accepted social movements and dared discuss or write about the struggles of Palestinians or Iraqis, their research topics and their political stands were often dismissed as being too 'controversial and divisive' for open discussion. When fellow activists demanded a clear-cut position on the ongoing colonization of the Arab world, their concerns were dismissed under the pretext of the obscurity of our



struggle and thus the impossibility to take a stand against or for it. Suddenly, social justice had multiple layers, and freedom became bound by historical junctures.

As a student, teaching assistant, and instructor, I felt the brunt of labeling, marginalizing and silencing of issues of concern to me and members of my community. I recall classes where writings by scholars from the Arab World were rarely included on the syllabus. And when we criticized, we were sometimes asked to suggest extra readings. June Jordan said: “It never occurred to me that optional reading lists might actually imply that somebody powerful really believed there were optional people alive on the planet.”<sup>19</sup> In anthropology, a discipline with a strong colonial past,<sup>20</sup> the ‘other’ was the object of study to be found on the pages of ethnographies but never in the theoretical reading assignments. My nationality, ethnicity, language, and religious background were “the other” to be studied, observed, written about, and re-presented. It is the same “other” whom Napoleon’s ‘army’ of 50 or so scientists had documented in volumes and volumes upon his conquest of Egypt in 1798. This knowledge helped define ‘Europe/West’, its ‘others’, and a relationship of authority over those ‘others.’<sup>21</sup> As the ‘other,’ however, we do not speak, cannot represent our own selves, nor produce theory about the world we inhabit.

Therefore, strutting through the halls of the academy with the multiple identities that we hold (Arab, working class, African American, Indigenous, Muslim, queer, Chicana, Japanese), we constitute a threat that requires silencing. Each of these identities was (and still is) silenced and deemed threatening to the ‘unity’ of the patriarchal nation at one moment in the history of the U.S. or another. Joanna Kadi argues that silencing is critical to the mechanism of oppression and, more viciously, internalized oppression: “all systems of oppression-from child abuse to racism to ableism-function most effectively when victims don’t talk. Silence isolates, keeps us focusing inward rather than outward, makes perpetrators’ work easier, confuses and overwhelms.”<sup>22</sup>

Silencing can take several forms including a professor telling a graduate student embarking on a thesis research, “you cannot say this” in a graduate seminar or “this is not an appropriate topic for study” or “you cannot use these foreign sources as references.” Indeed, intellectuals also act as gatekeepers to what is appropriate knowledge and who is an appropriate scholar. Policing thought and knowledge production is an important mechanism of maintaining oppression. Intellect becomes the exclusive realm of the ‘civilized’ and ‘enlightened’, those ‘experts’ who write about the ‘other.’ The genealogy of Orientalist writings and images is too long to discuss in detail here<sup>23</sup>. However, it is a strong force that is still alive and well in the intellectual circles of the American academy of today. It is a force that attempts to silence and control the domain of representation, convoluting textual with political representation and assuming that the textual is apolitical (Spivak).<sup>24</sup> Feminists of color such as bell hooks have criticized the academy, along with white hegemonic feminism, for their inability to articulate and provide a space for knowledge produced by feminists of color. As Arundhati Roy<sup>25</sup> argues, “I think it’s vital to de-professionalize the public debate on matters that vitally affect the lives of ordinary people. It’s time to snatch our futures back from the ‘experts.’”<sup>26</sup> When creating syllabi on gender in the Arab world, I make a conscious decision to include poetry, literature, ethnographies, and theoretical works by Arab women. This is part of my resistance in a college campus to bring in alternative forms of knowledge that are based in experience, other histories in the back pockets of women of the world. I am part of Arab and Arab American

feminist list serves where exchanging this information is crucial because looking over old syllabi or previous courses will not-we are convinced-produce the material we want.

The other form of racialization that many Arab and Arab American feminists face is in relation to our activism on behalf of our communities. Naber<sup>27</sup> discusses the processes by which various state institutions target and oppress political activists working for Arab peoples' rights and, more specifically, those working on Palestine and against Israel and U.S. imperialism such as the anti-war movement. As a student and a teacher on campus, I worked closely with student and community organizations. Given the beginnings I have discussed above, it is not surprising that Palestine is central to our organizational efforts. It is a fundamental and existential question that touches all aspects of our lives. These include, predominantly, the support that Israel receives in this country from both the government and its various public institutions. Even though I can write chapters on the various issues that we have had to deal with on college campuses, a few examples will suffice here.

- At an organized rally that was permitted and approved by the administration in 2002 on a California campus, a white male student held the American flag and wore a white T-shirt that read "Kill all Arabs." He circled the protestors chanting at the top of his lungs "kill those Arab babies," today's babies are tomorrow's terrorists" for about an hour. Not only was he not removed from the premises, but also we had to restrain ourselves from engaging with him even as he stood two inches away from a close friend screaming those words into his face.
- A year later, an anti-war rally was organized. We met with the administration, obtained the permit, and made it clear that there would be counter protestors and that there should be a way to deal with that. We were promised that counter demonstrators would not be permitted on the lawn. However, we as students and faculty had to create our own barricade around the stage to prevent screaming counter protestors from storming it. Counter protestors, dispersed among the rest of the crowd, were screaming and arguing with people to distract them from listening to the speakers. One of them even faked an assault and a citizen's arrest against a green party student pacifist, which was caught on tape.
- Racist teaching assistants can parade racist cartoons and statements<sup>28</sup> on the door to their offices and the administration's response to concerns raised by faculty and students was to claim that the door constitutes freedom of speech. On the other hand, a student was told not to wear a T-shirt reading "Free Palestine" in a center that serves marginalized communities on campus. This same center was won by students after staging a hunger strike in the early nineties. The center carries a large framed picture of these students during their hunger strike, all wearing kuffiyahs, the scarf most identified with Palestinian national identity. The irony notwithstanding, it was only after 9/11 that a Middle Eastern intern was finally established as a position at this center. However, whenever the intern dared to speak out or write, she was warned and chastised because she was making other students uncomfortable. In a meeting with the Dean of Students, where students and community were arguing against the imposition of an Israeli student on campus as the Middle East intern, the administration went as far as indicating that they would have no problems

with welcoming any group to the center even if it was a member of the Ku Klux Klan.

The mechanisms of surveillance are becoming more and more apt as every aspect of our activities becomes monitored and reported on. Having lived through the Israeli occupation in South Lebanon, I was now living through the impact of Zionism here in the United States. The bottom line is that Arabs and Muslims are rarely seen as humans. We have no right to claim victimization or discrimination since only humans can be victims. By automatically making the ‘perpetrator’ to be anti-Semitic, the Zionist hegemonic discourse has been successful at stifling any criticism of Israel. While Jews have the right to claim victimhood, which has become a privilege in Zionism’s attempt to silence others, Arabs, who also have Semitic roots, cannot even claim such victimization status. We couldn’t organize a lecture or show a movie without being harassed. By way of challenging the enforced silence and educating the public on issues of concern to women in the Arab region, I organized a film series while teaching at a university. Discussing women’s oppression based on patriarchy or gender was acceptable, however discussing oppression based in wars and occupation was targeted. Showing movies about women in South Lebanon and Palestinian women earned me numerous tactics of intimidation and silencing. After attempts to silence us by knocking on the doors of all the various policing institutions available, such as the Chancellor, Deans, Chairs of departments, the local police station, and Daniel Pipes’ Campus Watch, failed, those who aimed to quieten us resorted to intimidation tactics at the showings. We could not expect the administration to protect our rights and to make us feel safe, but we could expect to be questioned and asked to explain ourselves.

As you read, racist organizations are being formed on many campuses – a matter aided by the ‘tolerant’ atmosphere of the re-election of the Bush government. The perpetuation of stereotypical images and the muffling of alternative voices in mainstream media and on campuses has led to a reinforcement of the status quo -- that Arabs and Muslims are not fully human. We have to endure questions like “Aren’t women oppressed where you come from? Can you belly dance for me?” even from friends whom we have known for a long time. We have to tolerate watching disgusting TV programs that continue to depict Arab women as oppressed and ‘chaddor’ ridden or exotic belly dancers, and Arab men as violent, fanatic, fundamentalists who enjoy reading Qur’anic verses just before they start shooting women and children (exemplified by such films as *The Siege* or *The Mummy*, to name a couple of examples). The portrayal of these demonic images and the silencing of alternative and informed images and discussions (such as my meager attempt of a film series on campus) are two mechanisms of reinforcing a violent exclusion from the “nation.”

### APPROPRIATION AND SOLIDARITY

In feminist circles, there has been some recent change in the ways in which feminists interact with their Arab sisters, a direct result of our insistence on engagement. However, this process is still greatly laden with problems. I used to feel, and still do sometimes, more like an outsider in feminist circles. It often seemed to me that we shared many of the same concerns regarding the improvement of women’s lives and the belief in the humanity of all people, and we shared similar struggles against oppressive patriarchal systems. Nonetheless, my

white feminist colleagues often seemed to be more interested in pointing to how horrendous life for women in my part of the world is and in finding ways to ‘save’ these women than in engaging in actual meaningful dialogue with them or me. Obviously, racism in U.S. culture has seeped through to these feminist circles. At the same time, however, feminists of color have also often failed to see the connections and the humanity of their Arab and Muslim sisters of color. They launched legitimate critiques against the middle-class white feminist agenda, but failed to link up with those ‘others’ on the margins. They may have identified race, and in some instances class, as the main elements of oppression in addition to gender; however they have failed to accept and take notice that other ideologies have and do maintain the oppression of their sisters.

Arab and Muslim feminists have identified Zionism as an important determinant of the forms of oppression we struggle against in the U.S. and beyond. However, in feminist circles, this discussion was not acceptable, once again deemed too ‘controversial’ or ‘obscure’ at best. In “The Forgotten-ism”, Naber et al discuss the various ways in which Zionism impacts our lives negatively as Arab and Arab American women in this country, including the silencing, the isolation, and the charges of anti-Semitism.<sup>29</sup> There have been feminists of color like June Jordan who have made those connections and intersections between the various ideologies and mechanisms of oppression. Feminism of color, or third world feminism, though, is the only likely space where we could perhaps feel at home. The statements that feminist of color make about the centrality of their dual and multiple identities and the inextricability of race, class, and gender is parallel to the demands and statements of Arab women. As an Arab feminist, I too am a product of all the histories I discussed. I am also aware of the conjunctures of my identity as an Arab, as a middle-class woman, as a member of a minority group, and as an immigrant. This awareness of the multiplicity of my positionings makes it impossible for me to organize from a single one. I carry all of my histories in my pocket at all times.

On the eve of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, many demonstrations and lectures were being organized. It was at once an invigorating experience and an eye opener to the ever-deepening complexities of “Third World”/“First World” relations. I found myself engaged with students and found a need to write about why it was important for students of color to oppose the war. To have to say that this was needed and necessary was a slap in the face. What I assumed to be natural alliances in the struggle against empire building were not fully clear here. Coalition building was thus another process of building bridges and re-learning the basics of the commonality of struggles. The problematics of paternalistic discourses sneak into the anti-war movement. As Arab feminists, we need to question notions of solidarity and representation. It is one thing to stand in solidarity with an existential struggle and to see clearly its repercussions on you and a totally different matter to pretend that you own that struggle. In the first instant, respect should, I believe, be the underlying premise for any solidarity or coalition. This is where we come full circle to carrying our histories in our pockets and understanding our privilege, be it as a white U.S. citizen or a privileged immigrant benefiting from education and a high-paying job. We face issues of cultural appropriation and the commodification and promotion of ‘ethnic’ cultural artifacts as attempts at solidarity. We hear things like “I married one of you” from the mouths of those traveling on global exchange’s, reality tours, or the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) to countries of ‘conflict.’ Solidarity has been essential in every struggle for self-determination around the world; however, every individual engaged in it must ask

him or herself: “With all the intersections of my history and my identity what drives me to partake in this solidarity? Am I carrying my history in my pocket? And what have I learned from it? Is my solidarity conditional and, if so, on what?” These questions are not aimed at belittling the work in which solidarity movements are engaged, but to call into question motivations, processes, notions of solidarity, and ownership of struggles.

I still have perplexed feelings towards the terms ‘violence and belonging.’ I see them as connected on some level. However, I would have liked them to be more distinct. I grew up in a war-torn country and, thus, violence has a very specific meaning to me. While in the U.S., though, I see violence of a different kind perpetuated on a daily basis on different groups of people. Violence is on display, not only in TV shows, but also in the new fervor of reality TV and on the news. Shows and news on TV perpetuate a notion of the need to be ‘number one’, to be the winner at the expense of others; it promotes attributes such as conquering, mastering, and winning as paramount values of being in the world. A culture of violence and fear, and violence justified by such fear is on display all the time. As Roy argues: “... this whole regime of synthetically manufactured fear has bonded people to the government. And that bond is not because of public health care, or looking after the old, or education, or social services, but fear.”<sup>30</sup>

The statistics on rape and crime are terrifying.<sup>31</sup> Walking down the street in the middle of the night in a city like Beirut is not even a question in my mind. Walking just after dark in ‘safe’ cities in the U.S. is always accompanied by fearful thoughts and anxieties over rape and hate crimes. I see the American flag on cars and windows as a way to perpetuate violence and aggression on other people of the world. Belonging to the U.S. as a nation in the way that it is being portrayed on TV, in political rhetoric of war and patriotism, in newspapers and people’s bumper stickers is a violent act. While at the same time, I am made to feel that my belonging to an Arab World, my belonging to a nation massacred by Israel and the U.S., borders on terrorism. And again, this is violence committed against those to whom I belong and whom I love.

The escalation of violence and the drums of war have, in fact, forced out into the public more defined spaces where I could start to feel a bit safe. Let me explain myself. I felt safe within a San Francisco demonstration of 80,000 or more demanding an end to the war against Iraq and freedom for Palestine. I felt safe when people of all walks of life were marching beside me and condemning aggression against the children of the Arab World. I felt safe at a women of color meeting where a poet identified my aggressor and connected it/him/them to her aggressor. Despite all the problematics I have discussed, those new anti-war and feminist movements with progressive politics are the only locations in the U.S. where I could feel safe, where my belonging could start to take shape, where the history that I carry in my pocket can find room to breathe and dialogue. Perhaps the operative three words that are often thrown at me and others while walking in a demonstration, “Go Back Home”, are true in the sense that I do not belong in the U.S. However, regardless of whether I make my home in the U.S. or elsewhere, I hope to see a world where belonging is not a violent act of non-belonging to another, and this change is essential in the Belly of the Empire.

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**ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> bell hooks with T. Mckinnon, "Sisterhood: Beyond Public and Private," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 21(41) (1996), p.814-829.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction. Vol.1*, (New York: Vintage Books, Inc, 1990[74]), *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Sheridan, A., (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> There are numerous examples from the nomination of Gonzales to HR 10 to the thousands of detainees since 9/11 in U.S. detention prisons and in Guantanamo Bay to Patriot Act I, II and numerous other legislations. In addition, the pro-war position of both presidential candidates is an indication of the desire for elimination. For an assessment of the candidate's positions on the war, two articles present alternative viewpoints [http://www.isreview.org/issues/39/right\\_wing\\_repub.shtml](http://www.isreview.org/issues/39/right_wing_repub.shtml) and [http://www.isreview.org/issues/39/antiwar\\_movement.shtml](http://www.isreview.org/issues/39/antiwar_movement.shtml).

<sup>4</sup> The incessant display of affection towards Israel on behalf of both the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates in the 2004 campaigns is available in newspaper articles and websites. For more info check *Haaretz* especially between July and December 2004 as well as [www.aipac.org](http://www.aipac.org).

<sup>5</sup> Rasha Ghappour put it very succinctly in her poems titled "Colors" in *Mizna*, vol.4 (1), p.7-8; this is one excerpt:

"I am tired of explaining that Allah is God  
and not a three headed creation.  
That we believe in Noah and Moses and Jesus, too.  
But sometimes that's expected.  
I just never thought  
I would have to explain  
the struggles of color  
to you" (8).

<sup>6</sup> Saida or Sidon is the largest city in South Lebanon and an ancient biblical port.

<sup>7</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, translated and edited by Hoare, Q. and Nowell Smith, G., (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

<sup>8</sup> Joanna Kadi, *Thinking Class: Sketches from a Cultural Worker*, (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1996), p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, translated by Nice, R., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p.72

<sup>10</sup> b. hooks, "Out of the Academy and into the Streets," *Ms. Magazine*, (July/August, 1992), p. 80-82.

<sup>11</sup> H. Moore, *A Passion for Difference: Essays in Anthropology and Gender*, (UK: Polity Press, 1994), p. 81.

<sup>12</sup> The limited space does not allow me to engage in a lengthy explanation of these major moments in the last 100 years of Arab history.

<sup>13</sup> "This book is more than the story of Wilma Mankiller. It is also the extraordinary story of the Cherokee people and their indomitable courage. The chapters of this book weave together the story of one Cherokee woman with the history of all the people of the Cherokee Nation, much as traditional Cherokee stories weave together the unbroken threads of tribal history, wisdom, and culture preserved by each generation" (xiii). W. Mankiller and M. Wallis, *Mankiller: A Chief and her People*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993)

<sup>14</sup> Maya Angelou *Gather Together in My Name*, (NY: Random House, 1974) and Maya Angelou *The Heart of a Woman*, (NY: Random House, 1981) are but two examples.

<sup>15</sup> June Jordan, "Waking Up in the Middle of Some American Dreams", *Technical Difficulties: African American Notes on the State of the Union*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 11-24, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Jordan, "Waking Up in the Middle of Some American Dreams," p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> Personal Correspondence, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Nadine Naber, "Ambiguous Insiders: an Investigation of Arab American Invisibility" in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23(1), (2000), p. 37-62.

<sup>19</sup> June Jordan, "Of Those So Close Beside me, Which are You?" *Technical Difficulties: African American Notes on the State of the Union*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 25-31, 27.

<sup>20</sup> I would argue also a colonial present though perhaps it does not permeate the discipline as a whole.

<sup>21</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), p. 42.

<sup>22</sup> J. Kadi, *Thinking Class*, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Several have written about Orientalism in its various forms after Said's landmark book in 1978 as well as critiques of Western feminism. See Mohja Kahf *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999); Malika Mehdid "A Western Invention of Arab Womanhood: The 'Oriental' Female", *Women in the Middle East: Perceptions, Realities*

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and *Struggles for Liberation*, ed. H. Afshar, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), p. 18-58; Chandra Mohanty "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Boundary 2*, vol. 12 (3) (1984) p. 333-358; Lila Abu-Lughod, "Introduction: Feminist Longings and Postcolonial Conditions," *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. L. Abu-Lughod, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 3-31; Ella Shohat & Robert Stam, Introduction, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.1-12.

<sup>24</sup> G. Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Nelson, C. & Grossberg, L., (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), p. 271-313.

<sup>25</sup> A. Roy, *Power Politics*, (Boston, MA: South End Press, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> Roy, *Power Politics*, p. 24. This particular reference in Roy refers to the so-called dichotomy that is perpetuated by 'experts' and politicians around who acts and who knows. The activists are often seen as those who take action, but do not always have the intellectual capacity to analyze whereas a team or teams of experts (academics) are usually paraded by governments, politicians and corporations to give testimony and analyze the situation. Roy believes that in matters that affect people, which include all political and economic decisions whether in regards to building a dam on the Naramda river or privatization and use of corporations that pollute, people and not so called experts should speak, address the issues, understand and thus decide.

<sup>27</sup> Nadine Naber, "Ambiguous Insiders: an Investigation of Arab American Invisibility" in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23(1), (2000), p. 38-40 and 47-50.

<sup>28</sup> A Statistics Teaching Assistant at UCD displayed a manufactured picture of a plane crashing into Mecca during the pilgrimage season.

<sup>29</sup> Nadine Naber, Eman Desouky, and Lina Baroudi "The Forgotten – ism: An Arab American Women's Perspective on Zionism, Racism, and Sexism" (2001) Arab Women Solidarity Association presented at the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa (31 Aug. – 7 Sept, 2001) <http://www.awsa.net/forgottenism.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> Roy, A., *Power Politics*, p. 28.

<sup>31</sup> One in every four college female students is raped in the course of her life at the university.

# YOUTH ORGANIZING, FEMINISM, AND IDENTITY

## AN INTERVIEW WITH JAN ATTIA

By Nadine Naber

**Jan Attia** is an Egyptian Copt raised in Los Angeles. She became involved in grassroots organizing work in high school and has since worked on issues ranging from violence in the home to teaching social justice education and organizing in high schools. She is currently on the organizing committee of the Arab Movement of Women Arising for Justice [AMWAJ]. She is studying to become a nurse.

**Nadine Naber:** You are an organizer and have played a significant role in raising awareness about the ways that Arabs in general and Arab women in particular are racially marked in the U.S. You have especially contributed to spaces where youth of color are grappling with social justice issues. Can you tell us about your work with young people of color?

**Jan Attia:** First, I think it's important to clarify that not only are the youth of color I have worked with grappling with social justice issues, but, more particularly, they are just learning about their own racial/ethnic identities in empowered ways. They know how society sees them, and my role is to share my experiences and help them place theirs in social justice contexts, equip them with the language necessary to name the injustices, and, often most important, work with them to create new languages around identity and social justice. I think this is very different for some Arab American youth because there isn't an Arab American power movement like those of Chicano/Latino and Black communities to draw from, so they often identify with other communities of color. Their struggle often starts with the fact that nobody knows the difference between Pakistan and Palestine!



**NN:** What have been some of the challenges you have faced in terms of building an understanding among youth of color about the ways that Arabs in general and Arab women in particular are racially marked in the U.S.?

**JA:** Some of the challenges are that some youth of color have limited contact with Arab communities and do not have a basic understanding of Arab cultures, religions, etc. Of course, given the way gender and Arabs are played out in the media, oppression of Arab women by Arab men is something I always hear when I do the stereotype piece of the Arab 101 workshops. The information they have says all Arab (and Muslim) women are controlled by Arab men, that Arab women don't know how to read, that they can't leave the house. They often mention that the Arab girls in their school always stick together and don't talk to anyone else, which clearly plays into stereotypes of Arab women being timid and even evokes images of the 'harem.' So the information they do have is marred with racism and stereotypes, through different mediums that often target youth such as music, video games, and so forth. It isn't that much different with adults, really. The other day I did a workshop for a group of youth of color (no Arab youth were present) about the peoples, cultures, and histories of the southwest Asian and North African regions. They had so many questions I hardly had time to get through the workshop (which of course means it was a success). What really excited me is that they were seeing commonalities with their own experiences and were enraged that they never hear about what Arab youth and their families have to endure at school and on the streets. In general, I think once the information is in their hands, they really get it.

The problem is that we are not doing much to empower Arab youth to speak for themselves, and so they often remain invisible to other youth. I know there are some programs at cultural centers that work with youth, but they are often quite conservative in their approach. We know that many of the girls don't want to talk about the issues they face in front of their brothers and male cousins so one approach I took with a group of high school students who wanted to start an Arab Student Union was to meet with the girls separately and really get to the core of their concerns (I did the same with the boys but they really needed a male to do this work with them). It's simple, but it opened them up considerably and empowered them to take positions in the Arab Student Union, which they had refused when the group was all together. We are afraid to talk much about patriarchy in the Arab communities because of the way it gets special negative attention, but we can't ignore it because of this. We have to spell out the racism in that view so that we can also work on issues of sexism and patriarchy in our communities. Otherwise, we continue to perpetuate what we do have going on, and the youth aren't empowered to change anything. I also don't see that we are talking to our youth much about social justice, about our resistance histories both in the Arab world and in the U.S. If we did more of this, perhaps the young women could speak to what I have mentioned about the way the West paints our culture as hyper-sexist while keeping in mind that we need to speak out against the true sexism in our communities.

**NN:** How have some of these issues played out in your interactions and in your work with people of color or women of color-based organizations in the Bay Area of California?

**JA:** As I mentioned, I think adults are severely misinformed as well. My experiences as a culturally and politically identified Arab but ethnically identified African (I am Egyptian) woman often becomes a point of contention whilst organizing in people of color spaces. Identity politics is of great importance in people of color spaces, but too often I have found that I am expected to fit into neat categories (not Arab and African together). So, sometimes it can be difficult to talk about serious issues Arab communities are facing because there is tension around my own identity politics. I don't find that this completely rules my experiences by any means, but it does color it in significant ways. At the same time, it's the Bay Area and California, where many organizations are somewhat keen to Arab issues, at least since 9/11 when people decided they had better get caught up on what's happening in Palestine or make an Arab friend! I am joking, of course, well, maybe somewhat.

One thing that is especially a sticking point is the hyper visibility and yet invisibility of Arabs in this country, which complicates things a great deal in organizing spaces. In one women of color group I worked with post-9/11, group members said that they felt the Arab sisters are so angry to have been marginalized in women of color spaces, but now, suddenly, we want to work with other women of color. Even more complicated was the tension between the queer women of color in the group. There was a sentiment among some of the women that the queer Arab women were acting as if they were 'more oppressed' by homophobia than the other queer women. This came up when the queer Arab women tried to have a conversation about how homophobia plays out in our communities, not that it is more or less than anyone else's community, but that it has some different ways of existing. So even radical women of color spaces are riddled with stereotypes and false notions leading to a certain amount of silencing of Arab women. After 9/11, all kinds of women's events wanted an Arab speaker so there was that tokenism without dialogue going on quite a bit. I think we are really working harder at changing that now.

**NN:** In your view, what are the commonalities around which coalitions can be built among Arab American youth and other youth of color? What are the differences or sites of tension between Arab American youth and other youth of color, and how does gender or sexuality come into play in the process of coalition building?

**JA:** I can't necessarily think of Arab American youth as being one group with common experiences. Certainly class differences and immigrant experiences or growing up as a first vs. third-generation Arab American changes things. I have mainly worked with immigrant youth from working-class backgrounds and even with them there is such variety. Here in the East Bay (Oakland and Berkeley), Arab youth do not have any center or group really working with them in the schools, like youth have in San Francisco through the Arab Cultural Center. A group of boys asked me to help them start an Arab Student Union at their high school. They felt that the girls weren't going to come unless I invited them because they wouldn't take invitations from boys. So I literally begged the girls to come to the first

meeting, they came and would not engage at all. We were trying to assign positions and none of the girls would step up. Finally one of them yelled at a cousin and said to him, “Why should I be treasurer? So you can tell my dad?” I say all this to illustrate that we need to be doing some serious work around systems of oppression in our communities and in society in general with Arab youth independent of other youth before we can really think of coalition building. Other communities of color are active with their youth, and we need to do the same in sustainable ways with Arab youth so we can move into coalitions.

**NN:** What are some of the tensions around issues of homophobia, sexism, and racism that you have experienced in the different communities to which you belong?

**JA:** This is a big question! The biggest tension is how to enter any space as your whole being, for me as a woman, as a Copt, an African, an Arab, a queer woman, as woman-centered, etc. I used to just float by in woman of color spaces as ‘the Egyptian’ or in queer spaces as just a queer woman of color. When I was finally able to merge the queer and the Arab, after running away from the queer Arab community here in the Bay Area for so long, things may have become more whole for me personally, but they became way more complicated as an organizer. Like so many other queer folks of color, it sometimes feels like I have to pick between my identities, which just isolates me from so many of my communities. The queer ‘community’, which is often dictated by white supremacist, classist, and sexist ideas, has many issues with me being Arab, and the Arab community (like so many other communities) isn’t quite working on its homophobia. So for now, it’s about pushing my own boundaries and those of my communities, not only to accept the queer or the Arab but to be active and have an analysis of what is creating that isolation for so many.

**NN:** What have been your experiences with feminisms in the U.S.? What does women of color feminism mean to you? Or, are there other feminist spaces that have meaning to you?

**JA:** My first memories of a feminist identity came in high school when I read Alice Walker and other women writers of African descent. Walker of course coined ‘womanism’ and though that spoke to me to a certain extent, since I was not really comfortable with feminism, womanism, or any other label. I find myself continually grappling with what feminism means to me because so much of my first experiences are tainted by white feminists exotifying me, especially my queerness coupled with my Arabness. And then add Zionism to the mix, and this Egyptian girl growing up on the west side of Los Angeles went running from feminism if that’s what it meant.

But I have definitely been part of many amazing women of color spaces that identified themselves as feminist. However, until I really came to identify myself as Arab, I never felt there was space for me. After that point, I demanded a place for myself and now am finally able to work with other Arab women to think about what Arab American feminisms look like. We have such a rich history of feminist

thinkers and organizers in the Arab world and in the U.S., so we definitely don't have to completely reinvent the wheel. Work has been done, but only to a certain point. We need to push Arab American feminisms into more action. What's important to me is a collective, progressive identity for Arab women in the U.S., however we decide to name it. A movement that understands we cannot wait for other communities of women to acknowledge our experiences as important but for us to really do the work. We need to challenge women of color spaces to think more about who is invisible, how certain groups are made out to be hyper-visible without having them at the table, etc.

**NN:** When you hear the words, "violence" and "belonging," what do these terms evoke for you?

**JA:** My initial reaction is my family. I grew up in a family that was struggling with the belonging part, just as many immigrant families. My parents had no idea what they were coming to in 1969. When they saw that their papers labeled them as 'Caucasian,' they had no idea what it meant, but I think they understood they were being erased. They were given a television shortly after arriving, and when they turned it on, they were shocked at the way people of African descent were being treated in the U.S. They gave up dreams of belonging long before my father came home from work one day almost in tears because somebody at work called him 'Ayatollah Khomeini' and told him to go home. So, given all of that confusion and pain, the violence they experienced externally often found its way into family dynamics. We don't often talk about pressures and experiences of racism and classism on families of color as one of the sources of the violence within the home.

**NN:** What strategies have you used in the process of creating social change? What do you think could be different within the progressive circles where you do your work? What kinds of changes do you think could make an important impact?

**JA:** We can sit in meetings and process group dynamics all we want, but when it comes down to it, we as politically active Arab communities need something to push our boundaries, something that speaks languages that are not academic or organizing speak, something we can create and be visible through. One example is the Theater of the Oppressed and Augusto Boal's work. Art, particularly theater, is how I became active in community organizing as a youth, and though I haven't used art in the way I am speaking of here in recent years, I see it as essential for making change. I need to return to it, and the youth I have worked with always remind me. They would never dream of doing an action or event without art, and not art for art's sake. I think all organizing needs to use art as the work and in the work, so this is one way that the progressive circles I am in could be different, one thing we must return to in organizing.

**DEFYING CATEGORIES—  
THINKING AND LIVING OUT OF THE  
BOX**

## TANGLED

Yumna Chlala\*

I circle my accent, seeking my tail. Clip a thousand articles about the weather in Beyrouth, like stubborn hairs, stack them in a box without a lid, hope that fire rescinds memory, moves back rain. Righteousness in simple acts of solitude. Camus capitalized Suicide and we clerk and sort identity. You came back with a diamond necklace, *Allah* spelled out like stars, the refugee camp might miss it, don't believe in collective memory. Found a pen that belonged to my childhood, a lake in the south, seven tones of blue, green, green, blue

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## BETWEEN THE LINES

**Youmna Chlala**

Heba always wears headphones when she paints. She takes a class every Tuesday and Thursday. All because a critic in the local freebie newspaper said she had a great ability to create texture. She is like Tunis, all turquoise and sunrises. In the next paragraph he wrote: *unfortunately, Heba cannot draw*. She decided against Botany, Geography, Architecture.

Every two hours she gets up to drink coffee. Her sketches are nude, hands at their side, throats throbbing between collarbones.

This makes all her boyfriends uncomfortable.

She imagines herself at the Whitney wearing all white, knitted cap and flat sandals, like an old man. Her parents went to Hajj last week. Her father has been putting aside money since she was in high school and once her brother stole it to buy music. She sent them money from her art scholarship. Her mother packed long robes, olive oil soap and a box of fig cakes for the airplane. Heba was pretty sure her father was disappointed that he could no longer smoke in the sky. She picked up that habit from him, early on, when he came in her room to watch her paint at three am.

## MOURNING

Yumna Chlala

syrupy marmalade  
spread onto toast, burnt  
on the edges, like a charred sandbox

irrepressible fires inside rivers, the Euphrates  
screams and rises with the Tigris  
emptied bells on ringing rooftops, the Church of the Nativity  
stands and hollers, parallel to Al Aqsa

in the tenderness of morning,

who would have imagined miles of mirrors, imploding?



# REFLECTIONS ON SEX, SILENCE, AND FEMINISM

Nathalie Handal\*

*"If nothing else is left, one must scream. Silence is the real crime against humanity."*<sup>1</sup>

My mother always told me that my body belonged to the man I would marry. What if I didn't want to marry, I would ask. *Then you will not have a life*, she would respond. I was convinced at a young age that she must have been missing some information to come to such a conclusion. How can my body belong to anyone but myself? Why did she think it was dirty for a woman to have sex with a man to whom she was not married, to imagine having had sex with several men? What she was speaking about was this unyielding divide between sex for pleasure and sex for procreation, a divide that is linked to culture, religion, and socio-politics. Like many women, due to religious and/or cultural norms/values, she was conditioned to believe that virginity before marriage and heterosexual relationships should be enforced without taking into account that sexual oppression and gender oppression is a way for the power system to control society. In this way, nation has power over man, man has power over women. As Evelyne Accad and many other scholars point out, "sexuality and sex-role socialization are intimately connected to national and international conflicts."<sup>2</sup>

I felt conflicted between my views on sexuality and my need to be a real 'Palestinian woman' that, at the time, I thought meant following the traditional notion of being strong in society but primarily taking care of my husband and children and certainly not having sex before marriage. Although this is by no means a negative image, the problem stemmed from the fact that choice did not exist. Having been displaced all my life—a woman who lived in the Middle East and North Africa regions, the United States, Europe, Latin American and the Caribbean, it seemed important to fit in as many spaces as I could. A Palestinian woman living an

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exilic and diasporic existence, I already had so many questions to answer pertaining to my identity that I felt I could not handle being outside of the norm of another extremely conflict-ridden issue: my sexual identity. Being Palestinian was already too controversial, but my multiple displacements gave me important assets: a different cultural lens and point of reference. A restless need to understand, while fighting to keep an open mind, led me at an early age to realize that my struggles were not exclusively Arab; that my girlfriends from various religious and cultural backgrounds faced similar battles. These struggles could not solely be looked upon as issues of sex and sexism; they also had to be analyzed in a generational, economic, political, social, and cultural context. As Evelyne Accad says:

Unless a sexual revolution is incorporated into political revolution, there will be no real transformation of social relations... By *sexual revolution*, I mean a revolution that starts at the personal level, with a transformation of attitudes toward one's mate, family, sexuality, society, and specifically a transformation of the traditional relations of domination and subordination that permeate interpersonal relationships, particularly those of sexual and familial intimacy.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, national liberation is not possible without women's liberation; women's liberation is not possible without socio-economic change and is incomplete without the liberation of women's bodies. Society cannot evolve without the equality/evolution of women (in society).

In my journey, I needed to answer the following questions: *How did the West see us, how did we see ourselves, and how did I see myself?*

### **THE V WORDS: VIRGINITY, VIOLENCE, AND VEILING**

From a young age I started questioning the unequal male-female dynamic and, although I did not know it then, that is when I became a feminist. At the time, it was an instinctive reaction as it was not until college that I became active politically and as a feminist. I think it all started when I first discovered that for most, if not all, cultures, it was a greater joy, a greater gift of God, if a woman bore a son. It shocked me then and continues to disturb me. I kept asking myself what did God have to do with it.

Then, when I was old enough, my mother told me: *remember, always keep your honor and your family's honor [ʿird]*. Why would sex take my honor away, let alone my family's? Was I an object-prize for the man I would marry? Why weren't the male members of my family given the same advice? The contradiction lay in the fact that both my parents, and my mother in particular, encouraged me to become historically, socially, culturally, and artistically aware. They supported my desire to seriously engage in my education and to travel worldwide. To some degree, they also gave me space to rebel, especially by allowing me to pursue my interest in writing. This 'freedom' was accompanied by an unspoken but understood agreement that I would not have sex before marriage and that I would marry a Palestinian (since then that has changed). I was expected to live a life similar to theirs, a life where the demands of society were often hypocritical and impossible to meet without sacrificing, usually something intimate and self-related. Sacrifice was always a word I was uneasy with. I often heard people say, *make the sacrifice*, but also *God never asked us to sacrifice*. And if we do not live in accordance with who we are, how can we evolve? How can we make those around us happy if we are not happy ourselves?

How can we be a positive energy to our society, our world? These seem like essential questions to ask, but no one around me seemed to be asking them, or so I thought. Perhaps they felt that they did not have a choice and did not allow themselves to consider these issues.

Many of the women I grew up with tended to blame other women for things that went wrong within the family unit. They would tell me that if a husband cheated or disrespected his wife, it was probably because the wife had provoked it. When I think back, it surprises me less now that I would enter an abusive relationship at a young age and stay silent. He was everything my family had hoped for and not at all what the person I really was, but had not fully grown into, wanted. He was Arab, educated, and from a family we supposedly knew. They assumed it was safe since, to their knowledge, nothing had ever gone wrong when a woman from where I come from was with a man that possessed those characteristics. But times had changed, and we were no longer living in Palestine, more specifically Bethlehem; we were living in different countries throughout the world, and there were bound to be truths we did not know.

I lived in an abusive and difficult relationship for years and acted as if everything was as perfect as it looked like from the outside. I stayed silent because I had never heard another woman complain or speak about such things, and I thought that it was a woman's duty to help a man. I stayed silent because I was afraid, ashamed, and unaware of my choices.

Despite the emotional, physical, and psychological pain, this experience forced my family to change in a positive way and led me to become aware of myself and of the world I lived in. But that took many years.

My relationship started the year I went to college. My parents did not want to send me to a co-ed university so I went to Simmons College in Boston. This experience turned out to be the beginning of my 'de-conditioning.' It is there that I started to deconstruct all of the notions I had of women and society, women and sex. The very first time I took a class on Feminism I thought, *why do so many women hate men?* I did not understand. I was seventeen and had never heard women question and/or criticize men, had never heard women speak about rape, incest, and violence. I stayed quiet and listened to their experiences and points of view; this empowered me in ways I could never have imagined.

I started to openly question the views I had been taught, to wonder why I'd been given an education and then been told that I should marry and 'follow my husband', I started questioning why I had to accept that my body belonged to *any* man. My sexual empowerment was to come much later, even though I knew that I needed to understand my body to really understand myself, understand the societies I belong to and the culture I come from. By sexual empowerment, I mean that moment when I stopped thinking that sex was 'dirty' if it was not with my spouse, stopped thinking that my sexual life was reserved for the man I would marry. My empowerment came when I allowed myself the right to desire, to pleasure when I wanted and with whom I wanted.

First, I had to bridge the gap between my origin and the different places where I'd grown up. Who was I? Was I to search for my identity in my childhood, in my family, in Palestine, in the countries I lived in? And where was I to look for my feminine identity? Who were my female role models? My mother, my grandmother, the women I was meeting? I started to search, observe, and remember. Each country in which I lived had its own attitudes towards the body and sex: some similar, some different. In my house, we never said the word *sex*; we only used the

word *virgin* when speaking about intimacy. When I was in France, I was exposed to nudity and at home nudity was also accepted; I was free with my body in that sense. However, during my first semester in college, I undressed in front of my roommate from Maine, and it created quite a scandal. I was treated as the ‘non-puritan’ foreigner. Americans had another view on nudity, and although most girls at the dorm were having sex, we never really spoke about it. When I lived in Latin America and the Caribbean, the women usually dressed provocatively; they had a sensual relationship with their bodies. But it was understood that they should not have sex before marriage otherwise they would damage their chances of getting married, and I related to that. It was no surprise that in all of these societies I found patriarchal characteristics.

It was not only in my Arab Palestinian family that sex was not spoken about. Virginity is a demand imposed on women in many societies worldwide, and marrying within one’s culture is a common characteristic in numerous cultures. Spiritual, psychological, political, and economic elements come into play in marriage (a central constituent of family), and family is fundamental to Arab and Mediterranean societies. The importance of family in various religious, cultural, and socio-economic landscapes, along with individual family politics and the element of ‘time’, must be taken into consideration when trying to comprehend gender relationships in the Middle East and North Africa region. We must also remember that different consequences for women exist in rural and urban, rich and poor, educated and uneducated families. Arab family structure is usually supportive and oppressive. It generates togetherness, compassion, generosity, yet, on the other hand, is controlling and can create a struggle within many who feel both attached and resistant to their families. For Arab immigrants and immigrants in general, family becomes even more imperative, the need to preserve culture and traditions is primordial and staying together a way to survive.

Women lack education on sex and sexuality. Although my cousins and friends spent a great deal of time eroticizing our bodies by following ‘sexy’ fashion trends or by wearing clothes that we thought made us desirable, most of us did not engage in sexual activities due to the social and cultural pressures we faced in our societies.

It was in college that I seriously started reading Gloria Steinem, Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and, most importantly, Arab feminists and writers. I discovered pioneers such as Huda Sha’rawi who in 1923, after returning to Egypt from a conference in Rome, took off her veil at the Cairo train station and others joined. And there are more, such as Laila Baalbaki (*I Live* being particularly important), Ghada al-Samman, and May Ziyada who was one of the first women to praise other Arab female authors and to support their intellectual and economic development. And then more contemporary author/activists: Nawal El Saadawi, Fatima Mernissi, Hanan al-Shaykh, Assia Djebar, Vénus Khoury-Ghata, and Ahdaf Souief. We also have to acknowledge the men who fought for women’s rights such as Qasim Amin and writers like Rachid Al-Daif whose novels challenge societal views on issues such as sex, virginity, and marriage.

The contributions made by these women were crucial in any changes vis-à-vis Arab women that followed. They portrayed the different faces of Arab women, not the usual ones mostly portrayed by men where she is either a whore or the ideal woman (pure, prude—a virgin). Personally, I had to deconstruct my notion that I would dishonor the family and myself if I had sex, deconstruct my belief that I was a whore if I enjoyed sex. I needed to gain knowledge and acknowledgement.

It was during this ‘unveiling of mind’ (the slogan of AWSA, Arab Women’s Solidarity Association which was founded by Nawal El Saadawi in 1982), that I identified that the so-called problems with my *identity* stemmed from others’ narrow definitions and need to ‘box.’ I knew who I was—Palestinian, but also French, American, Latin, and whatever lay ahead since our identities constantly change. It was also then that I became aware of the positive attributes possessed by the women with whom I grew up. These women are great examples of courage. They are warriors, surviving exile, political turmoil, and traumatic change. They are examples of endurance and evolution. I admire them and understand them now. Their multiple roles as daughters, mothers, lovers, workers; as women who resisted, and who were open to change despite their strong beliefs, are admirable. My mother, grandmothers, aunts transmitted to me *strength* which would help me overcome anything that came my way, including the unveiling of the ‘sexual confines’ they so implicitly tried to enforce.

Writing was another force in my life. Although I always loved literature and telling stories, it was not until I went to college that writing played a central role in my life. I realized I could make a living doing what I love, and this knowledge gave me direction and inner power. It gave me voice. Writing, for me, is a place of imagination where I go to look for truth. As I became increasingly active in the creative and political sphere, I started questioning my private life versus my public life, the role I was expected to play and the role I was meant to play.

I grew stronger yet could not figure out how to leave the abuse in my private life. Although I had good public speaking skills, I did not know how to communicate with my family. I know now that they would have supported me, but, at the time, I felt guilty, humiliated. Mostly, I was frightened of breaking away from tradition, of being blamed, of being judged, frightened of losing their trust, their respect, their love.

But I knew that there would come a time when I would break the silence. It was my body that would lead the way. I had a body depression. I could not move. I was stuck. After years of body stress and physical abuse, my body gave up. I had to confront the situation, but I did not know how. During that time, I met an incredibly courageous woman, Evelyne Accad. I was just out of college and had gone back to Paris where I had started researching Arab women writers. The very first time we spoke on the telephone we connected in a way I did not recognize. I soon found out that she was battling breast cancer and had taken time off from her teaching position in Chicago to heal and write in Paris. I thought perhaps it was the pain inside of us that spoke to each other. For about two years, we had an incredibly spiritual relationship; we would speak on the telephone and write to each other, and although it was not often, every time was immensely powerful. We never met in person. But Evelyne’s mental and emotional openness about her cancer gave me inner strength to fight the cancer in my life—violence. Later I read the following lines she wrote, but consciously or unconsciously, she had already communicated this to me: “During my ordeal with breast cancer...Françoise Collin encouraged me to carry my analysis further, talk about my relationship with my body... She told me that women were divided between those who loved their bodies and those who negated them, and that I was in between.”<sup>24</sup>

I broke my silence. I asked questions I did not know I had. I questioned my body, spoke to it. I learned that my body had a memory so that the times (after I separated from my partner) when a part of my body would ache as if I had just been hit was a ‘memory’ of a past incident that I was remembering and healing from. I

learned that I was not alone. When I finally spoke, every other close friend I shared my story with had a story of their own: date rape, verbal abuse, and so forth. We were stunned by this silence that kept us away from ourselves, from each other. I was given tremendous support by my family and friends, but there were also those who were not supportive, who asked questions such as: *what did you do for him to react that way or you are so strong, how did you accept it?* At first, I did not know what to answer. When I met other women in abusive relationships, I realized many were not as young as I was at the time and they too were strong women; many had prominent careers as lawyers, doctors, judges, politicians etc. Violence is manifested physically, psychologically, verbally, and mentally, but also exists in the demeaning and misconstrued attitudes we can have of the other. We can often be hostile in the process of trying to make others understand and see things our way.

Evelyne's story made me realize the power of speech, of telling, of words. I tell my story to give those still silent strength. To tell them that they are not alone and that they must fight violence. My story is not about an Arab woman, victim of her culture's oppressive men, not about an Arab woman, needing to find a safe place in the arms of foreign men as some have suggested. It is not an Arab issue; violence is a universal tragedy. It is about centuries of patriarchal behaviors, about many men conditioned to think they have the license to such actions, and, more specifically in this case, about a man's low self-esteem. He felt he had to break me because I was strong. When I spoke to other women who suffered violence, we realized that many of these men had similar insecurities.

I was no longer a virgin. No longer violated. My mind no longer veiled. My body deaf to silence. I grew stronger every day, and although I have spoken about this experience for years, this is the first time I am writing about it, and this new expression gives me a new strength.

I also get strength from young Arab women who empower themselves through creative channels. In Jacqueline Salloum's (Arab American filmmaker) forthcoming film, *SlingShot Hip Hop: The Palestinian Lyrical Front*, a young rapper from the all female hip-hop group *Arabeyat* says: "I want to see the outside world and show them that there are Arab girls doing rap... At first it was difficult because we're Arab girls and we're Muslim too. It was difficult for some to accept us but we won't let anyone stand in our way... We will continue."

### THE F WORDS: FEMINISM AND FREEDOM

*"The only hunger I have ever known was the hunger for sex and the hunger for freedom and somehow, in my mind and heart, they were related and certainly not mutually exclusive. If I could not use the source of my hunger as the source of my activism, how then was I to be politically effective?"<sup>5</sup>*

With the exception of Nadine Naber, whom I met in the early 1990s, it was not until the late 1990s that I met Arab American feminists such as Rabab Adbulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and others. Until recently, and more specifically following the Gulf War and 9/11, Arab and Arab American women writers and feminists have generally been excluded from multicultural anthologies and feminist criticism. We can no longer be ignored. Today, Arab American literature is composed of more women authors, and Arab American feminists are increasingly writing in mainstream journals, teaching at major institutions, and playing important roles in literary and academic circles.

A few years ago, essays written by Rabab Abdulhadi and Reem Abdelhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, Nadine Naber, Nada Elia, and myself were included in *This Bridge We Call Home* edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating. Twenty years prior, Anzaldúa and Moraga edited the first version of *This Bridge*, which, as Alsultany says, ‘revolutionized the way we saw ourselves as women of color.’<sup>6</sup> The new *Bridge* revolutionized us in another sense—we felt that our voices and opinions were being disregarded and silenced during our listserv discussions. Although this incident was not uncommon, American and Western feminists, activists, and academics often exclude us from debates and dialogues, we felt this exclusion had reached its peak when other women of color participated in the silencing. We needed to do something. A year later, led by these women, a panel on Arab American Feminism was organized at the American Studies Association (2003).

Arab American feminism is not new. From approximately 1904-1924, Afifa Karam wrote hundreds of columns/articles in Arabic, mostly for *Al-Hoda* where she was editor/director of women’s issues.<sup>7</sup> Karam was an important campaigner for women’s rights within the Syrian/Arab community in the US. An Arab American feminist movement started in the late 60s-early 70s with the 1967 war. It intensified with the continued political conflict in the Middle East and North Africa region, the arrival of educated and more politicized immigrants, and the social, civil, student, and women’s rights movements which awakened post-colonial, ethnic, racial, class, and gender activism and the beginning of a new consciousness. Although Arabs come from different countries with diverse ethnicities, religions, class and educational backgrounds, in the United States they—Palestinian, Lebanese, Syrian, Egyptian-Americans and others—have united under the umbrella of Arab Americans. This unification strengthened them politically and socially.

In the 1980’s, Carol Haddad founded the Feminist Arab Network (FAN); the Association for Middle Eastern Women’s Studies (AMEWS) was created, as was The Union of Palestinian Women’s Association in North America (UPWA). After the Egyptian government shut down the Arab Women’s Union (founded in the 1980s in Egypt), an AWSA North American chapter was created. In the 1990s, Arab American feminists organized the first major exhibit of Arab women’s art in the U.S. (1993) at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in D.C.; Joanna Kadi published *Food for Our Grandmothers* (1994), and AWSA North America had a Feminist Expo in 2000.

Today, the Arab American women included in *This Bridge*, along with other feminists, are actively engaged in challenging Western perceptions of Arab women as portrayed in the media and by many Western feminists, scholars, and writers. First and foremost, to my knowledge most Arab women do not recognize themselves in these representations. We are not described as leaders, inventors, doctors, and intellectuals, but instead stereotyped as veiled, silenced, and subdued; negative practices, such as female circumcision and honor killings, are highlighted, blaming Islam and accusing Arab and Eastern culture for being oppressive. But women are equal in Islamic law and before Allah. It is men, corrupt politicians, and nations who distort sacred texts. Sexual oppression is also a result of various socio-political and economic aspects. As El Saadawi says, women cannot be liberated in countries that depend economically on the West.<sup>8</sup> And Arab women and men are victims of colonization and war that contributes to patriarchal structures and promotes fundamentalism. When analyzing gender roles, we need to place issues in their political, social, and cultural contexts as well as in local, national, and

international contexts. The conflict Arab women have with Western feminism is well articulated by Suha Sabbagh, she writes:

Western feminism, of course, is grounded in Western thought, ideology, and values. Arab women's struggle is equally grounded in the religious, cultural, and political norms of the Arab world. According to some Arab women, it is a difficult if not impossible task to write about Islamic feminism in a climate that assumes the universal supremacy of Western feminism. They believe that Western feminism is rejected by Muslim women because it calls for a form of cultural conversion at a time when the West is seen by them to be a dominating force.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, the West must become aware that we have not been inactive victims but have always been actively engaged, socially and politically, and have been important contributors to literature, art, music, and other disciplines. We have to eradicate the notion that we need liberating. For in that case, they too need liberating, from American consumerism, from eating disorders, from violence in the U.S., to name a few issues. After all, every eight seconds a woman is assaulted in the U.S. Furthermore, today body image has become more and more demanding on women as the obsession for the 'perfect body' increases with the trend of liposuction and plastic surgery. So modernity, in every sense, has not always been to the advantage of women. In the case of the Middle East and North Africa region, Pinar Ilkkaracan states:

Women's status has occupied a central place in the modernization efforts in the region; for decades, the modernists argued that reforms in the position of women in the economic, educational and legal spheres would lead to more "modernization", and consequently, to greater gender equality in all spheres. Women were among the first who recognized the complex and contradictory nature of modernity, and that modernization projects did not necessarily lead to real gender equality for all or in every sphere.<sup>10</sup>

Women globally face sexual, physical, and mental oppression, masochism, discrimination, and inequality. We want to include our battles with other American and Western feminists, create important alliances and dialogue as equals. Dominant cultures tend to impose their views and values on other societies who do not have the same moral and social norms. We want to make clear that aligning ourselves does not mean erasing our cultural and social specificity and/or differences. We want to be constructive, not spend our time defending our religion and culture instead of fighting against the real offenders: power and patriarchy. We must also challenge those in the Middle East and North Africa region who are indisposed to look at our issues. For instance, consider what Mai Ghosoub remarked and Evelyne Accad confirmed to also have experienced: "...every Arab feminist had to listen to [Arab] men's arrogant refrain: 'Do you want to become like Western women, copying the degenerate society that is our enemy?'"<sup>11</sup>

Feminism exists to help society evolve; it is "not for women only, it is there to build new and fairer social politics for both genders."<sup>12</sup> Finally and most importantly, as Audre Lorde rightly states in *Sister Outsider*:



Can anyone here still afford to believe that efforts to reclaim the future can be private or individual? Can anyone here still afford to believe that the pursuit of liberation can be the sole and particular province of any one particular race, or sex, or age, or religion, or sexuality, or class?<sup>13</sup>

### THE W WORDS: WORD AND WORLD

Through writing we resist, create new maps, identities, realities. Our words are warriors. Infinite dialogues. Our words create new worlds.

Discussing sex and sexuality is daunting even in open societies due to cultural, social, and religious norms, and moral preaching is common. As M. Jacqui Alexander says, historically there have been “attempts to manage sexuality through morality... They are inextricably bound to colonial rule. In fact, the very identity and authority of the colonial project rested upon the racialization and sexualization of morality.”<sup>14</sup> This reinforces the importance of bringing this topic to the page and, in the case of Arab and Arab American women, the exigencies vis-à-vis sex imposed on them (purity-virginity) can also be traced to colonialism and patriarchy, which is an embodiment of *power*.

This essay was difficult for me to write. I often caught myself self-censoring, mainly because I did not want to hurt my family in any way or have them disapprove of ‘my truths;’ and because when we write about sex, we are indirectly writing about family, culture, society, religion, and politics, and that is always challenging. But the words of the following women continuously kept me going.

Audre Lorde reminded me that “*survival is not an academic skill*. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish.”<sup>15</sup>

The Argentinean philosopher María Lugones reminded me of the importance of entering other worlds. She agrees with Hegel who says that “self-recognition requires other subjects,” but disagrees with his claim that it requires tension or hostility. She writes: “...Traveling to someone’s ‘world’ is a way of identifying with them...by traveling to their ‘world’ we can understand *what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes*. Only when we have traveled to each other’s ‘worlds’ are we fully subjects to each other.”<sup>16</sup>

Madeleine Gagnon and Cixous in *La Venue à L’écriture* reminded me that, “All we need to do is let the body flow, from the inside; all we have to do is erase... whatever may hinder or harm the new forms of writing...”<sup>17</sup> I know that my way of resisting is through writing and that literary activism is essential. After all, that is why power systems go to great lengths to silence us. For instance, take the case of the Muslim author Taslima Nasrin who was condemned to death because of her words; this shows the power words have and why we must protect them. Women and words go back a long way in the Arab world. How can we forget Sheherazade, whose stories impeded fatal acts?

Cixous also reminded me of my drives and the link between sexuality, women, and writing. She says, “Oral drive, anal drive, vocal drive—all these drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive—just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood.”<sup>18</sup>

Finally, we have to challenge the tendency in the West to discredit women who write about sex. Trinh Minh-ha emphasizes this point in *Women, Native, Other*:

Imputing race or sex to the creative act has long been a means by which the literary establishment cheapens and discredits the achievements of non-mainstream women writers. She “who happens to be” a Third world member, a woman, and a writer is bound to go through the ordeal of exposing her work to the abuse of praises and criticisms that either ignore, dispense with, or overemphasize her racial and sexual attributes.<sup>19</sup>

There is certainly not enough research conducted on sex and sexuality in the Middle East and North Africa region, but in 2004 the American University of Beirut organized a conference entitled, “Sexuality in the Arab World.” It engaged discussions around topics such as sexual identity, health, and abuse; we need more conferences such as this one. We need to continue to fight against those who take our power away from us and fight ourselves when we give our power away.

Not long ago, I went to Brussels (sponsored by the British Council/European Community) to propose projects to the EU that could empower Muslim and Arab women in art and media. There I met other women participants from Third World and developing countries working in different sectors. Although I knew of the work that needed to be done at all levels concerning women, the statistics/facts presented at the conference left me stunned at just how far away women, especially women from Third World and developing nations, stand from economic, socio-political, and educational equality. We agreed that it was imperative to bring three important words together: dialogue, empowerment, and women. By creating spaces for women to dialogue, we empower them. Vital channels of empowerment are through media, art, and literature. They help in the development of societies, aid in connecting networks and initiatives, create international dialogue, build tolerance, and foster better understanding of Arab and Muslim women as well as reflecting Arab women’s creative contributions. They assist in demonstrating the crucial role women play in building a culture of peace through creative arts.

One of the most fundamental and rapid ways to enforce, reinforce, and emphasize dialogue is through use of the Internet. The Internet has increasingly become one of the most powerful means of communication, a crucial force of information dissemination that can travel fast and worldwide. The Internet has provided unprecedented access to the Arab and Muslim world, and Arabs have been able to generate information that they might not otherwise. An unbelievable number of sites related to the Middle East and North Africa region, Arab women, Arab feminism, art, and literature have been developed.

Without the empowerment of women, our world cannot evolve, and without words, we would not be here, discussing, exchanging ideas, connecting our future, fostering humanity and peace, empowering women, ourselves.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope against Hope: A Memoir*, Translated by Max Hayward (London: Collins, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> Evelyne Accad, “Body Image and Breast Cancer” in *Al-Raida*, XX.99 (Fall 2002/2003), p. 49-55.

<sup>3</sup> Accad, *ibid*, p.12

<sup>4</sup> Accad, *ibid*, p.49

<sup>5</sup> Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*. (Boston: South End Press, 1983)

<sup>6</sup> Evelyn Alsultany, “Los Intersticios: Recasting Moving Selves” in *This Bridge We Call Home*, eds Gloria Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 108

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- <sup>7</sup> She was brought to my attention by Professor Michael Sulciman.
- <sup>8</sup> Angela Gilliam, "Women's Equality and National Liberation" in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), p.231.
- <sup>9</sup> Suha Sabbagh, *Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint*. (New York: Interlink, 1996), p. xxiv-xxv
- <sup>10</sup> Pinar Ilkkaracan, "Women, Sexuality and Social Change in the Middle East and the Maghreb" in *Al Raida*, XX.99 (Fall 2002/2003), p.14
- <sup>11</sup> Evelyne Accad, *Sexuality and War. Literary Masks of the Middle East* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), p.14
- <sup>12</sup> Seham Abd El-Salam, "The Importance of Genital Mutilations to Gender Power Politics" in *Al Raida*, XX.99 (Fall 2002/2003), p.39
- <sup>13</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press Feminist Series, 1984), p.140
- <sup>14</sup> Jacqui M. Alexander, "Redrafting Morality: The Postcolonial States and the Sexual Offences Bill of Trinidad and Tobago" in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 133
- <sup>15</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" in *This Bridge Called My Back*, eds. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. (Watertown, Mass: Persephone Press, 1981), p.99
- <sup>16</sup> María Lugones, "Playfulness: 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception Making Face, Making Soul. Haciendo Caras," ed. Gloria Anzaldúa. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990) p. 401
- <sup>17</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of L'Écriture feminine" in *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Showalter. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 372
- <sup>18</sup> Jones, *ibid*, p.366
- <sup>19</sup> Trinh Minh-ha, *Women, Native, Other* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p.62-63

## DYKE MARCH, SAN FRANCISCO, 2004

### I AM ALSO A BELLY DANCER

Happy/L.A. Hyder\*

Below is a speech I gave at the 2004 Dyke March in San Francisco, the night before the Pride Parade in June. The Dyke March is attended by thousands of lesbians from around the world. The 2004 theme was 'Uprooting Racism', and Jewel Gomez and Elana Dykewomon were also keynote speakers. As it turned out, we used similar words to talk about our local lesbian community and the world at large, focusing on strength, diversity, respect, and freedom when speaking to 'Uprooting Racism.'

Dyke March, 2004:

Let me look / drink in the energy of these hills / the revelry in our corner of eden. Welcome to those here from around the globe joining us as we do the Dyke March San Francisco style, showing off our strength and growing numbers as young to old make choices to live in a way that is still new and being sorted out. It's been only 30 years since dykes started coming out in record numbers. Much had to happen from there to here, where the word lesbian is spoken openly and seen in daily newspapers without it being in a denigrating context. And here we are - together- from the very old school-style to the new-style gender benders, for it is true that even the most high femme among us is bending gender to her own desires.

The dyke community has always been, at our best, available to the processes that makes this day's inclusive, open, and fired-up energy possible. This same energy is what we must use to change the face of racism - and to manage the great efforts it is taking to heal a society mired in racism - just as we are changing the face of who one can be in this world.

We were all raised to be racists. It is endemic to our society and kept vital by a corporate controlled media whose job is to keep us from questioning the profit

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\* Happy/L.A. Hyder is a fine artist working in color photography, the founder of Lesbians in the Visual Arts, and an Advisory Board member of the Camera Club of New York which was founded in 1884 by Alfred Steiglitz. Hyder's photographs can be viewed at [www.lahyderphotography.com](http://www.lahyderphotography.com).

motives that perpetuate wars and a poverty-based society. We were all raised to be racists, and for many people of color this has taken a heavy internal toll. For everyone, the external toll is devastating.

The blatant racism against Arabs in this country is nothing new, nor is it isolated. It's cousins with the racism against all people of color. It's just that we Arabs are the people to hate at the moment, we are the most visible "other", a position foisted upon any population being decimated, and let's be real- the Palestinians are being decimated, the Iraqi civilization has been bombed to dust, there is a push in the government to make a pre-emptive strike against Iran, and the list goes on. It goes around the globe and it's face is also Latin, African, Asian, those Native to all lands, and most especially those who are Native to the U.S.

As dykes, we are hardly fooled by the stated desire of the U.S. government to help the women in Arab countries. This government has, for years, been installing right-wing fanatics in positions of power around the globe as they undermine women's rights here as well. Women in Middle Eastern countries were not veiled under punishment of death until quite recently (and are not all Muslim). Women in Middle Eastern countries enjoy many freedoms and are highly educated. These women have always, and continue to, participate in their countries' struggles at all levels of the spectrum; by educating girls in secret as well as openly demanding and participating in the reform of their governments. Women of Middle Eastern descent - meaning from North Africa and from Southwest and Central Asia - have always been politically active within the U.S. as well.

So what can we offer in the midst of our celebration and keep right on celebrating? Looking at our rainbow of colors within all our ethnicities gathered on this hill in the name of 'Uprooting Racism', I see strength. I believe that as dykes, knowing what it is to be spit upon and made "other" puts us somewhat ahead of the game. The trick is to bring this afternoon's energy and spirit with us for use on a daily basis. That means we give each other the respect we deserve; we strive to understand each other in a compassionate way, and we keep the lines of communication open in dialogue. Remember, difference is not a dirty word. Neither is forgiveness. We've all made mistakes we've regretted deeply and all hold on tight to at least one grudge. When we come together in respect, with compassion, and in dialogue, we can forgive ourselves and others, and we can gather our strength into a power we can wield in the world.

We are more powerful than we can imagine - otherwise why has so much energy been expended to keep us invisible? Now take a look around at how visible and vibrant we are! And, imagining a world where peace and justice are respected and lived concepts, let's use this energy from today to do whatever it is we do best and let's, collectively, vote for people who work with peace and justice as their goal.

### **MANY ARE INTRIGUED BY THE FACT THAT I AM ALSO A BELLY DANCER**

Many are intrigued by the fact that I am a belly dancer. I have lived and worked in San Francisco for 35 years. Within two months of landing here from Worcester, Massachusetts, I purchased my first real camera. Within the first year, I began jazz and then belly dance classes. Each of these endeavors came from long-held desires to be an artist and to dance. I was so tired of trying to take artsy photos with an Instamatic camera.

Raised, as we all are, to be heterosexual, I held that role as my own until the early 1980s, when I came out, claiming a lesbian identity. At that same time, I became involved at the San Francisco Women's Building as a member of the Vida Gallery collective. It was here that I learned to bring my visceral knowledge of racism, classism, and sexism into a theoretical and into a practical pro-inclusion stance.

I have at times been questioned, because of my very feminist sensibility, about my belly dancing, especially how I justify performing considering the less-than-feminist way this dance is viewed. For me, it all stems from my first real belly dancer, who I saw at the age of five or six at a in an outdoor pavilion during a huge *maharajan* [festival] in Connecticut. The day was gloriously sunny and an adventure. My family sat at a round table covered with food and drink. The orchestra played classical Arabic music. At some point, a dancer was introduced, and I ran up to the stage to watch.

While I had seen dancers before at smaller venues, mainly church picnics, this time it was different. I was mesmerized. I remember the dancer as tall, with very long black hair wearing a red, black, and gold costume with a shiny gold coin belt. She was so majestic, and she could spin and spin and spin. Then and there, I knew I would belly dance someday, and while I always held the kernal of this desire, I never really considered it until I was in San Francisco where belly dance was already very popular in the early 70s.

I worked for a year with Jamilla Salimpour, well-known as “la mama” of early belly dance, getting down the basics. I feel it takes about a year to be comfortable with moves unfamiliar to our bodies. The next year I worked with Nakish, an African-American dancer with years of jazz behind her. Here I got a sense of performing at large. I have been shaping my solo performance on my own since then and occasionally collaborate on a piece. I should mention, I was the only Arab and one of the few women of color in these classes and in my social circles at that time.

Coming out as a lesbian, I did leave some elements of my life behind. Belly dancing was not one of them. And, as always, I was very outspoken about my heritage, which seemed to legitimize my dancing for some. I understand belly dance to be many things and watch as Tribal dance is embraced, where dancers are more covered up, have tribal markings on their faces, and wear heavy tribal jewelry. Their beautiful dancing is very choreographed and tight. My training is cabaret. It is more playful and, yes, seductive. I prefer a good-sized space to dance in, allowing me to move across the floor with large movements.

There are well-defined theories of dance coming from imitating and celebrating birthing, and while I can see that as true for some steps, I like to think it came, also, from women simply entertaining each other in the Harem. Music and dance are in all cultures. The truth is that cabaret belly dance is a sexy and sensual dance. What dance isn't? Even ballet can be overtly sexual. My guess is it's the amount of skin shown in a belly dance costume that is the problem - that and the overt nature of seduction - and the image of belly dancers that has been shown in film as dancing for nasty-seeming Arab men. It seems to me, in mainstream media this is part of the overt racism towards Arabs and so the dance is made sleazy.

A few years ago, I danced at a Hyder family reunion. My brother, Ed, an excellent drummer, had two other fabulous musicians playing, and Marie, a cousin I hadn't seen since my pre-teen years, sang beautifully. My favorite comment was an older cousin calling my dancing “elegant.”

In the Bay Area lesbian community, I am known as a visual artist and a dancer. In the early 1980s, I met dancers Sharon Page Ritchie, African-American, and Sylvia Castellanos, Mexican-American. We perform in various configurations to this day. We were the first out lesbian belly dancers, and I don't recall being confronted with questions about our choice of dance. We always dance from a place of strength and power. Our lesbian and/or feminist audiences loved us - and still do.

My mother and the church ladies love the dancers too and occasionally get out on the floor themselves, handkerchief in hand or using hand gestures. I remember a woman in a shimmy dress coming to a small church picnic and dancing in the middle of a circle of about 20 smiling and clapping women. My mother always encouraged my dancing and came with me when I danced a few times when visiting her on the East Coast. My favorite story concerning my mother and my dancing happened when she was visiting me in 1989. Although I had come out in 1981, I wasn't out to my family. Many of us refrain from coming out to families who do not live nearby. I wanted so deeply to tell my mother, who was 74 at the time, so I could be fully honest about my life. We went to Golden Gate Park and I told her as we sat and watched swans on a beautiful pond. We cried together, and we held each other, and we confirmed our love. A few days later, I was scheduled to perform with Sharon and Sylvia at a dance celebrating a lesbian of color conference, which we also attended. My mother came to see me perform. She had met a number of my friends and so was taken care of as I donned my costume. I could see she was enjoying the performance as the three of us danced together to open the set. When it was time for my solo, I made sure to spend some time dancing near her front row table in the large hall. As I was dancing and women were yelling, my mother sat with a big smile on her face, throwing me kisses.

This is the essence of belly dance to me. It is a joyous dance, really. It is performance as ritual with the dancer as an emissary of the erotic, bringing the sacred with the profane, holding the sensual and celebrating the sexual. Belly dance is one of few dance forms where the audience is actively engaged by the dancer. Is it any wonder that this dance of power and strength, performed by flagrantly seductive women sure of their own abilities, is denigrated?

## AM I LOST IN TRANSLATION?

Hala Kh. Nassar\*

When the editors of this issue approached me to submit an abstract on Arab and Arab-American women's experience, I instantly thought that it might be a chance to reflect on my experience as a Palestinian woman and a teacher on an American campus. I was thinking of writing about my courses on gender and Arab women's writing and the problems that arise from teaching Arabic texts - mainly novels by Arab women that are translated into English. Although there have been some studies on this issue<sup>1</sup>, as far as I know no one has studied Arab and Arab-American teachers' experience in such setting. Shedding light on these experiences in the classroom, then, is important not because of the political situation in the Middle East but also due to the increased demand for Arabic after the events of the 11<sup>th</sup> of September of 2001. In this paper, I reflect on the predicament of an Arab professor in the U.S. academy: one who is seen as a facilitator of knowledge and a representative of a culture and whose identity is continuously contested, rejected, defended, and interpreted in the classroom and beyond.

### DIFFERENT LOCALITIES/DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES?

I came to the U.S. in August 2001. I had just completed and defended my dissertation on Palestinian theatre at the Free University of Berlin, Germany. Arriving at the Institute of International Studies, I began my scholarship as a Rockefeller postdoctoral fellow in a program called, "Community in Contention" focusing on oral narratives by Palestinian women refugees in the Bethlehem area and investigating how their stories are transformed on the stage.<sup>2</sup> At Berkeley, a vibrant campus, I benefited enormously from both students and scholars. At first, the atmosphere was very pleasant but things changed drastically after the 11<sup>th</sup> of September of 2001. Like most Arabs and Palestinians, I was haunted by feelings of uncertainty. The Berkeley community, however, was very supportive and caring, if not protective, of me.

In the spring semester of 2002, I co- taught a course called "Diaspora, Displacement, Social Memory, and Exile" that covered refugees in the Middle East and Africa. The class was mainly for graduate students from various disciplines.

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Although Berkeley is known for its liberal politics, and Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) were very active on campus, the feeling of uncertainty never left me. My “presence” as a Palestinian woman was unsettling in relationship to the ever-deteriorating political situation worldwide.

Upon the completion of my fellowship, I was appointed at Evergreen State College in Seattle, Washington at the Performing Arts program where I taught Palestinian Theatre. Even though that campus has been known for its activism and solidarity with Third World struggles, I was constantly confronted with having to break and dispel stereotypes. Notwithstanding a relentless attempt on behalf of committed faculty to bring diverse guest speakers to talk about various issues relating to the Middle East, my appointment in the performing Arts program was pioneering in the sense that the program was offering a course on non-western theatre. I was trying to give a different “image” of the Arab world, in general, and of Palestinians, in particular. It was a daunting task! I saw signs of bewilderment and surprise on student’s faces when I stepped the first time into the seminar room. After the initial ritual of introducing the syllabus, students started to ask questions: Where are you from? Are you an Arab woman? Why isn’t your head covered? I found myself continuously having to explain and impart knowledge on my part of the world --an area of which they might only have heard through local, if not filtered, news.

Apart from statements that they “enjoyed” and “benefited” from the course, student final evaluations always referred to the “cultural” differences of the instructor rather than to the approach and style of teaching. Thinking back, I can see why students might have made such statements. Unearthing the students’ evaluations, I had to relive the experience again: some students referred to “culture” differences due to the fact that I have “an accent” and “being foreign”, which makes it hard for me to “understand” the American way of speaking or assimilate into the American “culture.” Others resented the fact that since I am a Palestinian, I only tackled in passing the theatre movement in Israel and its impact on Palestinian theatre! All this despite the fact that, when I gave a lecture on Palestinian theatre, I provided a map of the Middle East, gave a historical chronology of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and explained how local theatre develops or stagnates depending on the political situation. Also, when we read plays by Palestinian playwrights like *The Alley*,<sup>3</sup> students were always commenting that the material was culturally based, needed a lot of explanations, and was heavily politicized. Comments of this type also arose when I gave students an assignment to collect oral narratives from different ethnic communities around Evergreen College as a way to demonstrate cultural tolerance. The collection of these oral stories culminated in putting on stage a sketch that portrayed other cultures existing within their communities. Most students eagerly worked on this project; however, there were some who found it culturally biased and not beneficial to their study of performing arts.

My teaching journey on American campuses has landed me at Yale University where I now teach modern Arabic culture and literature. I offer courses on Arab women’s writings, Arab theatre, and an introduction to modern Arab thought. The experience of teaching theatre at Evergreen College helped me rethink the syllabus when I moved to Yale in September of 2003. One of the courses I am teaching now is on theatre and drama in the Arab world. Initially, the class was intriguing to many, but since the curriculum lacked the “key words”: “Islam”, “fundamentalism”, “insurgents”, or even Islamic plays, the number of students has dropped drastically. Students have opted for more “exotic” courses like

Introduction to Islam, Fundamentalism, and Jihad. Those who decided to remain are constantly skeptical finding it hard to accept that the Arab and the Muslim world had popular theatre that existed in forms that predated Islam despite reading texts by either Egyptian or Israeli scholars who strive to document this.

Students also find contemporary theatre problematic. It is hard for them to grasp the power of censorship and how it transforms plays in which some playwrights-- depending on the country they come from-- resort to symbolism to escape censorship. Last week, for example, we discussed the theme of defying colonial rule and the rise of national identity with a focus on Palestine as a case study. It is interesting that ten weeks into the semester, students found it hard to believe that Palestinians under occupation had the perseverance to produce theatre. They also wondered why contemporary Palestinian theatre reenacts an-Nakba over and over on stage. In spite of the fact that a historical introduction is given when we discuss the various theatrical venues in any Arab country, I still sense that the students are struggling to change the negative images about the Arab World in the light of the current political turmoil. Another factor might be that in any required survey course on theatre and drama, theatre in the Arab world is not included.

### THE RELEVANCE OF INTRODUCING ARAB ARTICULATIONS OF CULTURE

At Yale I am now teaching a challenging class on Arabic culture entitled "Topics in Arabic." I offered this advanced language course because I believe in challenges and creativity in teaching the language through poetry and music. My aim was not to have my students learn Arabic as a dead language that is isolated from its geographical, social, political, and historical context. Because of its advanced status, I am able to put the language into contemporary cultural context. When we discuss Arab nationalism, for instance, I assign recent critiques and, at the same time, we listen to the late Egyptian singer Um Kalthum singing for Egypt, the High Dam, the nationalization of the Suez Canal, and Jamal Abed al-Nasser. Students also watch *A Voice from Egypt*, a film about Um Kalthum's life.

When we discussed the war in Iraq, I had students read various historical reports on the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait up to the recent American casualties in Iraq. They now make the connections between Arab nationalism, Baathism, Nassirism, the Muslim Brotherhood, Palestine, colonialism, and the New Empire. The students read and listened to the exiled Iraqi singer Kathem al-Saheer singing about Iraq and read "Nothing, but Only Iraq", a poem written by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish; they also read "Salute to Iraq" by the Syrian poet Adonis and other poems by the Syrian poet Nizar Qabani on Iraq. When we discuss the Palestinian struggle for self-determination, students are assigned current newspaper articles that reflect different viewpoints from both Israeli and Palestinian society. They also read lyrics by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish and listen to the song by the Lebanese singer and composer Marcel Khalife. In addition, they view various films presenting both Palestinian and Israeli points of views. The most recent issue we discussed before fall break was the death of Palestinian president, Yasser Arafat, and the possibilities for a political solution in light of the current political deadlock. Here again the students are exposed to opposing points of view and yet still end up stating the same stereotypical views again and again: Arab societies need to reform; women are oppressed; and human rights violations are rampant. Some students complain that I am politicizing the Arabic language,

although I use the university assigned text, *Standard Arabic: An Advanced Course*<sup>4</sup>, and I only add recent articles and some poetry and music. I have also been told that I give these texts in order to change the image of the Arab world since I come from there!

In addition, I feel that I am still looked upon as a native informant on the Arab world and constantly have to defend it. For instance, on any major political event, visit of an Arab leader to an Arab or foreign country, major meeting - especially last year's Arab summit - or any comment by an Arab leader on a specific event, I am constantly approached to give comments although I do not physically live there and, most of the time, have not even heard of the news yet! Instead, I try to answer by relying on alternative newspapers, articles, books, and criticism from various resources whether they come out of Israel, the West Bank, the Arab world, or the United States. In so doing, I try to get my students to investigate and analyze critically what they hear or see and to always look for an alternative viewpoint before making a final judgment on an issue or a text.

In spite of the "war on terror," students do not seem to be interested in the Arab world beyond knowing names circulated in the media. On average, students are familiar with names like Bin Laden, Murtada al-Sadr, or other Arab leader making the news. The most recent examples are the deaths of the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri. Students were then flooded with negative images of the Arab world as, perhaps, they are always attuned to U.S. media and thus to one point of view. Therefore, it is a real challenge to convince them of the existence of another side of the Middle East, with its various cultural articulations, beyond the headlines.

My next stop after Evergreen was Columbia University where I was a visiting professor of two courses. The first was "Introduction to Palestinian Literature." Entering the class with eager course shoppers and attentive listeners, I started to talk about the importance of studying Palestinian literature. While the majority of the students were sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, most had never read a single piece of Palestinian literature. Of course, in such a setting, a professor encounters students who have preconceived ideas about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and learning about Palestinian literature was not going to change their political position. But they appreciated learning new things, were eager to pursue further readings on the topic, and enjoyed writing their final papers. I must admit that by the end of this course, students on either side of the conflict developed a sense of literary criticism in spite of their political and ideological differences.

Teaching my second course, "Gender and Nationalism in Arab Women's Writings", however, was a totally different case. First, I was surprised to see that some of the students were confused about my "identity" as a Palestinian woman. Some students came to class with misconceptions and preconceptions. To some students being "Arab" meant being a "Muslim" regardless of the geographical area and to others being a Palestinian meant coming from Israel. This lack of knowledge was also manifested when in, the beginning, students were trying to figure out my identity and where I actually come from. I was born and raised in an Arab country. I was and remain engaged in Palestinian culture. I would find myself with the endless task of having to deconstruct what students knew about gender, patriarchy, and masculinity as they related to my Middle Eastern and Palestinian identity. After a while, I began to ask students to go to the blackboard and write down their ideas about Arab women, whether they had learned such ideas from news media or entertainment. At the beginning, the students hesitated, and some felt embarrassed.

Sensing this, I told the students about the importance of such an exercise because we were dealing with texts that touch on many sensitive issues, and it was crucial that we read and analyze critically. After some moments of silence and hesitation, I went to the blackboard and wrote the first sentence: all Arab women are Muslims. Seeing me holding the chalk, the students, one after the other, went to the blackboard and wrote their ideas about Arab women. The list that the students wrote was familiar: Female Genital Mutilation, Arab women are veiled, women are confined to the house, women do not inherit land, women's profession is limited to teaching, men are allowed to marry more than one wife, honor killings, Palestinian or Arab women cannot live on their own unless they go to Europe or the U.S.A., women have no political constituency and power. Put on the spot, my next step was to tell students that, in the course of the semester, we were going to discuss and question these ideas together. Seeing this list in white and black not only intensified the unsettled feelings I already had, it also presented me with a dilemma: is it possible to teach and deconstruct such stereotypes when the novels I had chosen reinforced the list students had written on the blackboard in one form or another?

How am I supposed to "defend" a culture when I am teaching novels that are dissatisfied with it? At this point, I referred the students to the syllabus and to the supplemental reading, which mainly consisted of critical essays about each novel they would read. This blackboard exercise proved to be successful not only in breaking the ice in the classroom, but also in preparing the students to read the novels in an open, tolerant, and critical way. It was a rewarding experience when, at the end of the semester, some female students came and asked for more titles by Arab women novelists.

The same experience repeated itself when I moved from Columbia to Yale. Here, too, I am met with misconception and misreading regarding the role of Arab women, not to mention trying constantly to deal with being constructed as "foreign" and in a "foreign" environment. In such a context, translating one's identity, on many levels, is complicated. Apart from being pressed to talk about my background and education, most challenging to me has been the attempt to explain that "not all Arab women live like this." How to explain, though, depended on the context of the conversation and my insistence not to feed into the stereotyping of Arab women.

### TRANSLATION OF LOCALITIES

Whether we believe that we are prepared or not, there come moments when the teacher is caught off-guard. Most of the novels I taught at Columbia University and continue to teach are the same novels used and read by many instructors over and over again. Brian Whitaker has recently written in *The Guardian* about the lack of newly translated books from Arabic into English. He argues that there seems to be an assumption that "if you got something to say, say it in English. Other languages really do not count any more." Whitaker explains that only 2.8% of the books published in the U.S. are translated from other languages, and that it has been years since a translated book has reached the U.S. bestseller list. According to Whitaker, despite "the enormous political and military attention focused on the Middle East and the way in which the region dominates news coverage day after day, year after year, the average well- educated American or Briton has rarely read an Arabic book in translation."<sup>5</sup>

Peter Ripken, of the German Society for the promotion of African and Latin American Literature, also speaks to the low rate of translating Arabic books by pointing out that if an Arabic book catches the attention of a western publisher it is usually as a “result of having been censored by Arab authorities or spotted by an enthusiastic translator”, and western publishers impose their own agendas of “what Arab creative writing should be about, selectively translating books that meet the readers’ often prejudiced expectations of the orient.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the abundance of Arabic novels that do reinforce stereotypes has to do with Arab writers themselves. Both Jenin Abbushi and Amal Amireh have long discussed the predicament of writing and/or translating solely for the sake of getting visibility in order to be known and marketed in the west.<sup>7</sup>

In the course of my teaching, I have tried to explain to my students that translation in itself is a problematic enterprise. Marketing and producing a book as a consumer good becomes the main objective, therefore translations of original works are often altered so as not to hinder the process of selling. To make it easy for the average “foreign reader”, (borrowing Whittaker’s term), chunks of the Arabic texts are usually left out, the unfamiliarity of the text sometimes is explained in extensive footnotes or various passages are reinterpreted.<sup>8</sup>

That the translations are not always faithful to the original text is, in my opinion, due to the complexity of the prose, or the poetic style of some of the writers, which is difficult to capture in translation. Also translators sometimes interpret the meaning rather than translating and cut long passages of the original. Students who can read both Arabic and English always comment on this. Perhaps some translators fail to capture the context of the novel because of their lack of familiarity with the context. However, this did not make my job easier even when I provided critical essays on the novels the students have to read. Once translated, some novels fail to capture the beautiful landscape, the cultural or historical settings and events, or holy or national celebrations and end up interpreting them and rewording them.

My aim here is not to investigate the state of “translation” per se or to provide alternatives to this issue which deserves further attention, rather I want to show how complicated the task of the “Arab” instructor is especially when s/he is constantly put on the defensive. Students keep asking the same questions: How do you feel about these novels? Are they true? Are all Arab women like this? True, such reactions are not restricted to reading Arab novels per se, yet the Arab and Arab-American teacher here, suddenly thrust into the role of having to defend his/her culture, tries every possible method to make the students understand that the assigned novel, whether *The Story of Zabra* or *Wild Thorns*,<sup>9</sup> is not one monolith representation of Arabic culture nor are political or social issues in a given novel applicable to all Arab countries. The rise of political Islam, the war in Iraq, and the uproar against “the axis of evil” make my task all the more difficult. We might, for example, be discussing the *Story of Zabra* by Hanan al-Sheikh, when a student indirectly suggests that the current coalition forces and the United States should include in their agenda the liberation of Arab women in Iraq or Afghanistan. In spite of placing any Arabic novel in its historical, cultural, political, or social context and providing alternative reading, one can never be sure if students are reading the translated text as a representative of truth about the country or looking at the current events in the Middle East with critical eyes.

At Yale this spring semester I introduced a new course on modern Arab thought. In the first session, the seminar room was filled with eager shoppers, most

were graduate students while the rest were undergraduates. On the first day of the seminar, I introduced the students to the syllabus and how the weeks had been divided according to themes and major political events in the Arab world then I gave a short introduction about the seminar. In my introduction, I scanned through the early philosophers like Taha Hussein and presented a brief historical and political background with emphasis on the colonial and postcolonial context of the Arab world.<sup>10</sup> After I finished my short introductions, I then gave the students time to articulate their questions. Among the many questions regarding the grading system, requirements of the course, and where to buy the reader, eager students -- attracted by the title of the course, asked: Is the course going to cover the origins of The Muslim Brotherhood? Are you going to explain to us what the terrorists in Iraq believe in? Are you going to help us understand how a Muslim fundamentalist thinks? As I prepared this time, I thought that I was caught off guard again. I explained that the selected reading aimed to introduce not only different views on religious thought, but also socialist, Marxist, and feminist thought in the Arab world. I also emphasized the fact that we would be reading texts and responses to them by different modern philosophers, intellectuals, critics, and feminists. I added that the selection would concentrate mainly on Arab feminist thought. I also stressed the fact that articles had been selected to reflect different points of view and that each week two students would lead the seminar discussion based on the rest of the class's feedback. The shopping period ended that week, and my seminar remains full. I cannot at this point predict what course this semester is going to take or how students are going to react to the assigned texts. No matter what, I am convinced that by the end of this semester, I will need to sit and reflect again on my teaching experience this year. It is an exercise that keeps me grounded and checked against egoism and complacency.

### TOWARD THE FUTURE OF TEACHING

It is worth mentioning that my teaching experience and the courses I have introduced so far have been considered "new offerings" regardless of the department or campus. Moreover, my experiences as a teacher on American campuses raises questions of what is at stake here: is teaching in the U.S. a constant dismantling of "Orientalist" and "racist" views? Is there a paucity of Arabic texts? Is it a translation problem? Or is it a lack of a better method for communicating? In other words, is it possible for an instructor to change the negative perception of the Arab world when all students hear day in and day out is a broken record of: "war on terror", "they hate us", "Americans are coming as liberators not as occupiers", "democracy and reform is needed in the Arab world?"

Writing on cultural variables and influences in translation, Lawrence Venuti asks:

In the absence of cross-cultural communication unaffected by domestic intelligibilities and interests, what kinds of communities can translation possibly foster? What communities can be based on the domestic inscription of the foreign that limits and redirects the communicative aim of translation?<sup>11</sup>

Taking these questions into consideration raises further questions on the meaning and implication of cross-cultural communication. The current U.S. government

views the Arab world as a space to be liberated and in which to spread what it sees as “democracy.” In light of this argument, one must look at the needed resources to make a difference. Since we are talking about Arab and Arab-American professors on U.S. campuses, it is always beneficial to draw students’ attention to the different backgrounds and heritages that compose American society.

One pedagogical method would be to ask students to provide information on their immediate communities. The teacher, then, may make it possible for students to hear and understand the viewpoint of others on gender issues, cultural production, or volatile political events. In the end, it might help to begin a long process for better “translations” of the Arab world.

This could be achieved in many ways in the classroom. For instance, in teaching a course on Arabic theatre and drama, students’ assignments could be to compare and contrast theatres in cross-cultural contexts such as Latin America and South Africa. I found it useful to show students commonalities between the current popular cultures among Arab youths and their own popular culture, especially rap and pop music. Whether current music in the Arab world is considered and accused by some as “copying Western Music” or having “no substance” is beside the point. The objective is to expose students to alternative views away from the main stream American media.

Teleconferencing has also proved useful. Vron Ware, a colleague of mine in the Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program at Yale University, has recently initiated a teleconference course on gender with Malak Rushdy, a professor of Sociology at the American University of Cairo. Students from the U.S. and Egypt were communicating with each other via teleconferencing and sharing ideas on various aspects of gender dynamics. When it comes to teaching anything on Arab women, I intend in my courses to show students video clips by Arab female singers and maybe this will help to dispel many of the stereotypes and myths surrounding them. Another possible venue to address the lack of knowledge and awareness about the Arab World is to enlarge the number of guest speakers to give lectures on campus and, at the same time, motivate students to attend them. However, this is a long-term project to implement, and it is beyond just the classroom experience.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> On the issue of translating from one language to another, refer to Samia Mehrez, “Translation and the Postcolonial Experience: the Francophone North African Text” in *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*. ed. Venuti, Lawrence (Routledge, 1999), p. 120-158. See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak *The Politics of Translation in Outside in the teaching Machine*. (Routledge, 1993), p. 179-2000.

<sup>2</sup> The program Community in Contention: Culture of Crisis, Exile, and Democracy lasted for three years. I was part of the second year program, “Communities in Exile: Antinomies of Displacement.” <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/RockyCommun/angles.html>

<sup>3</sup> *The Alley* is a play about pre-1948 Acre, which compares life then and now. Samia Qazmouz Bakri wrote *The Alley* in 1992. It was recently published in *Short Arabic Plays: An Anthology*, Salma Khadra Jarrysi (ed.) (New York: Interlink Books, 2003), p. 81-114.

<sup>4</sup> James Dickins and Janet C. E. Watson, eds. *Standard Arabic: An Advanced Course*. (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Brian Whitaker, “Language Barrier” in *The Guardian*, September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2004.

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<sup>6</sup>Cited in Whitaker, *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> See Jenin Abboushi, "The Perils of Occidentalism" in *TLS* April 24<sup>th</sup> 1998. See also Amal Amireh, "Framing Nawal el Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transitional World" in *Gender, Politics and Islam.*, Therese Saliba, Carolyn Allen, and Judith A. Howard, eds. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> The critical essays on the novel I assign to the students are in Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W. Sunderman, and Therese Saliba, eds. *Intersections: Gender, Nation and Community in Arab Women's Novels.*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003). The book includes different critical essays on the most famous novels.

<sup>9</sup> *The Story of Zahra* written in 1986 in Arabic by the Lebanese-London based author Hanan al-Shaykh was published by Anchor Books in 1995. *Wild Thorns* was written by the Palestinian novelist Sahar Khalifeh in 1985 and published by Interlik in 2003.

<sup>10</sup> The reading for the first week was from Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*. Translated by Sidney Glazer, *American Council of Learned Societies*, (1954/1944), p.1-29, p.135-157, and from Sayyid Qutb, "The Present State and the Prospects of Islam" in *Social Justice in Islam* Translated by John B. Hardie and revised by Hamid Algar, in *Islamic Publications International*, (2000/1948), p. 261-196.

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Venuti, *Translation, Community, Utopia* in *The Translation Studies reader*, Lawrence Venuti (ed.), (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.469



# TEACHING SCRIPTURAL TEXT IN THE CLASSROOM

## THE QUESTION OF GENDER

Moulouk Berry\*

### INTRODUCTION

When we enter the classroom to teach the sacred text in the U.S. post-secondary secular academy, we teach *about the sacred text*. When students committed to the faith of the particular sacred text under study register for the class, they take a course *on the sacred text*. This blurring of the line between a course *about* and a course *on* the sacred text sometimes creates tensions in the classroom. The students have a different epistemological relationship to the course than their professor: they feel that they know their faith on one level of personal experience but are now challenged to consider it in a historical context and in relation to multiple perspectives. In this situation, it is imperative for the professor to explore ways to give voice and share authority in the classroom to avoid marginalizing and excluding student voices. This was particularly my experience when I developed and taught a course about the Qur'an in the winter of 2003 at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. I constantly had to navigate tensions that were generated, by way of discussions so as not to impose my own thought and in order to encourage students to speak. It was important to think with my students *collectively* how dominant discourses -whether religious or secular- can silence, exclude, and "otherize" the other.

### THE CLASSROOM

My class consisted predominantly of Muslim Arab and Muslim non-Arab Americans, one Christian Arab Chaldian American, and one Christian African American. Three of the Muslim American students were females who wore the head cover. The majority of the Muslim students were Sunnis and few were Shiites.<sup>1</sup>

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All of the students were brought up in the U.S. but traced their ancestral backgrounds to Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, and Pakistan.

The course was listed under modern and classical languages and was entitled "Introduction to the Qur'an." My syllabus consisted of two parts: the first part focused on the history of the text and the socio-political and cultural milieu in which the text emerged. The second part examined the content of the text. In the first half of the semester students learned the early history of Islam: the gathering, compiling, canonizing, and the transcription of the Qur'an, Qur'anic exegesis, the development of *hadith* literature (the collection of sayings attributed on the authority of Muhammad and his companions for Sunnis and on the authority of Muhammad and the imams in the case of Shi'is), and the development of major Islamic legal schools (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Ja'fari).

In order to demonstrate to students the heterogeneity of Islam and how different methodologies of reading the Qur'an (such as hermeneutics) yielded variant readings of the text, I dealt with different Qur'anic themes such as gender, pluralism, ethics, and science. My choice of the first two themes, gender and pluralism, was motivated by their centrality to scholarly debates dealing with Islam in the contemporary era. The second theme, ethics, is essential to Qur'anic exegesis in that it frames the first two themes. I chose the theme of science in order to engage students from science and engineering. In addition to the required reading texts,<sup>2</sup> students were assigned supplementary readings, such as chapters from various sources, for class presentations.

Most professors are familiar with the anxieties experienced in academia when teaching what is seen as controversial subjects and the concomitant methodological challenges. Frame this difficulty in the larger context of a post-9/11 U.S. campus and the complexity of the situation begins to unfold even more. One can readily recall the controversy at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill when the faculty committee decided to require all incoming undergraduates to read Michael Sell's book, *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*.<sup>3</sup> The controversy provoked strong negative reactions among conservative Christian students. They objected to the teaching of such a course on campus on the grounds that it contravenes the Establishment Clause in the Constitution. The Supreme Court dismissed the case against UNC considering the whole case nonsense.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the complaints by conservative Christians about being compelled to read the Qur'an against their Christian beliefs, the anti-book campaign spurred many debates about academic freedom, diversity, and the separation between church and state.<sup>5</sup> The anxiety caused within institutions in dealing with such events points to how the academy has always been politically implicated in its pursuit of knowledge and drawn boundaries around what is acceptable and what is not. Censorship, not restricted to state sponsored censorship or the silencing of marginal groups by dominant groups, implicates all of us, for we engage in self-censorship in an effort to work out the nuances, contradictions, and controversies of our own intellectual production.

My objective in teaching the Qur'an was to create a space where the exchange of ideas would foster better understanding through diverse perspectives as students decide for themselves what they stand for. Students' anxieties were often caused by the nature of secular education, and by extension the process of secularizing religion at its most basic core-- religious sacred text. In the case of the Qur'an, it became almost impossible since the Qur'an, unlike the Bible for some Christians, is not considered a human account of God's revelation. Muslims assert

repeatedly that God is the author of the book. Muslims believe that the Qur'an embodies Divine Speech and, thus, it cannot be subjected to historicization. The transhistoricity of the text, in the Muslim view, ensures the Qur'an's universalism and its relevance to all times and places, not just to when and where it was revealed.<sup>6</sup>

How would I then teach a text in a secular institution with a class in which almost all the students believed in its sacredness and the irrelevance of historicization? The lines between the divine and the worldly were so sharply drawn that the first day of class ushered in a deafening silence -- like a volcano waiting to erupt: Muslim students explicitly announced that the reason they were taking the class was to learn *The Truth*. The quest for the religious truth on the part of the students and the ever-present awareness of the institutional context, i.e. the secularity of the academy, made the class one of my most attended and most intellectually challenging. Students were coming to class not only to learn but also to defend their perspectives and to ensure fair representation. In light of this situation, I announced that the class was not *on* the Qur'an, for such a class would be taught at the mosque. This class, I stressed, was *about* the Qur'an and that, therefore, it should be examined within the confines of scholarship. I asked students to think about such questions as: Who establishes the truth? Whose Islam do we study? How is the divine articulated in human medium? Whose knowledge of sacred text is authoritative and whose is discounted? My goal was to challenge both students' preconceived notions of authority, knowledge, divinity, gender, and Islam, while at the same time refusing to exonerate secular scholars from taking responsibility for their anti-religious positions by claiming objectivity. These challenges created a vibrant intellectual atmosphere in the classroom and made the course very exciting and appealing to students.

During the course of the semester, a schism along Shi'i-Sunni lines was most pronounced. Tensions between students rose in the classroom and were only kept at bay by my intervention. Yet, not even the Sunni-Shi'i tension elicited as much controversy as gender. This time, the battlefield was drawn in which my students and I were on opposite sides. Almost all of my Muslim students had preconceived ideas about gender in Islam. They were committed to the patriarchal interpretations of the text. Liberal Muslim interpretations were dismissed by my Muslim students and were only accepted by the two non-Muslim, i.e. Christian, students.

All students, to a varying degree, accepted women's rights to participate in political and social life with an emphasis on women's primary obligation to her family. When it came to debating gender equality, Muslim students invoked essentialist notions of biological differences claiming men's superiority over women, women's emotionality, resorting to such interpretations in both Sunni and Shi'i traditions. Without realizing it, students actually treated traditional Islamic exegetical works as sacredly as they treated the Qur'an. In an effort to provide examples of Muslim liberal modernist interpretations, I assigned students Asma Barlas's book *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*. Barlas puts forth an internal interrogation of Islamic text and critiques the idea of the sacredness of the patriarchal project and interpretation of the text from a perspective that takes gender equality and women's liberation in the Qur'an as its point of departure. Reading a woman's interpretation of traditional exegetical works and her challenges to the different Islamic texts and the contexts in which they were codified was threatening to some of the students on a number of levels.

First, it contradicted the assumption that religious knowledge of the sacred text rested with Muslim male clerics which meant that the “true” and the “authentic” could only be that which was imparted by males. Second, the author’s perceived feminist stance was seen as an attack on established traditional and patriarchal interpretations of the text; in other words, what was established as canonical in Sunni Islam and as “most reputable” (*al-mashhur*) in Shi’i Islam -- *even when such interpretations contradicted the Qur’anic provisions.*

By virtue of not following the meta-narrative of gender inequality, and by not grounding such inequality in biological gender differences, Barlas’ work was rendered dubious in the eyes of the students. To assess how they related to reading the text, students had to know whether the author was following the proscribed ways of Islam. Because the author located herself within Islam and grounded her theory in the Qur’an, they could not attack her credibility on the premise that she was an “outsider” attacking the religion and culture. The students then resorted to the veil, always symbolizing religiosity and faithfulness vis-à-vis the not-so-good Muslim woman, which equals positioning anyone who does not fulfill the religious incumbency of covering the head as the “other”. Of course, the students’ inquiry had wider implications: the validity of the word of a Muslim woman had to be earned by her “proper” appearance. There was a sigh of a relief when I said that Asma Barlas might be veiled. Interestingly enough, none of my students inquired into the religiosity of Farid Esack whose book, *Introduction to the Quran*, that I also assigned as class reading.

I could not really gauge the full implication of the question of the veil until one of my female students, who wore a headscarf, did a presentation on the head cover, *the hijab*, in which she stated that a Muslim woman who respects herself must wear the head cover. At first, I did not take the comment personally and treated it as just the views of one student. But when the students looked at me and laughed, the point was made: I was the only Muslim woman in that class without a head cover. Her presentation was a direct attack on my own position, authority, and legitimacy as I stood to impart my knowledge *about* the Qur’an. “Respect is a matter of definition,” I commented afterwards maintaining a “natural” posture. This was not about shift in balance of power but an opportunity to educate.

Teaching the class also involved examining the history of textual and legal interpretations and impact of legal critical thinking (*ijtihad*) in formulating Islamic laws. Having both the academic training in Islamic Studies and the personal knowledge of how *ijtihad* is theorized and applied, assisted in anticipating students’ questions and problems with many issues dealt with in the class. In this case, the hardest to undo in the class was the paradigmatic thinking along right and wrong. After all, if you teach about the Qur’an, you are expected to narrow it to right and wrong.

In the course of the discussion and after listening to countless arguments about women’s fragile nature and how women’s primary duties should be to their homes, children, and husbands, Shi’i students proved more amenable to consider Muslim liberal modernist interpretations of key gender Qur’anic verses. This is possibly due to the different role the notion of *ijtihad* (critical thinking) play in Shi’i jurisprudence. Due to political and historical considerations, some scholars argue that Sunnis closed the door of *ijtihad* <sup>7</sup> during the Abbasid period in the ninth century when the Sunni legal scholar Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi’i (d.819), the founder of Islamic jurisprudence, curbed the diversity of legal practice and established a fixed and common methodology for all law schools.<sup>8</sup> By transferring

the authority for legal interpretation from individual law schools to the consensus of the scholarly community, Al-Shafi restricted the role of personal reasoning in the formulation of the law and, thus, closed the door of *ijtihad*.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, in Sunni Islam *ijtihad*, the jurist must accept the authenticity of the consensus of medieval Islamic scholars' interpretation of Islamic sources and their formulation of the law as binding and infallible and, thus, cannot attempt at to read the texts in light of contemporaneous events and needs. In distinction to Sunni Islam, Shi'i Islam accepts *ijtihad* and affirms that *only the opinion of a living jurist is binding*; therefore, jurists cannot accept their predecessors' opinions as authoritative and must revisit all primary and secondary Islamic sources when deducing new rulings. According to Shi'i jurisprudence, unanimity of the Shi'i jurists' views on certain legal questions is not a source in and of itself and as such has no validity on its own. This process is dynamic and allows for the renewal of legal methodologies (*al-tajdid al-fiqhi*) to adequately assist the jurists in dealing with old, "new," and "unprecedented" issues of life and society in the contemporary era.<sup>10</sup>

I am not claiming that Muslim Shi'i students in my classroom changed their opinion drastically, but the fact that they acceded to the notion that there could be multiple positions on this issue was in itself a hard earned struggle. A considerable number of class sessions were spent in dealing with cases of interpretations of Qur'anic verses and the new emerging legal rulings on gender, particularly those dealing with personal status laws. Many of my students believed in the universal applicability of the key words "to excel" and "a degree above" (*faddala* and *darajah*) in the controversial Qur'anic verses 4:34 and 2:28, though restricted by some contemporary legal scholars to marital life and the financial obligation of the husband. The verses read as follows: "Men have authority (*qawwamuna*) over women on account of the qualities with which God hath caused the one of them to excel (*faddala*) over the other and for what they spent of their property..." and "...and for the woman shall be similar rights (over men) in fairness, and for men (their rights) on women, is a degree above (*wa-lil-rijali `alayhinna darajah*); and God is Mighty, Wise."<sup>11</sup> The two key Qur'anic terms *qawwam* and *fadl* in this context, for instance, have been interpreted by some Shi'i scholars to indicate that men are intrinsically superior to women; therefore, in the general affairs of life, men have dominion over women.<sup>12</sup> This interpretation is due to the interpreter's already preconceived patriarchal notions of gender inequality- despite the fact that other verses in the Qur'an establish gender equality.<sup>13</sup> For example, one of the students Adel<sup>14</sup> whose parents came from Lebanon, but who was born in the U.S. and lived all his life in Dearborn, Michigan, insisted that women were emotional and thus could not be trusted with the political, legal, and military posts. Adel's insistence to uphold such interpretations was the result of the transpositions between the Qur'an and its exegesis. As Barlas argues in this context, "*Tafsir* [exegesis] became confused with the Qur'an and was thus given a suprahistorical status."<sup>15</sup>

Students were also generally aware of the other verses in the Qur'an<sup>16</sup> that assert equality of the sexes. Students could not theoretically work out the contradictions between the two divergent tendencies in the Qur'an: the legal but unequal gender approach and the moral/ethical but egalitarian gender tendency. Scholars such as Leila Ahmed account for this divergence and argue that Islam has always possessed these two divergent tendencies within its message. Its "ethical message" establishing the moral and spiritual equality of all human beings was undermined by the "sexual hierarchy" that privileges men. It was this message that

occupied the central position in the formulation of laws and institutions, thus, unarticulating Islam's message of equality of all human beings, particularly with respect to women.<sup>17</sup> I explained to my students the historical factors that impacted the direction of *ijtihad* in Sunni Islam that eventually led to the privilege of men and the establishment of "sexual hierarchy" in the legal sphere. I explained that the Abbasid Empire's (750-1258 C.E.) quest for and consolidation of political power over vast lands and diverse populations played a significant role in privileging certain readings of the Islamic textual sources over others. The Abbasid's "pluralism" and multiculturalism proved "repressive" towards Muslim women.<sup>18</sup> In their effort to create a unified law acceptable to their diverse populace, the Abbasids drew on diverse traditions and backgrounds. It was precisely then that many misogynist practices and traditions of diverse cultures entered Islamic sources (including Shi'i legal sources). I supplanted this historical background to my students as a prelude to discussing the importance of synthesizing the two divergent voices in the Qur'an and opt for a reading that is more responsive to women's aspirations. No matter what my students felt, I know that they were given the opportunity to intellectually engage in the process of rethinking old questions within a different context. These debates, students finally concluded, do not necessarily brand their author within or outside one's traditions. After meeting Dr. Asma Barlas at the 2004 Middle East Studies Association (MESA) annual conference in San Francisco and discovering that she did not cover her hair, I wondered what my students' reactions would have been, had they then known!

I was aware that I was challenging my students' interpretations of dominant Islamic discourses on gender. The whole idea of having to make the scripture a subject for study and inquiry was in itself a transgression. Almost a year after teaching this class, I am now conscious that many students of monotheistic faiths are brought up to think of their traditions and texts in a strict and rigid manner. Understanding this reality makes secular education a substantial challenge. Secular institutions are not so secular (if that could ever be achieved) for they also harbor similarly rigid ideas about traditions and world religions. This makes teaching a divine text a challenge as well. We need to create spaces in which the exchange of ideas embodies the recognition of student's spiritual commitments and that simultaneously uncovers the notions upon which their beliefs are based.

- This group of students, in particular, believed deeply in inherent differences between men and women. The persistence of Islamic essentialist discourses in certain contexts are not merely a result of the historical role of the state in codifying/controlling gender relations in the classical in the modern period in some Muslim countries from which the students came but they are part of much more cultural and historical complex.

Teaching the Qur'an course at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, in the heart of a large Arab and Muslim community in the U.S., re-poses universal questions of representation, the Self, the Other, and the Other within the Self. Depth of knowledge about the topic at hand and familiarity with the subject matter of the class and student socialization is an absolute necessity to teach and explain Islam, i.e. not everyone who feels like it can just jump on the bandwagon and teach Islam because it has become a sexy subject today. Maintaining intellectual integrity is an absolute necessity that we must apply to hold ourselves accountable.

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**ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Historically, the split in Islam along Sunni- Shi'i lines occurred after the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 A.D. The Muslim community differed on the question of succession to Muhammad. As a result, two distinct doctrines developed, the Sunni caliphate and the Shi'i imamate. For Sunnis the caliph is the elected successor to the prophet in matters political and military but not religious. In contrast, the Shi'i, the leadership of the community is vested in the imam who is divinely ordained and occupies a religio-political post. For more, see John L. Esposito, *Islam: the Straight Path*, expanded edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.45-47.

<sup>2</sup> Such as Farid Esack *The Qur'an: A Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002) and Asma Barlas, "Believing Women" in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*, (Ashland, Oregon, White Cloud Press, 1st edition 1999, second printing 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, "Cuckoo in Carolina", *New York Times*, August 28, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Check, for instance, UNC's home web site referring to the incident under "Summer Reading Controversy."

<sup>6</sup> Asma Barlas, "Texts and Textualities: the Qur'an, *Tafsir*, and *Abadith*" in "Believing Women" in *Islam*, p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> This is a hotly debated issue among scholars of Islam. Regardless of whether the door of *ijtihad* has been actually closed or not, the consensus of the community established by al-Shafi'i is a block in the way of any serious rereading and challenging the textual interpretations established during the doctrinal development of Islam. Any novel reinterpretation of texts is only possible and, only if, the opinions of the Muslim scholars and jurists are stripped of the sacredness that is usually accorded to the Qur'an.

<sup>8</sup> Esposito, "Religious Life: Belief and Practice", *Islam: the Straight Path*, p. 78

<sup>9</sup> Esposito, "Religious Life," p. 78.

<sup>10</sup> Moulouk Berry, "Contemporary Legal Decisions and Domestic Relations: Muhammad Husayn Fadl-Allah and Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, 1990-1999", in *Radical Transitions: Shifting Gender Discourses in Lebanese Muslim Shi'i Jurisprudence and Ideology, 1960-1997 and 1990-1999* (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan 2002), p.77-78.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted from the *Holly Qur'an*, translated by, in Mir, Ahmed Ali S.V. (New York: Tahrik Tarsil Qur'an, Inc., 1988).

<sup>12</sup> Majma` al-Bahrayn, for example, gives two meanings to the word *qawwam*: an "intrinsic/natural advantage" or an "earned advantage". Thus, in the meaning of the word, the implications of the statement contained in the Qur'anic verse are due to their natural advantage God favored men over women in certain matters, such as prophethood, imamate, and authority. The second is an earned advantage due to the welfare matters, e.g., men providing women with financial support. Al-Tabataba'i, a twentieth century commentator, in his renowned exegetical work *al-Mizān*, interprets the first part of verse 34 of the Sura Nisa in the light of the first meaning "*Al-Fadl*" in this verse to men's natural superior qualities (such as rationality, strength, and power) versus women's emotional and delicate nature...Therefore, the universality of this cause (*wa`umum badhibi al-illa*) demands that the ruling based on it-namely, *al-rijal qawwamuna`ala al-nisa'* should not be limited to conjugal life, but should generally apply to all matters involving men and women; matters such as legal procedures, state leadership, and military defense... Therefore, this verse (men have authority over women) has a universal applicability *dhū itlaq`amm*". For more on the lexical meanings of the key Qur'anic words, see, Fakhr al-Din Al-Shaykh al-Turayhi, "Qawwam," *Majma` al-Bahrayn*, edited by, in al-Sayyid Ahmad al-Husayni, vol. 6 (Tehran: al-Maktabah al-Murtadiyyah, 1386 A.H.), p.142. For the exegetical interpretation of the same Qur'anic verses, see, al-Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *al-Mizān fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, vol.4 (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Amili Lil Matbu'at, 1983), p. 343; also see, Berry Moulouk "The Right of Women to Occupy Positions of Judge or State Leadership in Islamic Shi'i Imami Law," *Law Review* (University of Detroit Mercy) 81, no. 5 (summer 2004): p. 695-696.

<sup>13</sup> Also a useful read is Barbara Freyer Stowasser, "Women and Citizenship in the Qur'an" in *Women, The Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic History*, Amira El-Azhary Sonbol (ed.) and forwarded by Fernea, Elizabeth Warnock, (New York: Syracuse University Press), p. 23-38.

<sup>14</sup> I changed the student's name to protect his identity.

<sup>15</sup> Barlas, "Texts and Textualities," p. 38.

<sup>16</sup> "So their Lord did respond to them (saying) "I will not suffer the work of any of you that worketh to be lost, be he male or female, the one of you being from the other..." (3:195); "And covet not that by which God hath raised some of you above others; for men shall have of what they earn; and for

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women shall have of what they earn; and ask God of His Grace; Verily, God is (very well) in the Know of all things” (4: 32); “O’ (Our) Prophet (Muhammad!) when come unto thee believer women pledging that they will associate not aught with God, and they will steal not, and they will commit not adultery and kill not their children, and they will utter not slander, nor utter any falsehood which they had forged themselves between their hands and their feet and they will not disobey thee in what is fair, then accept thou their pledge, and ask forgiveness for them from God is Oft-Forgiving, the Most Merciful”; ( 60: 12) and “Whosoever did good, whether male or female, and he be a believer, then We will certainly make him live a life good and pure, and certainly We will give them their return with the best of what they were doing”. Quoted from the *Holy Qur’an*, translated by, in Ahmed Ali, S.V. Mir<sup>17</sup> Leila Ahmed, “Conclusion”, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 238.

<sup>18</sup> C. Belessey quoted by Barlas, “Text and Textualities,” p. 44.



**ON OUR OWN TERMS  
DISCOURSES, POLITICS, AND  
FEMINISMS**

# MOBILIZING THE POLITICS OF INVISIBILITY IN ARAB AMERICAN FEMINIST DISCOURSE

Amira Jarmakani\*

A few years ago, I walked into a coffee house in Atlanta, GA, ordered a drink, and laid the book I was reading, *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, down on the counter in order to pay for my drink.<sup>1</sup> “Arab feminism”, the coffee barista exclaimed, “that’s just an oxymoron to me!” Her comment, cloaked as it was in certainty and self-assurance, solidified my understanding of the way in which Arab American feminism is, in some ways, forced to construct itself negatively. That is, Arab American feminists must necessarily respond to the stereotypical images by which they are largely understood in a U.S. context and are, therefore, put in a position of first correcting common misconceptions before creating a defining discourse. The barista’s comment was made to me in September of 2002 and was, therefore, undoubtedly influenced by the cultural context of U.S. attitudes toward the Middle East that emerged after the events of September 11, 2001. Her unquestioned certainty that Arab feminism could not exist was framed and bolstered by a U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, which was cast as a project of liberation meant to save Afghan women from the oppression of the Taliban.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the rhetoric surrounding this project of liberation has depended on the symbol of the veil, or *burqa*, to pictorially reinforce U.S. assumptions about the way in which *all* Muslim and Middle Eastern women have been forced to hide behind the oppressive and silencing shroud of the veil.<sup>3</sup>

Feminist scholars have offered lucid critical analysis of the problematic interpretations and deployments of the veil in U.S. and Western European cultures.<sup>4</sup> However, because the image of the veil has been appropriated as a powerful metaphor to describe and interpret Arab women’s lives, and given the way in which Arab American feminism has had to construct itself in opposition to this metaphor, it is worth reviewing the way in which it has functioned in U.S. discourse about the Middle East. The power and efficacy of the symbol of the veil as a cultural marker of difference is multi-dimensional: it serves as a useful, and accordingly prolific,

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articulation of female oppression in the Middle East; it reinforces and solidifies a monolithic and flattened understanding of Muslim and Arab womanhood; and it presents itself as an indigenous, and therefore authentic, example of the oppression of Muslim and Middle Eastern women. In other words, as a signifier, it almost single-handedly creates and reinforces a mythology of the oppression of Muslim and Arab women worldwide. The function of this mythology is to create a comprehensive narrative about Arab womanhood that ultimately serves the needs of a colonialist or imperialist power. While such a narrative might be employed to justify a project of domination by casting it as a project of liberation, it falls short of communicating the complexities of the Arab female experience.

As myth, then, the image of the veil eclipses the socio-historical realities that determine the very conditions of its representation. By presenting itself as an accurate and authentic representation of the realities of the women who live “behind” it, the image of the veil successfully elides the relations of power that determine its construction. The concept of the veil as a totalizing shroud is clearly an outside perspective, which sees the piece of clothing as a cover or block to some interior part of the culture to which the viewer does not have access. From this perspective, it is impossible to imagine the potential positive aspects of the veil, such as ways in which it might enable movement for the woman who wears it. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any subjectivity at all for the woman “inside.” It is this outside perspective that perpetuates an understanding of the veil as a marker of invisibility, a paradoxical framework that effectively seals any engagement with the realities of Arab womanhood inside. By marking Arab women as invisible, the mythology of the veil is actually assigning them powerful presence. However, that presence, which is sometimes hyper-visible in the context of U.S. military action, is utterly detached from the nuanced particularities of Arab and Muslim women. It signifies invisibility in order to corroborate dominant U.S. assumptions about the oppression of Arab and Muslim women. Their powerful presence is, therefore, subsumed under the louder message of their supposedly helpless silence. The mythology of the veil is so powerful and so prolific in the U.S. that it is virtually impossible to talk about the realities of Arab and Arab American women’s lives without invoking, and necessarily responding to, the looming image and story that the mythology of the veil tells. As a result, any articulation of Arab American feminism also finds itself necessarily engaged with an incomplete and one-dimensional understanding of Arab womanhood; it must begin from a corrective, and therefore defensive, stance.

### A HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR ARAB AMERICAN FEMINISMS

This type of oppositional stance is nothing new. In fact, it closely resembles Leila Ahmed’s experience at the 1980 National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) conference she recounts it in her article, “Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem.” Ahmed’s article while certainly not the only or the oldest example of Arab American feminism, provides a point of reference for tracing the trajectory of Arab American feminism in the U.S. Since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, Arab American feminism has been portrayed and perceived, from a mainstream perspective, as suddenly relevant or newly forming. Yet, using the NWSA conferences as a framework, I am interested in exploring the way in which Arab American feminists have been participating in critical feminist dialogue for the past few decades.

Moreover, Ahmed's experience clearly demonstrates a defining facet of Arab American feminism: the development of an oppositional consciousness. While attending a panel entitled "Women In Islam", Ahmed was surprised to hear what she found to be an overly optimistic view of women's status in Islam. While Ahmed agreed that "Islam had, as that panel maintained, brought about a number of positive gains for women in Arabia at the time, and had granted women certain rights", she felt that fact "still did not warrant playing down Islam's blatant endorsement of male superiority and male control of women, or glossing over the harshness of, in particular, its marriage, divorce, and child custody laws."<sup>5</sup> Having attended a conference devoted to critical interrogation of the status of women across multiple contexts, Ahmed was no doubt confused to find the panelists' analysis of gender oppression within Islam strikingly under-developed. However, as she explains in her later reflection, she had not yet lived in the U.S. and, therefore, did not yet understand the defensive position from which the panelists had begun. Before discussing the rich complexity and dynamics of female oppression within the Islamic tradition, the "Women In Islam" panelists first had to address those certainties and assumptions that existed in the audience about the hyper-patriarchal and overly-oppressive nature of Islam. There was no space for the panelists to offer an honest and productive critique of the status of women in Islam without first confronting U.S. misperceptions about Islam. As Ahmed discovered, these misperceptions were (and are) deeply entrenched in the mainstream psyche:

Just as Americans "know", that Arabs are backward, they know also with the same flawless certainty that Muslim women are terribly oppressed and degraded. And they know this not because they know that women everywhere in the world are oppressed, but because they believe that, specifically, Islam monstrously oppresses women.<sup>6</sup>

This type of "knowledge" about Islam, which is often conflated with an understanding of the Middle East, as the two have become virtually interchangeable in U.S. discourse, is the same sort of certainty that has reified the power of the veil as an all-encompassing signifier of Arab and Muslim womanhood in the U.S. As Ahmed points out, there is not simply a dearth of information about Arab and Muslim women; rather, there is a plethora of misinformation about the nature of female oppression in Islam. Consequently, Arab American feminists often find themselves absorbed in the task of addressing and correcting this misinformation, which ultimately subverts and redirects Arab American feminist energy and analysis.

Moreover, the concentrated focus on the oppressive nature of the indigenous patriarchy by hegemonic feminist discourse serves to cloud the system of oppression established by colonial and imperial forces in the region. Indeed, the example of excessive patriarchal oppression has been used on more than one occasion as a justification for occupation of Middle Eastern and Muslim countries by a U.S. imperialistic power. The 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan appropriated white feminist discourse (particularly that of the Feminist Majority) as a key argument in its proclaimed project of liberating Afghan women from the oppression of the Taliban. Yet, the invasion of Afghanistan was not the first time mainstream U.S. feminist rhetoric replicated and reinforced the racist assumptions of an imperialist agenda. During the first Gulf War in 1991, for example, the National Organization of Women (NOW) opposed U.S. involvement in Saudi

Arabia on the basis of its extreme oppression of its women. NOW president Molly Yard connected Saudi Arabia's oppression of women with South Africa's apartheid policies, saying, "We would be outraged if the administration sent American troops to defend South Africa from invasion, ordering black soldiers to 'respect the culture' by bowing their heads in the presence of white racists."<sup>7</sup> Leaving Yard's alarming conflation of sexism and racism in two radically different contexts to one side, the most problematic aspect of this statement is the way in which it inevitably silences the very women it purports to represent. Rather than critically examining the United States' own oppressive policies in the region, it overlooks a U.S. project of domination in order to focus on the easy target of an "extreme" Arab Islamic patriarchy.<sup>8</sup>

### THE POLITICS OF INVISIBILITY

This example illustrates the double bind that constrains Arab and Arab American women within the politics of invisibility. Either they are relegated to the silencing image of the veil, or they are kept busy engaging with, and working to correct, popular U.S. misunderstandings of Arab womanhood. The politics of invisibility, then, is the complicated process by which Arab and Arab American women are doubly silenced by the very categories that claim to give them voice. "Invisible", in this context, does not mean that Arab women are not visible; on the contrary, they are represented prolifically as veiled women, as harem slaves (particularly in the 1970s in the context of the 1973 oil embargo), and as exotic belly dancers (in contexts as varied as the popular sitcom *I Dream of Jeannie* to a 2002 *Camel* cigarette advertising scheme entitled "exotic pleasures"). However, these popular representations of Arab womanhood serve to circumscribe Arab women within a totalizing shroud of silence and oppression (recent images of the veil are only the most obvious examples). They speak for Arab women's realities in the shorthand of stereotypical categories. Furthermore, these categories of representation are insidious in that they present themselves as accurate and authentic reflections of Arab women's realities, and they are deployed by the dominant discourse in the same way – as proof of the condition of Arab womanhood.

Because these images are so pervasive, Arab American feminists must first point them out as stereotypes before they can explain the problematic and damaging aspects of these stereotypes. The continuous need to identify and deconstruct stereotypical images of Arab womanhood functions as a double silencing of Arab American feminists whose energy could be better spent theorizing new spaces of possibility for Arab American women rather than responding to the misinformation promulgated by the dominant discourse. In the contemporary context, the proliferation of the symbol of the veil as a marker of invisibility has enabled the kind of response demonstrated by former NOW president Molly Yard; it is a hegemonic positionality that wants to speak for, rather than speaking to, Arab women. To the extent that Arab and Arab American women, and particularly Arab and Arab American feminists, have been able to carve a space in which to give voice to their own issues and concerns, they have found much of that space reluctantly, yet inevitably, filled with corrective responses to mainstream misunderstandings. This double bind embeds Arab American feminism within a restrictive and limiting framework that funnels its energy back into the system it is critiquing rather than affording it new spaces for creative possibility.

The implications of this sort of politics of invisibility are explored by Japanese American writer Mitsuye Yamada in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color*. “No matter what we say or do, the stereotype still hangs on. I am weary of starting from scratch each time I speak or write, as if there were no history behind us, of hearing that among the women of color, Asian women are the least political, or the least oppressed, or the most polite.”<sup>9</sup> I reference Yamada here because of the way in which she writes about the “double invisibility” of Asian American women.<sup>10</sup> As I flesh out what I mean by the politics of invisibility in relation to Arab American women, Yamada provides a useful model for analyzing the insidiousness of a stereotype that reinforces the image of Asian American, or for my purposes Arab American, women as already inscribed in a space of silence or oppression. Because of the unobtrusive nature of this image or stereotype, it must be outlined and highlighted before it can be resisted, and because of its pervasiveness, it must be invoked and addressed with every interaction. Yamada is referring to the problematic position of defensiveness into which she is cast when she talks of being “weary of starting from scratch.” Arab American feminists must also “start from scratch” in the sense that they must first re-claim a subjectivity from the stereotypes of silence and oppression in order to then challenge the assumptions that those stereotypes make.

The complicated ways in which the politics of invisibility impact the articulation of Arab American feminism was brought home to me during my own experience at the 2001 NWSA conference. Though I was giving a paper about Arab American literature, I was scheduled on a panel entitled “Construction of Gender and Sexuality in International Literature”, thereby highlighting the way in which an Arab identity is interpreted as foreign even when it is, in fact, American. The conference organizers did not seem to have a framework for understanding Arabs as Americans. Yet, it was the audience response to my paper that gave the clearest indication of how Arab American feminism is affected by the politics of invisibility. The majority of the audience seemed to have chosen the “International Literature” panel in order to hear the other presenter’s paper, entitled “Performing Heterosexuality in *Jane Eyre*: What if Jane is a Lesbian?” I make this claim based on the audience members’ active engagement in the discussion following the *Jane Eyre* talk. Their response to my paper, then, was telling. With the exception of some questions from two women who were familiar with Arab American literature, I received two main questions from the *Jane Eyre* crowd. One was from a white woman who wanted to know why Arab Americans look down on her, or have a negative reaction, when she tells them that she is a belly dancer. The other was from a white woman who wanted to know if the anthology *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (a central part of my talk) or any other Arab American literature included any discussion of queer issues or sexuality (they do). The latter question (and this is why I have included so much background about the subject of the other presentation) made it clear that the audience members seemed to have no frame of reference for the category – Arab American women writers – that I was addressing, and, therefore, responded to my talk by asking about the identity category for which they *did* have a frame of reference (sexuality).

Remember that I was scheduled on a panel that was meant to discuss international literature, so the American nationality of the writers was subsumed under the organizers’ understanding of Arabs as foreign within a U.S. context. Moreover, I argue that the women in the audience had no frame of reference for

understanding Arab or Arab American women *as writers*, since the activity of writing requires a subjectivity that is incompatible with the frames of reference (the veiled woman, the harem girl, or the belly dancer) that are widely available for understanding Arab and Muslim womanhood. Indeed, these dominant interpretive categories were clearly in play for the woman who posed the former question about belly dancing, by which she was asking for validation and reassurance about her performance of the belly dance as a white woman. In addition to inappropriately expecting me to speak for all Arab and Arab American women, her question exemplified the fact that the only way in which Arab womanhood can be understood is in terms of the already entrenched stereotypical markers of Arab female sexuality, particularly because I made no mention of belly dancing in my talk.

So far, I have focused my discussion largely on the symbol of the veil in U.S. culture. However, the veil is only one of three main categories through which an understanding of Arab womanhood is filtered in the U.S.; it is joined by the images of the belly dancer and the harem girl or harem slave. When Leila Ahmed went to the NWSA conference in 1980, representations of the harem were more popular because they fit in nicely with the predominant stereotype of the greedy and licentious Arab oil sheik that became popular after the 1973 oil embargo. I gave my paper in the midst of the rising popularity of American interpretations of belly dance and the increasing popularity of belly dance exercise classes. The image of the veil was also certainly visible, but it had not yet reached the level of saturation it would just months later after the events of September 11, 2001 and the retaliatory invasion of Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, regardless of which stereotypical category was invoked during my presentation, the fact remains that the audience had either no frame of reference for understanding Arab womanhood (in the case of Arab American women writers, for example), or it could only understand Arab women through the filter of pre-existing stereotypical categories (like the harem, the veil, and the belly dancer). Like Yamada, I felt as if I were “starting from scratch” in that I had to name the stereotypes of Arab women *as* stereotypes before I could begin the work of dispelling them. In this regard, then, the politics of invisibility has impacted Arab American women’s lives and, by extension, the articulation of Arab American feminism in insidious and complicated ways. It is not simply that Arab American women are not seen because they are, as U.S. popular culture would have us believe, “hidden” behind the veil. Rather, as the coffee barista’s comment indicates, it is a matter of not being credited with the possibility of existence. Arab feminism appears as an oxymoron not only because Arab women are perceived to be silent and submissive according to the mythology of the veil. It is an oxymoron because Arab women are not afforded the subjectivity of thinking, theorizing individuals. They are not merely silenced; they are wholly displaced and, therefore, ontologically elided, by the empty forms of veiled women, harem slaves, and belly dancers. Arab and Arab American women as actively engaged in the process of creating and producing knowledge is incomprehensible to those who understand Arab and Arab American women through the filmy lens of stereotypical categories. My own experience at the 2001 NWSA conference speaks to the ways in which Arab American feminism does not seem to register on the radar screen of the mainstream movement. With no frame of reference by which to understand it, it is either ignored or it is displaced by the very stereotypes it seeks to critique.

### THE CUTTING EDGE OF INVISIBILITY

Three months after the 2001 NWSA conference, following the events of September 11, the politics of invisibility would take on another dimension in relation to Arab American feminisms in the academy. The explosion of stories and images of Afghan women's brutal oppression at the hands of the Taliban (an issue that had utterly failed to garner public and widespread U.S. interest for years) in many ways highlighted the hyper-visibility of Muslim (often conflated with Arab) womanhood. Again, it was not a matter of not being seen. Indeed, the U.S. public seemed to believe that it was finally seeing Muslim and Arab women in a way that it had not seen them previously. However, the seemingly sudden hyper-visibility of Muslim and Arab women's lives had, predictably, shrouded their realities even further. The sheer proliferation of the image of the veil, coupled with the way in which it was reproduced as a monolithic signifier of the oppression of Muslim and Arab women, effectively displaced any potential for understanding the complicated network of power relations, patriarchal and imperial, that impact women's lives in Middle Eastern and Muslim countries.

In September of 2001, I was teaching a course at Emory University entitled "American Identities", and as I struggled to acknowledge and voice the disturbing reality of violence and racism enacted against the Arab American community as a corrective to my students' assured assertions that hostility and hate crimes did not exist, I realized something about the mechanics of invisibility. Despite evidence and news stories to the contrary, my students could not see the violent and dangerous reality of Arab Americans' lives after 9/11, in part, because their understanding of the Arab American community was already determined by the dominant narrative of terrorism. As with the mythology of the veil, the narrative of terrorism had prefigured my students' understanding of Arab Americans. Their knowledge about Arab Americans was informed by the prolific image of the terrorist, which was incompatible with the realities of hate crimes and victimization that I wanted them to acknowledge. The conditions of Arab Americans' lives were already displaced by the interpretive categories by which they had come to be understood.

Regrettably, my colleagues' responses to me and my work after September 11 highlighted the problematic ways in which Arab American women's realities continued to be elided. The immediate connection that my peers made to my work on representations of Arab womanhood in U.S. popular culture after the horrific events of September 11 was to suggest, with a tinge of jealousy, that my work was at least now "cutting edge." I did not, and still do not, know how to respond to heartbreaking destruction and grief with the consideration of how I might capitalize on or benefit from that destruction and grief. Yet the "cutting edge" comment once again exemplifies the way in which the hyper-visibility of Arab womanhood actually worked to further eclipse Arab and Arab American women's realities. The assumption that my work was now suddenly interesting or useful in a way that it hadn't been before participates in the construction of 9/11 as *the* defining event for perceptions and representations of Arab women, and, in so doing, ignores the history of representations of Arab womanhood in the U.S.

Perhaps most problematic, however, is the suggestion that I can capitalize, through my research, on the increased attention given to representations of Arab women since it condones and reinforces an uncritical commodification of such representations. Even if unwittingly, it advocates for the appropriation of



representations of Arab womanhood at the expense of examining the realities that characterize Arab women's lives. It therefore participates in the politics of invisibility by once again validating the stereotypes of the dominant discourse while denying the possibility of an honest articulation of Arab women's realities.

### NWSA REVISITED

One of the most troubling side effects of this sort of response to Arab American feminism is the way in which it can transform an active and urgent engagement with Arab and Arab American women's lives into a dangerous complacency that ultimately re-inscribes the most detrimental aspects of the politics of invisibility. At the very moment that the rich complexity of Arab and Arab American women's lives might find a space for expression in mainstream discourse, it is quickly shut into tired, rigid categories of representation. My suggestion for responding to, or resisting, this sort of politics of invisibility actually brings me back to my discussion of the "Women In Islam" panel at the 1980 NWSA conference. In the context of a hegemonic white women's movement, the panelists addressing Arab women's issues at the 1980 NWSA conference spent much of their time working to dispel mainstream U.S. feminist narratives that cast Middle Eastern women as unwilling victims of a seemingly hyper-patriarchal society. In so doing, they were employing a critical perspective that not only paralleled the U.S. Third World women's movement, but also participated in a mode of analysis that paralleled the experience of women of color at the 1981 NWSA conference, as documented by Chela Sandoval in her article "Feminism and Racism: A Report on the 1981 National Women's Studies Association Conference."<sup>11</sup> Sandoval's account of the way in which women of color organized in response to the "Women Respond to Racism" theme of the 1981 NWSA conference offers a useful framework for understanding the work that has already been done by Arab American feminists. Arab American feminists were not clearly identified with U.S. Third World feminists in the context of the early 1980s feminist movement, in part, because of the way in which Arab American feminists seemed to be locked into a defensive stance vis-à-vis the mainstream U.S. feminist movement. However, they were engaged in a similar project.

Though this articulation of Arab American feminism, like the "Women In Islam" panel that Leila Ahmed saw in 1980, was caught up in a corrective, and, therefore, oppositional position in relation to the white women's movement, there was a way in which it did not yet seem to know it was responding to the racism of that movement. In other words, it hadn't yet been afforded the space to critique the standpoint of the hegemonic feminist movement. Even so, the solutions offered by the National Alliance for American Third World Women, which organized out of the 1981 NWSA conference, speak to the strategies and skills that continue to be developed by Arab American feminists as well.

In many ways, the fact that Arab American feminism has had to construct itself negatively has facilitated the development of its greatest strength: an oppositional consciousness. Sandoval's comments regarding the experiences of feminists of color at the 1981 conference can apply to Arab American feminists as well: "U.S. third world feminists must recognize that our learned sensitivity to the mobile webs of power is a skill that, once developed, can become a sophisticated form of oppositional consciousness ... which creates the opportunity for flexible, dynamic and tactical responses."<sup>12</sup> This sort of flexible, dynamic, and tactical

response to power is what Ahmed witnessed at the “Women In Islam” panel in 1980, and it is the type of critical consciousness and resistance that Arab American feminists have continued to cultivate in response to multiple forms of oppression propagated by racism in the white feminist movement, sexism in Arab and Arab American communities, and the racist, sexist, and patronizing effects of imperialistic projects of so-called liberation. What Arab American feminists need most urgently is to continue to use the skills and tools we have gained from an oppositional consciousness in order to forge new spaces of possibility for the lives of Arab and Arab American women. We must learn from third world feminists who “are calling for new subjectivity, a political revision that denies any *one* perspective as the only answer, but instead posits a shifting tactical and strategic subjectivity that has the capacity to re-center depending upon the forms of oppression to be confronted.”<sup>13</sup>

It is not enough to name the politics of invisibility, or to point out the problematic shortcomings of predominant stereotypes about Arab womanhood. The powerful and potent shorthand of the mythologies of the veil, the harem, the belly dancer, and the terrorist are not going to disappear – they are too useful as interpretive categories. Therefore, we must re-inhabit those categories of representation in order to re-animate them as oppositional and resistant forms. Simply advocating for a rejection of current stereotypical categories would inevitably lead to the establishment of equally limiting categories of representation. The work of Arab American feminists, then, must not focus on creating a new set of rigid images by which we can be labeled and understood, but rather on creating a fruitful fluidity that constantly forges new possibilities for understanding the complex realities of Arab and Arab American women’s lives. Utilizing the tools of an oppositional consciousness, we can do the urgent work of carving and crafting new spaces for the expression of Arab American feminisms. We must not simply resist the politics of invisibility that have denied us a full presence; we must reinvent and transform that invisibility into a tool with which we will continue to illustrate the brilliant realities of Arab and Arab American women’s lives.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Miriam Cooke and Margot Badran (eds.), *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> The way in which U.S. discourse about the oppression of Afghan women has been collapsed with a U.S. understanding of Arab and Middle Eastern womanhood highlights a conflation of Muslim and Middle Eastern categories in the popular understanding of the Middle East.

<sup>3</sup> Here I am purposely using the English term veil, rather than culturally specific terms such as *hijab*, *burqa*, etc. because I am referring to the way in which a U.S. interpretation of the concept has collapsed cultural specificity and function into one misperception of the veil as obstacle and barrier and as necessarily oppressive.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), Fadwa el Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy, Resistance*, (Oxford: Berg, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Leila Ahmed, “Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem” in *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 3: p. 521-534, 1982, p. 521.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 522.

<sup>7</sup> Therese Saliba, “Military Presences and Absences” in *Food for Our Grandmothers*. Joanna Kadi, ed. (Boston: South End Press, 1994), p. 131.

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of NOW’s reaction to the Gulf War, see Therese Saliba *ibid*

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<sup>9</sup> Mitsuey Yamada, "Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism" in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1981)p. 71.

<sup>10</sup> Mitsuye Yamada, "Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster: Reflections of an Asian American Woman" in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa,(New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1981), p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> Chela Sandoval, "Feminism and Racism: A Report on the 1981 National Women's Studies Association Conference" in *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990), p. 66.

<sup>12</sup> Sandoval, "Feminism and Racism," p. 66.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 67.

# SCHEHERAZAD'S LEGACY

## ARAB-AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS AND THE RESISTING, HEALING, AND CONNECTING POWER OF THEIR STORYTELLING

Amal Abdelrazek\*

You can hate someone whose story you know. But with every honest, heartfelt, true reflection of a human life, you can hold onto your hatred a little less.<sup>1</sup>

I will never forget the *New York Times* photo essay on December 31, 2001, depicting a veiled woman captioned “The Face of Islam”, appearing in juxtaposition to photographs of the crumbling Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, linking the oppression of Arab Muslim women to terrorist violence. In fact, there has been a flare of media coverage of Afghan women covered in their burqas since the “war on terror” that followed September 11, 2001. The plight of these Afghan women is depicted as the norm for all Arab women who are said to suffer from an oppressive and misogynistic religion and patriarchal social system. It is important to note, however, that Afghan women are not Arab women and that not all Arabs are Muslims. Hence, one of the challenges that Arab-American women face is that American society tends to lump all women from Muslim countries into the category of “Arab” (as in the case with Afghan women) and to view all “Arabs” as “Muslims”, and all Muslims as practicing a particular rigid kind of Islam.<sup>2</sup> This puts Arab-American women in a unique position because they are faced with the conflation of ethnic and religious identity while, in fact, not all Arabs are Muslims, and all Muslims are not Arabs. Islam is represented as monolithic, and Arab women, whether Muslims or not, as passive victims of their religion or culture. Such images impact the position of Arab diasporic communities in America

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where anti-Arab sentiments prevail. I, for example, am tired of the way people gaze at me in the grocery store as if I were an alien coming from a different planet either blindly following my husband who is married to a thousand other wives or hiding grenades in my wide and loose clothes. Arab women are perceived as either the “exotic”, “the sexually loose”, or the “meek” and oppressed creature coming from the un/underdeveloped world. One can see how people become shocked to learn that I am an Arab woman yet educated with a graduate degree. I am a mother of three children, and I am the only wife of an Arab man who is not a terrorist and who loves and respects me. More importantly, these people are astounded to know that I am veiled yet call myself a feminist, as if the word “feminist” and “veil” were mutually exclusive. Moreover, Arab-American women must not only resist American or Orientalist views of women, but they also have to resist Arab fundamentalists who misinterpret the Islamic religion to serve their own patriarchal interests and who see women’s bodies as a symbol of procreation and communal dignity to be manipulated and its activities codified. Arab-American women are caught between the globalized image of femininity or female *beauty* as a commodity in the West and the Arab fundamental notion of femininity as “protected” by men and hidden behind the veil.

An effective way to fight such misconceptions about Arab women is not by using bombs or guns but by using a more effective weapon: **words**. Powerfully using words, Arab-American writers like Mohja Khaf,<sup>3</sup> Diana Abu-Jaber,<sup>4</sup> and Suheir Hammad,<sup>5</sup> resist being defined, naming their own experiences. Arab-American writers, immigrants, and descendants of immigrants, are starting to open up with an outpouring of their own voices, telling their own stories. They have started to move out of the shadows, winning awards, celebrating Arab-American literary festivals, and publishing literary journals such as *Al-Jadid*, *Jusoor*, and *Mizna*. However, efforts to analyze Arab-American women’s lives and literary products are still in their infancy. Moreover, although Arab-American poets have been included in certain multicultural and American poetry anthologies and some Arab-American novels have been published, these works remain absent from feminist discourse and literary criticism in general. Prior to September 11, the prevailing stereotype of Arab-Americans was somewhat negative but not particularly well articulated. Since the dramatic and terrifying event of September 11, Arab-Americans have become subject to discrimination, negative stereotyping, and hostility in the United States. It is thus particularly timely to give voice to silenced and marginalized Arab-American women writers who are wielding their pens to chronicle the racism, oppression, and marginalization they experience in the United States and who are beginning to uncover the particularities of their own ethnic histories.

Like Scheherazad, Arab-American women writers are telling their stories over and over again, using them to change the dominant configuration of their identities. In telling their own stories, contemporary Arab-American writers take a stand against both the Orientalist and Islamic or Arab fundamentalist streams. Both of these perspectives obscure the complex web of gender, ethnic, and religious differences that separate rather than unite Arab and Arab-American women. Whereas earlier Arab-American writers tried to claim a space within white American culture through various strategies of assimilation, which often involved breaking away from their traditions and homelands, contemporary Arab-American women writers resist assimilation. They, through their powerful art, critique the intellectual tendencies that might be understood as making concessions to fundamentalist regimes and movements--in effect abandoning Arab women to their

iron rule. They rebel against such imposing practices that view women as bodies that should be covered or uncovered in order to suit national or international consequences. Using their artistic writings, Arab-American writers resist the East, with its fundamental regimes, and the West that views Arab women as the domesticated, subjugated, and unenlightened Other.

Although ethnicity has often been associated with an exotic otherness or with a sense of authenticity that might be attributed to minority cultures or alien religions, contemporary Arab-American women writers emphasize hybridity and diaspora, rather than roots, as a primary means of resisting essentialized identity politics.<sup>6</sup> Their works shift away from narrow identity politics determined by static notions of race and gender towards a rearticulated politics of difference. Although difference is often constructed and understood in racial or color terms, I argue that a more subtle, and in some ways more damning, designation of difference is affixed to the Arab—who is designated not only as alien but also as neither an autonomous nor an individual person. Arab-American writers, as appears in the different speakers in Kahf's poems, seek to challenge the dualism or opposition between self and other by questioning the stereotypes that constitute Arab women as “different” from Americans. They promote a dynamic identity of negotiation and resistance, celebrating rather than denying difference, a kind of difference that is not determined by a dominant culture and that breaks down the dichotomy between self and other—for in every self there is an other and in every other there is a self.

Another way Arab-American women writers resist essentialized identity politics is through the concept of hybridity, refusing to be restricted to only one right position, breaking down the center/margin dichotomy, and opening up spaces between the center and margins. Contemporary Arab-American writers tell their stories in an attempt to replace the Orientalist notion of the Arab Muslim woman as synonymous with passivity by notions of Arab women as active agents in the third space where hybridized individuals, erasing any claims for inherent cultural purity, inhabit the realm of an “in-between” reality marked by shifting psychic and cultural boundaries.

Finally, it is important to note that these writers use their words as a means of building bridges to the “othering” and, more specifically, post 9/11 American culture. By telling their untold stories of struggle, pain, and agony, these Arab and Arab-American women hope to reach out to others who either ignore or demonize them. Hence, the recounting of their personal stories in their poetry and novels aims to reduce inter-group conflicts and to enhance peace building and reconciliation between different groups who are otherwise barred from reaching out to each other by their racial and religious prejudices. Poetry and storytelling play a key role in resolving these racial and religious conflicts by engaging both the self and other and by providing a work of art that is both cognitively and emotionally compelling. Contemporary Arab-American writers, using the healing power of words to tell their stories, seek to open doors to an understanding of their differences and resist their own image that has been distorted and demonized by the harmful influence of prejudice.

### SCHEHERAZAD'S LEGACY

Arab women have been referred to not only as the daughters of Aisha, Prophet Muhammad's wife, but also of the legendary character of Scheherazad of the *One Thousand and One Nights*. These women have been depicted as

inconsequential or have been erased. In the case of Aisha, patriarchal segments of Islam fail to acknowledge her important role in the life of the Prophet and the development of Islam. Meanwhile, the West has reproduced the stories of one thousand and one nights (Alladin, Sinbad, etc) but left out the female narrator from these tales. Aisha is a woman who, despite her young age, was the first consultant to the Prophet on all political and social matters. She is the first woman to narrate the Prophet's Hadiths and to teach both men and women the teachings of Islam.<sup>7</sup> Aisha is also the woman who led the Prophet's army into battle after his death. We, Arab women, are also the daughters of Scheherazad who, through her narrative skills, story telling, and the power of her words, managed to heal the king's ailing psyche.

Scheherazad is the vizier's daughter who volunteered to marry the despotic king, Shahrayar, and to save the kingdom's women from the cycle of his violence. Shahrayar was cheated on by his wife as soon as he departed for a hunting trip. Upon his return, he was informed about his wife's betrayal by his brother who himself had also suffered from the same fate with his own wife. Afterwards, the two royal brothers set out on a journey in search of another man who had been betrayed by his wife and thus dishonored. Instead, they discover a superhuman genie who tells them his story of having suffered from the same blow by the captive mistress that he had kidnapped on her wedding night and imprisoned within a secure seven-lock chest. Learning this story, the brothers regain their confidence in their male egos and return home, deciding never to let any other woman betray them again. Their plan was that the king, Shahrayar, who now believes in the mischievous and disloyal nature of all women, would marry a virgin each night and kill her in the morning, thus preventing her from ever hurting him again. This vicious cycle of sex and death would be repeated until there are no more virgins in the nations, thus satisfying the King's simultaneous sexual and revengeful desires.

Scheherazad however, volunteers to risk her life to cure the king's ruptured ego and to save the women of the whole nation. After a lapse of a thousand and one nights, hence the title of *One Thousand and One Nights*, filled with the saving narrative skills of Scheherazad, she is able to change the king's distorted views of women, thus ending his killing spree. She has proven to him that not all women are deceptive. Shahrayar becomes so grateful to her that he orders his courtiers to record Scheherazad's stories in golden letters in a written manuscript to be preserved in the royal safe. It is hence through the power of Scheherazad's words and her narrative skills that she manages to tame Shahrayar's violent desires and to cure his sick psyche. Instead of killing her, he feels captivated by the web of stories that she weaves every night. Like Scheherazad, whose role is to correct the King's clouded judgment of all women, Arab-American women writers are telling their stories, seeking to subvert the dominant paradigm that understands Arab women only as oppressed. Just as all women were seen by the king as treacherous and unfaithful, all Arab women are seen by the West as oppressed.

Mohja Kahf in her poetry collection, *Emails from Scheherazad*, builds on the legendary character of Scheherazad and presents a modern Arab-American one. "Hi, babe. It's Scheherazad. I'm back/For the millennium and living in Hackensack, New Jersey." She feels proud that it is through her stories that she is able to kill "the beast of doubt in [the king]" instead of letting him behead her.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Scheherazad's stories were not merely "bedtime stories/that will please and soothe, /invents fairy creatures/that will grant you wishes." Instead, Scheherazad

subverts her role as a meek female storyteller and locks the king with his arrogant male ego in the web of her stories.

I told a story. He began to listen and I found  
That story led to story. Powers unleashed,...<sup>9</sup>

By telling the king stories, Scheherazad does not only manipulate the king but she unleashes her artistic skills, uncovering her “true call:” an artist who not only fights for her rights and for the rights of her countrywomen but also who stands up for her own right in having her works break the shackles of the king’s safe and get out to the public.

In Kahf’s modern version of Scheherazad, she gets divorced from the king and breaks beyond the oral narrative tradition that she managed in the past. She moves beyond the private realm of orality into the public realm of the written and published word. What Scheherazad could not achieve in the traditional world of the ninth century (the date of the first published manuscript of *the Nights*), Kahf vows to pursue with zealotry. She insists on having a work of art that will never be subject to erasure or forgetfulness.

A thousand days  
Later, we got divorced. He’s settled down  
& wanted a wife & not so much an artist.  
I wanted publication. It was hardest....  
I taught him to heal  
His violent streak through stories, after all,  
And he helped me uncover my true call.<sup>10</sup>

Though it appears that the story of Scheherazad is one against women, it actually marks the creation of one of the strongest and cleverest heroines in world literature. Scheherazad triumphs because she is endlessly inventive and artistically creative. The spirit of Scheherazad is forever present in the Arab-American literature by women, who use their art and storytelling as a powerful means as a form of resistance, defining themselves, naming their own experiences, and like Scheherazad, teaching others “to heal/ [the] violent streak”, killing “the beast of doubt” in them. Through telling their own story, Arab-American women seek to voice the narratives of the dispossessed and the subjugated. It is their alternative to being marginalized and excluded from historical narratives. Their storytelling, writing from outside power, resists dominant discourses that consistently refuse to include their stories. Arab-American women writers illustrate the potential of the storyteller as a subversive figure, challenging, and subverting “authoritative” dominant discourses from without.

### THE HEALING, CONNECTING, AND RESISTING POWER OF STORES

According to Webster’s dictionary, a narrative is a “discourse, or an example of it, designed to connect a succession of happenings.”<sup>11</sup> An important word in this definition is the word “connect.” A story usually connects not only events but also the past with the present and the teller to the listener. A culture’s story, thus, creates a shared history, linking people in time and event as actors, tellers, and audience. Stories are not merely chronicles of what happened, they are also about meanings. People are drawn to stories for a number of reasons: they can



entertain us, help us organize our thoughts, fill us with emotion, and keep us in suspense. At times, stories can heal when one feels “broken”, moving one towards a new psychological understanding of self and other. This is the case when health professionals employ narrative therapy in their work to help their patients reframe their life in a more holistic and integrated way. Moreover, the recounting of personal stories in situations, which aim to reduce inter-group conflicts and to enhance peace building and reconciliation between different groups, has been used within the last decade in a number of contexts around the world. Examples are the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC),<sup>12</sup> which was established in South Africa in 1995 to start healing the deep wounds of the Apartheid years; PRIME--the Peace Research Institute in the Middle East that is a jointly run Palestinian-Israeli research non-governmental organization and that involves narratives and story telling as it appears in the Oral History Refugee project.<sup>13</sup> Telling one’s story, through oral or written means, has proved to be a significant experience in people’s lives, playing a key role in resolving conflicts, engaging both the self and other, and providing a narrative that is both cognitively and emotionally compelling. The open and honest recounting of one’s life story, and the willingness to be an emphatic listener for the other, even if this other has caused one’s group pain and suffering in the past, can open the door for peace building and coexistence.

By telling their own stories and by speaking the language of art and poetry, Arab-American women aspire to find themselves.

All women speak two languages:  
The language of men  
And the language of silent suffering.  
Some women speak a third,  
The language of queens.  
They are marvelous<sup>14</sup>

In this poem, “My Marvelous Friends”, Mohja Kahf describes her Arab-American fellow women writers as powerful, independent, and active contributors to the community. However they are not only wives and mothers, they are also teachers, artists, engineers. These women writers are, above all, like poetry, “creatures of beauty and passion, /powerful workers in love.”<sup>15</sup> They, like poems, and through their poetry that they use as an effective resistant weapon, affect people with their beauty and powerful passion. They are a work of art in themselves. Arab-American writers, thus, are like a “seamstress” sewing together the poems that tell their own stories of love, marriage, divorce, and in/justice. These women writers act as the “rescuers ...of the weak and the wounded.” They save not only the “shrinking” women who suffer from the injustice of male and social patriarchy but they are also the rescuers of the “fallen knights.” These knights are fallen because they are committing the sin of misinterpreting the holy books whose meanings they distort in order to maintain their dominant roles over women. With their poetry, their powerful work in love, passion, and beauty, these women are capable of becoming “swimmers/in dangerous waters, defiers of sharks.”<sup>16</sup>

These women writers feel that they are not forced to choose between passively keeping silent and minimizing the consequences of Arab and Islamic fundamentalism or siding with the harrying forces of the United States with its wanton bombing of Sudan and Afghanistan and its continuing assaults on Iraq. Using the healing power of words to tell their stories, Arab-American writers seek to open door to an understanding of their differences and resist their own image

that has been distorted and demonized by the harmful power of prejudice. These women writers, as appears in Mohja Kahf's and Suheir Hammad's poetry and Diana Abu-Jaber's novel, *Crescent*, explain notions such as the veil, the Arab female body, difference, and doubleness.

### VEILED OR NOT, THAT IS NOT THE QUESTION

The common American feminist project of rescuing Arab women from an oppressive religion that imposes a certain code of dress is challenged by Arab-American women writers. Many westerners use the veil to identify Muslim culture with women's exclusion and exploitation, yet do not apply the same standards to conservative Christian and Jewish women who *choose* to cover their heads when entering their churches or synagogues or to their own dress codes. As Kahf writes:

Hijab Scene#2

"You people have such restrictive dress for women",  
she said, hobbling away in three-inch heels and panty hose  
to finish out another pink-collar temp pool day.<sup>17</sup>

As an Arab woman living in the United States I have two recurring experiences. Either I stand out as an oddly dressed woman, one who is linked nowadays to terrorists, or I am rendered invisible. People *choose* not to see me because they believe I am too inferior to them. I come from this "backward" part of the world. To continue with Kahf:

"Would you like to join the PTA?" she asked,  
tapping her clipboard with her pen.  
"I would", I said, but it was no good,  
she wasn't seeing me.

...

"Dammit, Jim, I'm a Muslim woman, not a Klingon!"  
--but the positronic force field of hijab  
jammed all her cosmic coordinates.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, people tend to be blinded by their assumptions and their reliance upon the negative and demonizing stereotypes propagated by the media. Instead of viewing Arab women as "different" they see them as "strange" just because they have a different culture or because *some* of them dress differently.

Hijab Scene #1

"You dress strange", said a tenth-grade boy with bright  
blue hair  
to the new Muslim girl with the headscarf in homeroom,  
his tongue-rings clicking on the "tr" in "strange."<sup>19</sup>

Trinh Min-Ha argues that the ideology of dominance, based on sex or culture, has long governed western notions of identity, notions that rely on the concept of an essential, authentic core that remains hidden to one's consciousness and that requires elimination of all that is considered foreign, that is to say "non-I, other."<sup>20</sup> Min-Ha thus introduces a new model of identity that allows for the negotiation of similarities and differences. Like Min-ha, I argue that a clear dividing line cannot be made between "I and not I, he and she, between depth and surface,

or vertical and horizontal identity, between us here and them over there.” Applying this notion of difference to the concept of veiling Trinh Minh-Ha pointedly says:

If the act of unveiling has a liberating potential, so does the act of veiling. It all depends on the context in which such an act is carried out or, more precisely, on how and where women see dominance. Difference should be defined neither by the dominant sex nor by the dominant culture. So when women decide to lift the veil, one can say that they do so in defiance of their men’s oppressive rights to their bodies. But when they decide to keep or put on the veil they once took off, they might do so to reappropriate their space or to claim a new difference in defiance of genderless, hegemonic, centered standardization.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, I personally believe the veil can be liberating in several aspects. I feel empowered by the veil that I am wearing out of respect to my own faith and that is liberating me from the dictates of “male” fashion. Moreover, according to Marnia Lazreg, “the veil became women’s refuge from the French denuding gaze” under colonial rule in Algeria.<sup>22</sup> Today women still wear the veil in Algeria as a rejection of the persisting influence of French colonialism and Western ideas, but more are defining it as a sign of religious readiness, an indication of personal religious commitment.<sup>23</sup> Veiled or not, I believe that my body is my own business and that people have to know me for what I am and not for what I look like. Whether or not Arab and Arab-American women cover their hair should be their own concern. Their hair is their own and their decision to cover it or not should also be their own.

My hair is neither sacred nor cheap,  
Neither the cause of your disarray  
Nor the path to your liberation<sup>24</sup>

### MY BODY IS MY OWN BUSINESS

An Arab-American, however, cannot have her story heard unless she acknowledges herself as an integrated identity whose body and soul solely belong to her. Hence, Arab-American Scheherazads do not only seek to alter the American misconceptions of the Arab woman but also to heal the ailing consciousness of Arab men who claim to have divine rights. Arab-American writers critique the view that a woman’s expressions of her desires and the pursuit of her interests contradict the interests of man and challenges man’s “God-given rights” over woman. Through her power of story telling, the speaker in Kahf’s *Emails from Scheherazad* hopes to correct the misconception of men that “the sun is all for them/and the water is all for them.” She rebels against men who think “the earth of green and gold and God/is all for them”, restricting women to “one small spot/between four walls for all the women of the world.” More importantly, the narrator hopes that through telling her own story, she would affect the sick mentality of those men who “kill” her by trying to silence her and by depriving her of all her rights as a woman

Men kill me  
How, if a woman takes one ray of the sun  
Or cuts a river through the water,  
They accuse her of violating  
The Copernican order,

Of upsetting the orbits of the planets  
And the orbit of the pilgrims at the Ka'ba<sup>25</sup>

Talking back to Arab males and Western prejudiced interpretations of Islam and of Arab culture that claim that a woman's first and foremost duty is to her husband, the narrator in Kahf's "The Woman Dear to Herself" asserts that a woman's first duty is towards her self. It is traditionally acceptable that an Arab woman be perceived as successful by Arab culture only if her primary role is as wife and mother. She realizes herself through her husband and her children in whom she completely loses herself. Talking back against such a tradition, the narrator of the following poem affirms that,

The woman dear to herself does not lose herself  
In the presence of man,  
Woman, or child  
....  
In love she remains whole  
She doesn't chop herself like an onion  
She doesn't peel herself and sweep away the dry peelings<sup>26</sup>

Kahf asserts the importance of women having a self-integrated identity before she thinks of her relationship with others. Many Arab women have been taught that their individual selves have to be relegated because their priority is to become wives and mothers. Their only way to find themselves is through losing themselves in their husband and children's lives. In a rebellious mood, Kahf's poem urges women, especially Arab women who think of the female body as a taboo that should never be addressed, to take good care of their bodies of which they should be proud. She emphasizes, more importantly, a woman's right over her own body, knowing "the geography of her body/and how to give good directions home/to those whom she selects for company."<sup>27</sup> Thus, a wholly integrated and dignified woman, instead of losing herself in every man or child, should be living in the "heart/of every man/woman, and child" while remaining dear to herself. Kahf rejects the restrictions of labels as "Flags and banners" that only make of her body a "prisoner[s] of war."<sup>28</sup> The poet claims the right over her own body, thus rebuffing any oppressive voices that declare control over Arab women's bodies – whether Arab patriarchy or Western feminism.

My body is not your battleground  
My hair is neither sacred nor cheap,  
Neither the cause of your disarray  
Nor the path to your liberation  
My hair will not bring progress and clean water  
If it flies unbraided in the breeze  
It will not save us from our attackers  
....  
Untangle your hands from hair  
....  
My body is not your battleground  
My private garden is not your tillage  
My thighs are not highways to your golden city  
....  
My body is not your battleground

Withdraw from the eastern fronts and the western  
Withdraw these armaments and this siege.<sup>29</sup>

### OTHER THAN MYSELF/MY OTHER SELF

Another concept that Arab-American women writers seek to introduce through their stories is what Geertz identifies in another context as the "...difference between a difference and a dichotomy. The first is a comparison and it relates; the second is a severance and it isolates."<sup>30</sup> Arab-American women are not quite the same as Arab women or the same as American women, nor are they quite the "other"; they stand in that undetermined threshold place where they constantly drift in and out. The Arab-American woman is, "this inappropriate 'other' or 'same' who moves about with always at least two gestures: that of affirming 'I am like you' while persisting in her difference and that of reminding 'I am different' while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at."<sup>31</sup> It is even more important to note that differences do not only exist between Arab-American women and their "other" Arab or American women but they also exist within the single Arab-American identity. Within every "I" there is an "other" and within every "other" there is an "I."<sup>32</sup>

A character that best explains this point is Sirine, the Arab-American chef in Diana Abu-Jaber's novel *Crescent*.<sup>33</sup> Sirine lives the life of an independent American woman, and yet she cannot overlook the bond she feels towards her Iraqi heritage. When she meets an Arab woman called Rana she at first can only see how strange she looks with her black veil. However, when she gets to know her she realizes that Rana is not strange but that she is only different. The Sirine-Rana relationship reflects the Arab-American woman's hyphenated identity with all its multiplicity and complexity. Rana is Sirine's "other self"; she is "other than [herself]." Indeed, Rana is Sirine's other. She is the "typical Arab", veiled, dark-featured woman who has been forced into marriage to a dominant old, rich man. However, like Sirine, Rana is in actuality an independent woman who has managed to escape from the dominance of her husband and to enjoy the freedom of living on her own. Rana is Sirine's "other" or "same" who embodies a stance of affirming "I am like you" while "persisting in my difference."<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Sirine has traces of Rana's identity. Sirine is an independent woman but, like traditional housewives, Sirine is confined to the kitchen. So, what ingredients of Rana's identity label her as an Arab and what ingredients of Sirine's identity mark her as an American?<sup>35</sup> It is impossible to categorize Sirine as purely American just because she was born and has always lived in America or because she looks American or because she acts American. Similarly it is impossible to label her an Iraqi just because her father was originally from Iraq or because she has been raised by her Iraqi uncle or because she is a chef at a Middle Eastern café.

Likewise, it is hard to call Rana an Arab only because she has dark features or because she is wearing the veil, given that escaping from her husband and coming to live in the United States on her own is anything but "Arab" within Arab or Muslim 'traditions'. It is thus perhaps fairly safe to say that Sirine and Rana are both Arab and American at the same time. Indeed, Rana is different from Sirine but she is also the same as her, and Sirine, though she is partly similar to Rana in her attachment to Middle Eastern cooking and culture, is very different from Rana. Thus, as Minh-Ha says, "differences do not exist only between outsider and insider-

-two entities. They are also at work within the outsider herself or the insider herself--a single entity."<sup>36</sup>

### SPLIT VISION AND DOUBLENESS

Through telling her own story, Arab-American Sirine points to the in-betweenness and doubleness of Arab-American women who, through their position between two cultures, challenge dominant frameworks that define Arab women as a monolithically oppressed group. Sirine, her blond hair and green eyes, looks American rather than Iraqi. She, however, feels that she internally has inherited her father's character. Sirine is straddling identities and cultures. She wonders, if she does not look Iraqi, does that mean that she is not?<sup>37</sup> Would she belong better to the Middle East where flavors, scents, and stories seem to be pulling her? Or is she too American as Hanif, Sirine's Iraqi lover, tells her? Sirine's character points to a common experience of some Arab-Americans trying "to leap the gulch between two worlds, each/with its claim" whilst "impossible for us to choose one over the other."<sup>38</sup>

Another Arab-American woman, critic Lisa Suheir Majaj, whose experience of doubleness and alienation I identify with, says in *Food for Our Grandmothers*:

Although I spent years struggling to define my personal politics of location, I remained situated somewhere between Arab and American cultures--never quite rooted in either, always constrained by both. My sense of liminality grew as I became more aware of the rigid nature of definitions; Arab culture simultaneously claimed and excluded me, while the American identity I longed for retreated from my grasp.<sup>39</sup>

Arab-Americans live at borders that are constantly shifting. The Arab-American community, shaped by a century long history of migration, is remarkably diverse. It includes third and fourth generation Americans as well as recent immigrants; people from different countries and different religious denominations; those who speak no Arabic and those who speak no English; people who identify with the "Arab" side of their heritage and those who identify primarily with the "American" side.

This diversity complicates assessment of what constitutes Arab-American identity. The designation "Arab-American," like any classificatory phrase in ethnic studies, is immediately problematic. It does not adequately describe the large contingent of Arab Canadian authors who are often referred to as Arab-Americans.<sup>40</sup> More importantly, a good amount of work written and received as Arab-American is produced by authors with no Arab background, as is the case with the *Iranian* writer Boodka Gheisar or Bangladeshi writer Monica Ali. The matters of blood relationships and nationality also serve to complicate any simple conception of Arab-American letters. Some writers who have been counted as Arab-American have one Arab grandparent while others who publish in Arab-American forums were born and live in the Middle East. Some are immigrants from the Middle East to America while others emigrate from America to the Middle East.

This tension over identification also involves almost every discussion of Arab-American literature. For some, Arab-American literature involves cultural translation in which literature (usually written in English, although there is another

question about Arab-American literature written in Arabic) celebrates “Arab” themes to American readers. From this perspective, texts that depict “non-Arab” or “Arab taboo” topics (such as homosexuality) may be judged as not really Arab and hence not really Arab-American. For others, Arab-American literature is “American literature” that explores issues of ethnicity. In this case Arab-American literature includes only literature that portrays immigrants’ experiences in the U.S. and the conflicts experienced by second and third generation Arab-Americans. Texts that address issues other than these or that are set in non-U.S. contexts are then not really Arab-American literature. Arab-American literature has, thus, been doubly invisible, partly because there is not a great deal of it and partly because of the lack of recognized categories to make it visible. Like Arab-Americans themselves, Arab-American literature is part of the Arab culture and part of the American culture and, most importantly, it is part of what the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha calls the “space in-between.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, Arab-American women are often challenged by what Majaj calls “split vision”<sup>42</sup> or what W.E.B. DuBois calls “double consciousness”<sup>43</sup> meaning that, as Arab-American writers turn one eye to the American context, the other eye is always turned towards the Middle East, which reveals the contradictions of trying to set neat identity boundaries.

### FROZEN IMAGES

Arab-American women told, are telling, and will always tell their painful story of being subjected to the perception of others that misrepresent them in frozen and distorted images. Mohja Kahf beautifully reflects on the external gaze any Arab woman is subjected to from the moment she sets foot in America, a moment she describes as “hard” not just because of the clash of cultures that results from any kind of immigration but mainly because of the stereotypes Arabs are branded with. She says in her poem “Descent into JFK:”

Descent into New York airspace is hard.

....

If they saw Uncle Shukri  
In his checkered headscarf,  
Like when he let her ride  
Behind him on his motorbike,  
They’d think he was a terrorist.  
They’d never know Khaleda  
Has a Ph.D.  
Because she wears a veil they’ll  
Never see beyond.<sup>44</sup>

In fact, this view of the Arab woman as an illiterate, silenced, and oppressed wife covered from head to toe is not new. Such images date back to colonial times and a few of these images have their origins in the economic, political, and religious conflicts known as the Crusades.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, stereotypes disrupt any clear understanding of the lives of Arab women, both in the Arab world and in America. Susan Muaddi Darraj states that “much of this confusion and misunderstanding stem from the fact that Arab women generally live in the third world<sup>46</sup> countries that are stereotyped as ‘backward’.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Arab women have seldom been presented in American art, literature, song, or film as loving daughters or as involved in the professions, public life, and politics in the Middle East. The

Arab woman in Western popular culture has predominantly been either silenced or depicted as a sexual object, a projection of the suppressed sexual fantasies of eighteenth and nineteenth century Europeans. <sup>48</sup> Arab women have been represented in the harem, in the bath, or depicted as sexually available to Western men. Marsha Hamilton in her essay, "The Arab Woman in U.S. Popular Culture", states that the image of the Middle Eastern woman in the nineteenth century was that "of an alien creature of a different nation and religion, sometimes dark-skinned, and by the late nineteenth century, the symbol of a defeated and occupied empire."<sup>49</sup>

The contemporary Arab-American poet, Suheir Hammad, rejects being enclosed within the frame of the Western male gaze, saying:

Don't wanna be your exotic  
Some delicate fragile colorful bird  
Imprisoned caged  
in a land foreign to the stretch of her wings  
don't wanna be your exotic<sup>50</sup>

Arab and Arab-American women, like Hammad, seek to break free from the image of the exotic "other" that has been imposed on them. Suheir Hammad does not just say "I'm not your exotic", she also emphasizes that her will is at work here. She is not and will not allow herself, or others, to put her in a frame that is not hers. She does not have to look exotic because she looks "different" or dresses "differently" or because she has "different" cultures and traditions that she *wants* to practice in a land "foreign" to the "stretch of her wings."

Arab-American women writers also tell their stories of being misrepresented in frozen images. Kahf's poem "Thawrah des Odalisques at the Matisse Retrospective" is a rebellion against misrepresentation of the Arab woman.<sup>51</sup> The poem is a melodrama where a group of the painted and framed women rebel against being misrepresented and against being subjected not only to the male but to the whole Western gaze; the gaze of the other. The poem starts with Arabic words "Yawm min al-ayyam", meaning once upon a time, recalling Scheherazad and her tradition of story telling. This poem is the story of Arab women who are tired of being fixed in a frame and a position that does not suit or represent them. So, they decide "enough is enough." However, "it wasn't just one day " they decided to rebel, this decision came out of years of silenced agony, of being "uncomfortable in that position" that others have chosen to put them in. The poem points out the great harm that such freezing misrepresentations do to women, and the pain they have to endure such as having "icy nipples and "coughing,/the draft in the gallery had gone straight to their chests." <sup>52</sup> Some women have been suffering from "back aching/a seventy-five year kind of ache" while others have had a "migraine...from all those years/sitting and staring at her goldfish swim in circles/around, around, around, around/till fish was woman and woman fish." These women have thus been subjected to the perception of others who wipe out the individuality of women by seeking to group them into one of two categories: either victimized or exotic and sexual. Having endured and suppressed this pain inside is like having "numb" arms from sleeping on them. Believing in their own powers, the Odalisques "tore down museum banners" which represent the categorizations imposed on Arab women because these labels or "banners" do not really represent Arab women.



Ironically, however, the poet points out that even though Arab women revolt against these frozen images that are supposed to represent them, their voices are still not heard. Instead of listening to these women or seeing them for what they are, people are still only interested in the women's bodies as commodities, giving them movie and magazine offers. No one is really interested in what these women have gone through or in what they are rebelling against: "No one wanted to know about us." In an emotional and aggravated tone, the poet expresses her frustration with all the movements that claim to know Arab women, what they want, and what they are suffering from: "Statements were issued on our behalf/By Arab nationalists, Iranian dissidents, Western feminists."<sup>53</sup> Kahf points to the Western feminist, Islamic, and Arab feminist theories that are not really concerned with Arab women's experiences and that are only theoretically touching upon what these women go through. Arab-American women have to fight two fronts: the Arab and the American. Kahf's poem points to the prejudice Arab women face in America because they are different or because they wear the hijab while serving as "tokens of diversity." She is also annoyed at the Arab patriarchal systems that criticize Arab-Americans for being too westernized or Americanized.

Why had we hung around so long? In the capitals  
Of the Western world so long? With our legs so open?  
You can see les implications dangereuses  
It did no good to tell them we didn't choose the poses  
We were painted in. Or that anyway, our sexuality,  
When we choose to put it into play,  
Is our business<sup>54</sup>

The poet is thus frustrated at the narrow-mindedness of Arabs when it comes to the topic of female sexuality that is perceived as taboo. These Arab-American women protested not against art, but "we just don't want to be made something we're not/It's a lie. The paintings lie about us. We were made to live a lie."<sup>55</sup>

### STEPS ON A STILL-LONG JOURNEY

The question to be asked now is what is to be done to better understand the complicated identity of Arab and Arab-American women without assuming to totally "know" them. I believe that there are a few steps that need to be taken on a still-long journey towards deeper rapprochement that depends on many things, including greater clarity about definitions, the most important of which is that of "feminism."

Feminism is the principle that women have an equal right to the same opportunities as men in all spheres of life. But feminism's content depends on the circumstances of individual women. The meaning of feminism for an American white woman who is fighting for equal pay in her job is completely different from the feminism of a Palestinian woman who is trying to find a safe corner to live in where she can protect her children from gunfire. The reality is that there are different expressions of feminism because women in different countries have different priorities. For some Arab women, the American feminist movement has become too narrowly identified with issues that are not their top priorities, such as abortion and lesbian rights, although to some Arab-American women, these are extremely important issues. Thus, Arab-American women must question what kind

of feminism/s is/are appropriate for Arab-American women, whether feminism is an “inauthentic” import from the West, and whether there is something such as “Third World” feminism or more specifically “Arab feminism.”

Chandra Mohanty says that Western feminisms “appropriate the production of ‘the Third World Women’ as a singular monolithic subject” for a “discursive colonization.” The term “Third World” hence refers to that “stable, ahistorical something that oppresses most if not all of the women in third world countries.”<sup>56</sup> Recent scholarship by Arab-American writers and critics have started to pull away from the pitfalls of essentialism by presenting a different picture of Arab women that focuses on the rich diversity of their experiences and struggles. Writers and activists have cultivated “Arab feminism,”<sup>57</sup> which is necessary when studying the lives of Arab women as they confront gender-specific issues that are different from those faced by their First World counterparts.<sup>58</sup> Arab women everywhere are struggling to construct a future when justice and peace will no longer seem impossible dreams. Arab and Arab-American feminists focus on one of the very basic rights women are supposed to enjoy, the right to survive. With the bombings, killings, and continuing building of Israeli settlements in Palestine, theft of water as well as of land in Iraq, Palestine, and other occupied locations, the concerns and priorities of Arab and Arab-American feminists are different from those of white American feminists. Arab-American poet Suheir Hammad says in an interview posted on her website that she cannot separate her obsession with gender equality from her obsession with the freedom of Palestine:

My vision for a free Palestine is my vision for the whole world which is respect for human life, which comes from respect for the land. I don't think you can truly respect the land and not respect human life. And within respecting human life, there is gender equality, religious enrichment and understanding, and safety, whether physical or emotional, and the right to education. And I wish this for the whole world.<sup>59</sup>

Arab and Arab-American women need to tell more of their own stories, calling for the freedom and equality of Arab women wherever they are. Through their stories, they explicitly challenge the arrogance of those men who require a level of human dignity and respect for themselves while denying that dignity to another human, for various reasons--including because she is a woman. In particular, they reject the false justification of such arrogance through narrow interpretations or misinterpretations of the Qur'anic text, namely interpretations that ignore the basic social principles of justice, equality, and common humanity. While men and women have different roles within the family because of biological differences, it firmly holds that these differences do not make women morally, spiritually, or intellectually inferior to men or preclude them from participating equally with men in the public arena.<sup>60</sup>

Arab-American writers do not have to abandon their religion or tradition to secure their rights, asserting that there are other models for emancipated, modern women besides the Western one. Since Arab-American women cannot eradicate their differences, they can only assert them. The solution thus depends partly on the American feminists to open their eyes, ears, and, above all, their hearts to the differences that exist between Arab and Arab-American women and themselves.

The responsibility also falls greatly on Arab-American writers to produce more literary works as they are one of the most effective means to correct or change people's views. I absolutely agree with Miriam Cooke who speaks of her own writings, saying:

You set out to express yourself, to transform your own self, your vision of your own presence in the world through your writing. And if one person reads your poem and says: "Yeah, I felt this but didn't express it this way, or I never saw it this way" - that's good enough. So, I believe that my writing has the potential that it will change one person. I don't aspire to more or less than that.<sup>61</sup>

In a powerful poem, Mohja Kahf talks of her babysitter Selwa who wears a face-veil and drives a four-by-four on mountainous truck tires. Selwa is a strong woman filled with self-confidence, yet the other drivers are "transfixed" by her appearance. Arab-American women writers, through voicing their own stories, ask the following questions, opening the door to a constructive dialogue.

At intersections do drivers know  
each other for a moment?  
Is it the lull, the looking in glass, the lane lines, the language  
Of light and movement--Is traffic transcendental?  
Do Selwa and the woman with the lipstick  
And the trucker see  
Behind the blind spot for an instant?<sup>62</sup>

Our stories help others see beyond the blind spot, learning about this "other" woman beyond the stereotypes one sees in the media of a victim oppressed by her customs or as the exotic other clad in "difference." In a political environment of increasing hostility toward Islam, Arab-American women writers demonstrate that the face of Islam is not essential or monolithic nor are Arab women (veiled or unveiled) mere passive victims of their religion and culture. Through their stories, these writers suggest that it is not Islam per se that oppresses women, but rather, the continuity of patriarchal values within nationalist and religious ideologies that limit women's agency. Rejecting any essentialist, monolithic, and static notion of culture, Arab-American women writers thus warn of the dangers of making "civilizations" and "identities" into what they are not: shut down, sealed off entities that only allow for a history of wars of religion and imperial conquest rather than one of exchange, cross-fertilization, and sharing.

Through the power of art and narrative, conflicts may be replaced by mutual understanding and tolerance. For just as the powers of art resolved the conflict between the king and Scheherazad, I believe the most effective way for Arab-American women to connect with, heal, and resist imposed stereotypes is through emphatically telling our own stories even if it takes more than one thousand and one nights for them to be listened to. As Mohja Kahf aptly points out, words can be more powerful than bombs.

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<sup>63</sup>

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**ENDNOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> Judith Black, [www.storiesalive.com](http://www.storiesalive.com)
- <sup>2</sup> Muslim women in North American diasporic communities come from geographical regions as diverse as China, Iran, and Nigeria. So, any attempt to capture their various cultural and religious expressions would be reductive.
- <sup>3</sup> See Mohja Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999) and Mohja Kahf *Emails from Scheherazad*. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003).
- <sup>4</sup> See Diana Abu-Jaber, *Arabian Jazz* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1993) and Diana Abu-Jaber *Crescent* (New York: Norton & Company, 2003).
- <sup>5</sup> See Suheir Hammad, *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, 1996) and Suheir Hammad *Drops of This Story* (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, 1996).
- <sup>6</sup> Diaspora and hybridity theories are well developed in the work of cultural theorists such as Homi Bhabha *the Location of Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1994); Gayatri Spivak "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Reprinted in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, (eds.) (Routledge, 1995), p. 24-28.; Stuart Hall, "What is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" in *Black Popular Culture*, Gina Dent, (ed.), ( Bay Ness, 1992), p. 21-33.
- <sup>7</sup> Hadiths are the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.
- <sup>8</sup> Mohja Kahf, *Emails from Scheherazad*, p. 43.
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 44.
- <sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 43.
- <sup>11</sup> *Webster Third International Dictionary*. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1996), p. 1503
- <sup>12</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission available at <http://www.doj.gov.za/trc>.
- <sup>13</sup> See S Lynd, S. Bahour, and A Lynd, (eds.), *Homeland: Oral Histories of Palestine and Palestinians*. (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1994).
- <sup>14</sup> Mohja, Kahf, "Emails from Scheherazad", p. 51.
- <sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 51.
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 52.
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 42.
- <sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 43.
- <sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 41.
- <sup>20</sup> Trinh Minh-Ha, "Not You/Like You: Postcolonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference" in *Dangerous Liaisons*, eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 71.
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 76.
- <sup>22</sup> Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 219.
- <sup>23</sup> For a detailed discussion of the veil, see Fatima Mernissi *Beyond The Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society* (London: Al Saqi Books, 1985) and Leila Ahmed *Women, Gender, and Islam*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992)
- <sup>24</sup> Mohja Kahf, *Emails from Scheherazad*, p. 58.
- <sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 61.
- <sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 55.
- <sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 55.
- <sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 56, 58.
- <sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 58, 59.
- <sup>30</sup> Clifford Geertz, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 28.
- <sup>31</sup> Trinh Minh-Ha, "Not You/Like You..." p.418
- <sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p.418.
- <sup>33</sup> Abu Jaber, *Crescent*
- <sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 419.
- <sup>35</sup> Edward Said's comments on this point are quite relevant here. As he states: "no one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind...just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities." Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Knopf, 1993), p. 336.
- <sup>36</sup> Trinh Minh-Ha, "Not You", p. 418.

<sup>37</sup> Abu-Jaber is interested in the notion of “race” and how it is based on appearance. In an interview, elaborating on this point, Abu-Jaber says “race is based on appearance. And appearance is strenuous at best. I happened to come out looking like this. My sisters look much more traditionally Arab...but I am actually the only one among my sisters to speak Arabic. Race has nothing to do with who we are and it's not a reality. It's a complete social construction and we cling to it...as some kind of a signifier and it basically signifies nothing” by Andrea Shalal-Esa, *Al-Jadid* 8.39 (Spring 2002).

<sup>38</sup> Mohja Kahf, *Emails from Scheherazad*, p. 20.

<sup>39</sup> Joanna Kadi, *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*. (Boston: South End Press, 1994), p. 79.

<sup>40</sup> See Kadi, “Introduction,” *Food for Our Grandmothers*..

<sup>41</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>42</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Books 1996 (1903 reprint)).

<sup>43</sup> Lisa Suhair Majaj, ““Boundaries: Arab/American”” in *Food For Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (Boston: South End Press, 1994), p. 65-86.

<sup>44</sup> Mohja Kahf, *Emails from Scheherazad*, p. 37.

<sup>45</sup> These stereotypes have been documented by Jack Shaheen *the TV Arabs*, (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1984). For a more detailed discussion of the link between these stereotypes and colonization, see Leila Ahmed *Women, Gender, and Islam*

<sup>46</sup> The term “Third World” is a controversial one. It mainly refers to underdeveloped countries, but it “originally signifies a ‘third force’ of non-aligned nations which wedge themselves between the Cold War oppositions of first world ‘democracy’ and second world communism.” Kateryna Longley, *Striking Chords: Multicultural Literary Interpretations* (North Sydney, NSW; Allen & Unwin, 1992).

<sup>47</sup> Susan Darraj, “Third World, Third Wave Feminism(s): The Evolution of Arab-American Feminism” in *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, eds. Rory Dicker and Alison Piemeier (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), p. 202.

<sup>48</sup> Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1860-1950* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>49</sup> Joanna Kadi, *Food for Our Grandmothers*, p. 179.

<sup>50</sup> [www.suheirhammad.com](http://www.suheirhammad.com), accessed October 20, 2004.

<sup>51</sup> Mohja Kahf, *Emails from Scheherazad*, p. 64.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.* p. 66.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p. 66-67.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>56</sup> Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes,” *Feminist Review* 30 (1988), p. 61-88, 69

<sup>57</sup> There is a group of Arab women who deal with gender issues--their association is called AWSA, the Arab Women's Solidarity Association.

<sup>58</sup> See miriam cooke and Margot, Badran, *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1990), Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1992), Valentine Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder: L. Rienner, 1993), Suha Sabbagh, *Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint* (New York : Olive Branch Press, 1996), Joanna Kadi, *Food For Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American And Arab Canadian Feminists* (1994), and Lila Abu Lughod, *Re-making Women: feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) are but a few examples of this crucial endeavor. However, critical discussions of Arab-American literature has remained limited, with much of it remaining at the level of survey.

<sup>59</sup> [www.suheirhammad.com](http://www.suheirhammad.com).

<sup>60</sup> Among the Muslim world's 1.2 billion adherents, this emerging vision of gender equality is only beginning to have an impact on legal and political structures. “We're only at the beginning of imagining what Islam would look like without that patriarchal filter”, explained Mohja Kahf in “Women's Eloquence in the Early Islamic Era” in *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America* Gisela Webb (ed.) (Syracuse University Press, 2000), p. 150. This is book contains collection of female voices redefining women's rights from an Islamic perspective.

<sup>61</sup> cooke and Badran, *Opening the Gates*, p. 43.

<sup>62</sup> Kahf, *Emails from Emails from Scheherazad*, p. 34.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39

# PERSONAL AND POLITICAL

## THE DYNAMICS OF ARAB AMERICAN FEMINISM

Susan Muaddi Darraj\*

In 2003, I crafted a proposal for a book on Arab and Arab American women's literature. I decided that I would invite several Arab women writers to contribute essays on why, where, and how they write, as well as on what obstacles they face – whether internal or external – when they write. Such a book would be the first of its kind – not a critical look at Arab American literature, but a discussion by Arab American writers themselves, an opportunity for them to define their own issues and agenda. To my delight, publishers expressed interest in the project, and I soon signed a contract with one. Then the real work – and the true learning process – began.

I approached several well-known as well as up and coming writers and asked them to contribute an essay and sample of their creative writing to the book. Writers, including Naomi Shihab Nye, Etel Adnan, and Diana Abu-Jaber, agreed to pen essays that addressed the writing process itself: Why do we write? Are we compelled to write about Arab-related themes, and why? Who are our influences, both positive and negative? What are our obstacles? What are our thoughts and hopes for the emerging genre of Arab American literature?

The collected voices in the book addressed major themes within Arab and Arab American literature: the crisis of a dual ethnic identity, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, discrimination against Arabs in the United States, a lack of general understanding of Islam, and related issues. Another topic that several writers addressed was the fundamental misunderstanding of the role of Arab women in the Arab world and in the Arab American community.

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My publisher proved to be very supportive of the project and enthusiastic about the potential contribution the book could make to the field of ethnic American literary studies. However, the design for the book's cover nearly knocked me off my chair when I first saw it as a PDF file opening on my computer screen. The title of the book, *Scheherazade's Legacy*, had been my suggestion, a way of reclaiming the stereotype of one of literature's greatest storytellers, but I was dismayed by the image that accompanied it: toward the bottom of the cover, a woman's eyes gaze out at the viewer from between the narrow slits of her black face veil. Behind and above her, minarets loom in the dusky blue background. It was an exotic and Orientalist design, something completely anathema to the book's message.

When I expressed my concern, the publisher stated that, at such a late stage in the process of the book's publication, little could be done about the cover art. While I understood that the marketing and design departments had already invested significant time in the cover, the blatantly stereotypical image deeply disturbed me. There was a ridiculously wide disconnect between the image on the cover and the voices within the book that struggled to articulate their disapproval of just such an image.

Yet the sad fact remains that the image on the cover of my book persists. The face behind the veil continues to be the way that the West understands Arab women. Despite recent interest in the Middle East, following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the West has not made significant progress in its understanding of either Arab culture or of the role of women in Arab society and within the Arab community in America. In fact, the image of the oppressed, silenced Arab woman is frequently used by some as *proof* of the barbarity of Arab culture, and even to justify the West's foreign policy toward the East. In the third presidential debate of 2004, President George W. Bush, who would eventually be re-elected to the dismay of 56 million Americans, made much of the fact that in the recent elections in Afghanistan, the first person to vote was a 19-year-old woman: proof, it would seem, of the progress America's bombing and invasion of Afghanistan had caused and evidence of the goodness that can come of the Bush doctrine of "spreading liberty" around the globe. Attempts had been made to speak similarly of the status of women in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, who have allegedly fared better since the fall of the "evil" dictator. During the first and second American wars with Iraq, the few Iraqi women depicted on American television screens were heavily veiled, wearing black chadors, to show American viewers how desperately Iraq needed American liberty. Ironically, before the wars, Iraqi women were considered some of the most "liberated" in the Middle East – with some of the highest rates of women in white-collar professions – although the fundamentalist insurgency that has sprung up in reaction to the United States' occupation will surely alter that dramatically.

Nevertheless, Arab and Muslim women continue to be used as a means of justifying the "spreading of liberty" doctrine across the Middle East. At a time when East and West are allegedly at odds, Arabs in America – and especially Arab women – have become key players and, too frequently, pawns.

In the early 1990s, Gloria Steinem famously turned the popular feminist slogan of the seventies, "The personal is political" around on its head. "The political is personal" she declared instead, signaling that for the new generation of feminists, political action and involvement was central to ensuring a society in which women were treated equally.<sup>1</sup> Her words rang true for American women, who felt that their personal lives and choices were deeply affected by legislation and government. For

example, how could women become independent and pursue careers when many of the major universities barred them from enrolling? How could a woman abandon an abusive marriage or charge an attacker with rape, when the courts were already biased against her? Women could only achieve equality and fair treatment in the home, in the workplace, and in society if politicians legislated that equality.

For Arab American women, feminism's core is slightly, though significantly, different. Arab American feminists must grapple with *the political and the personal*. These are two battles confronting them, and they are not the same. In American society, women of Arab descent or ethnicity find themselves portrayed in two different ways: their family and the Arab community regard them in one way (the personal), while the larger American society, and especially the American government, regard them in another way (the political).

Consequently, Arab American women face personal challenges within their own communities regarding education, sexuality, work, and marriage. At the same time, they face overtly political obstacles from the larger American community. These often pose substantial problems for the civil rights of Arab Americans who often face racism and discrimination.

### THE PERSONAL

It was a hot August day in downtown Philadelphia, when our local chapter of the Palestine Aid Society (PAS) organized its annual 10KM walk-a-thon through the city streets. As a teenager, I was involved in the New Generation of Palestine (NGP), an affiliated youth group that, in Philadelphia, had developed as an offshoot of the PAS; most of the youth in NGP had parents who were long-time PAS activists and members. Our parents had always involved us in PAS activities, encouraging our enthusiasm in Palestinian history and culture. My own parents would pack us into the car once a month and take us to their monthly meetings, and on the drive home, patiently explain to us what had been discussed during the meeting. Each year, the PAS parents mapped a route through downtown Philadelphia where we waved flags, American and Palestinian, handed out leaflets to the smiling, the scowling, and the bored-looking passers-by. As it was a warm day, many of us – boys and girls – were wearing cut-off pants or shorts and T-shirts. Hundreds of supporters arrived to march with us, but then an argument broke out.

A group of Palestinian men had arrived, but upon seeing several teenaged girls in shorts, they refused to march. One of the organizers went to speak with them, and he was curtly told that they would not join us until *al-banaat* (the “girls”) changed into more decent attire. This caused a heated debate, as the parents of *al-banaat* angrily insisted there was nothing inappropriate about wearing shorts, especially on such a humid day. Others said that the parents had a point, but that we should respect the feelings of those men who had arrived to march with us.

Meanwhile, *al-banaat*, including myself, stood there, holding our flags and wondering why in the world the baring of our shins and knees had caused such an uproar. We weren't allowed to date or have boyfriends, and now we had to worry about getting funny looks from people in our own community?

It is difficult – and actually painful – to write critically of fellow Arab Americans, especially of those who obviously shared our political goals on that day. I remember telling some non-Arab friends at school the following week about the incident, and their faces registered their alarm and disgust. These, of course, were girls whose fathers coached their basketball teams or swim clubs, so why did I



expect them to understand? I suddenly felt like a traitor, and I found myself quickly defending these men even as I criticized them, much to the confusion of my friends and myself.

Despite the inherent difficulty in criticizing members of your community, especially when the community itself is under attack socially, culturally, and politically, the fact remains that some elements of the culture can be neither protected nor neglected. Those men, in the end, simply gave up and left, no doubt shaking their heads on the ride home about the lack of shame they had witnessed. In my heart, though, I was happy that they decided not to march with us on that day, because I, and some of the other girls who wore shorts, would have been uncomfortable in their presence as if we were doing something wrong.

The problem, at the core of it all, is the erroneous notion that there is one, monolithic, unchanging Arab Culture, and that Arab Americans should strive not to lose it. What that Arab Culture consists of, though, differs from Arab to Arab, from generation to generation. Those men, not unlike some of the older men in my own family, were simply unaccustomed to seeing a woman bare her shins and knees in public. And yet, while I could feel sympathetic about their culture shock, I could still feel resentful that a huge fuss had not been similarly raised over the fact that several of the teenaged boys, such as my brothers and cousins and friends, wore shorts and tank tops. Where was the uproar, the threat to not participate unless *they* changed? Even if someone felt it was not right or appropriate for girls to wear shorts, why insist that they change and threaten to leave unless they did? To me, this was a blatant double standard motivated by sexism.

Arab American women themselves often feel a cultural shock upon realizing the enormity of this gender-based double standard. Grappling with the patriarchal attitudes and customs of Arab culture, which are carried over and transmitted by immigrant parents and grandparents, is only one of the challenges facing Arab American women today. In *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (one of the earliest and most important collections of feminist writing by women of Arab descent), J.A. Khawaja writes:

My grandfather ranted at the top of his lungs for someone to bring him his food his socks his his his and my grandmother for fear for fear of for fear of being slapped at the back of the head brought him his food and his housecoat and his socks. <sup>2</sup>

She adds, “And when I was born my grandfather said a girl throw her in the river that’s what girls are good for. In the old country we throw them in the river.”

While Arab American women certainly have assertive, strong Arab women role models to emulate, it is wishful thinking to pretend that domestic abuse, emotional and physical, is completely non-existent among the community. Like any other community, Arab Americans are impacted by sexist socio-cultural factors. Nada Elia writes about the fact that, even in the absence of her father, the strong patriarchal attitudes continued. Her father, a peripatetic businessman whom she rarely saw, died when she was six years old:

When he died, everybody around me said our family was as good as dead, for he had left ‘only women’ behind him. My mother, my three sisters, and I now made up the Elia household. I grew up surrounded by people who believed that, because none of us had a penis, we were worthless. In vain I tried to comprehend this. And I came to strongly resent the suggestion that it was my father, this

occasional visitor, who had given meaning to my existence. Didn't my mother matter – who had always been there, feeding me, changing my diapers, washing me, staying up at my bedside when I was sick, rising before dawn to prepare our lunch-boxes? Later, as an adolescent, I frequently overheard discussions between my mother and some 'wiser' family member – female more often than not – urging her to get my sisters and me out of school because a high-school degree would do us no good. Invariably, my mother refused. She had been denied an education and did not want her daughters helpless and dependent on husbands, as she had been.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, even in Arab American households where the paternal figure equally encourages his daughter as well as his sons to excel, the father himself, especially if he is an immigrant, will sometimes grapple with the need to encourage his daughters but also the wish to see his children absorb and reflect the Arab culture as well. Usually, girls will feel the burden – more so than their brothers – to not become Westernized or Americanized. In my own family, where I am the only daughter (I have three wonderful brothers), I was never permitted to date, attend school dances, talk to boys on the phone, and other staples of a teenaged American girls' upbringing. Ironically, my father pushed me to excel in school, pursue a career, and be financially independent, something most of my friends' fathers did not particularly encourage. I find this an interesting facet of some Arab American women's upbringing. While it may be partly related to the immigrant's instinct to see his/her children excel, there is also an element of Arab culture motivating it as well. My father, for example, loves poetry, and he used to recite to me poems from Arab women poets ranging from al-Khansaa to the late Fadwa Tuqan. Behind his recitations, I always sensed a pride in Arab culture, in both the male and the female Arabs who contributed to it. To mimic my father's thought process: Why waste time on silly things like dating, going to the malls and the movies, when you can devote that time to your schoolwork, to reading, to building your future?

In addition, the fathers of many Arab American women emphasized the fact that the behavior of an Arab woman reflected upon the family as a whole. In her essay, "Boundaries: Arab/American", also published in *Food for Our Grandmothers*, Lisa Suhair Majaj writes lovingly of her Palestinian father and American mother. She also describes the tug of war her own immigrant father experienced in wanting his daughters to adapt to his own culture:

Although he has left much of my sister's and my own upbringing to my mother, he had assumed that we would arrive at adolescence as model Arab girls: when we did not he was puzzled and annoyed. As walking became a measure of my independence, it became as well a measure of our conflict of wills. He did not like my 'wandering in the streets', it was not 'becoming', and it threatened his own honor [...] as my sister and I entered the 'dangerous age', when our reputations were increasingly at stake and a wrong move would brand us as 'loose', my father grew more and more rigid in his efforts to regulate our self-definitions.<sup>4</sup>

Majaj's experience with her father represents something not atypical for first-generation Arab American women, a tug-of-war between loyalty to loving fathers and an instinctive rejection of patriarchal attitudes and impositions. While

we reject these patriarchal modes of thought and bristle at the limitations they try to impose, we similarly understand that our feminist self-definition is not as simple as the American model. We may be angry about being robbed of a “normal” teenager’s social freedoms, but we may find support and encouragement when we decide to apply to college. So we understand, but still we bristle. No one said it was easy.

An important and groundbreaking study into the lives and needs of Arab American women is Evelyn Shakir’s *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States*. Published in 1997, *Bint Arab* is one of the only books to research and closely examine the lives of immigrant and first-generation Arab women. The conversations collected here, as well as the analyses and historical details provided, accurately portray the conflicts that these women face.

One particular conversation between two sets of Palestinian American sisters illustrates the pressure on young Arab American women from their families to marry at a young age. It is worth quoting at some length:

*Nuba*: Lately I’ve been rebelling against my parents.

*Nawal*: You have not! You got engaged. She got engaged to this dufis.

*Nuba*: Well, that’s what my parents wanted. He was a friend of the family, he comes from the same village they do. And I was like, “Well, I should please them.” At that point, my life revolved around my parents.

*Nawal*: No, her idea was it’s an easy way to get out of the house.

*Suhair*: A lot of Arab girls do that....

[...]

*Nawal*: [turning again to Suhair] I know you went through a lot when you married, just to go back to school.

*Suhair*: I know, I know. The thing is it’s not him that is the problem. He actually gets mad at me sometimes if I get a C in a class. The problem, it’s with his family. My father-in-law – he’s my uncle – he doesn’t believe in girls going to school. His first daughter, his eldest, he forced her out of school into marriage. But her husband was encouraging enough to let her go back so that she was able to finish school. When she had her kids, her mother-in-law took care of them. With me, my husband was encouraging too, but his family was very discouraging, and they lived with us at the beginning. They did everything they could to make it hard for me.<sup>5</sup>

The above quote illustrates the diversity within the Arab American community in that the husband of the young woman supports her educational pursuits, but his parents do not. The fact is that some young Arab American women have to deal with these sorts of restrictions on their freedom and aspirations.

Furthermore, the restrictions placed on Arab American women are often used as a method of publicly illustrating the family’s conservative nature and even its honor. A “good” girl, one who has not been sexually promiscuous, can command eligible husbands from the parents’ village. During the course of the

above conversation, the girls also mention that, in their families, “If you marry outside the village, you’re talked about.” Another one adds, “Yeah, they’re like, ‘I wonder what happened to her.’ Or, ‘She must have been not a virgin.’ Or ‘Nobody else wanted to marry her.’”<sup>6</sup> Clearly, Arab American women feel the burden of carrying their family’s sense of honor and cultural responsibilities. In this way, marriage becomes a way to escape their family’s close surveillance. The fact that some girls feel marriage is the “only way out” should be cause for concern for Arab American feminists.

### THE POLITICAL

In her essay, “The Arab Woman and I”, Mona Fayad describes an experience similar to that of another famous Western feminist:

I am haunted by a constant companion called The Arab Woman. When I shut myself alone in my home, she steps out of the television screen to taunt me. In the movies, she stares down at me just as I am starting to relax. As I settle in a coffee shop to read the newspaper, she springs out at me and tries to choke me. In the classroom, when I tell my students that I grew up in Syria, she materializes suddenly as the inevitable question comes up: ‘Did you wear a veil?’ That is when she appears in all her glory: The Faceless Veiled Woman, silent, passive, helpless, in need of rescue by the west. But there’s also that other version of her, exotic and seductive, that follows me in the form of the Belly Dancer.<sup>7</sup>

Fayad’s depiction of the Faceless Veiled Woman is the Arab American woman’s version of Virginia Woolf’s “the Angel in the House.” The Victorian model of domestic bliss stifled the intellectual and professional ambitions of real women, like Woolf. Similarly, the ability of an Arab American woman to define herself as an individual becomes overshadowed by The Faceless Veiled Woman who, according to Fayad, prevents her “from talking about myself, pushing me to feed you what you want to hear.”<sup>8</sup> The image of Arab women becomes a way to confirm the alleged inferiority of Arab culture and Islamic religion: the backward nature of the “other” becomes a confirmation of the dominancy and superiority of the “self.”

Much has been written about the creation of this image of Arab women, but little has been written about its impact on Arab American feminism. Arab American feminists today face the Faceless Veiled Woman on a number of fronts: in academia, in politics, in the social context. She signals a fundamental lack of understanding about the Middle East on the part of the West, setting up a formula by which the silenced veiled woman is the norm, and other Arab women – whether unveiled or veiled, but assertive and vocal – constitute an anomaly, a deviation.

Geraldine Brooks’ *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* was published in the mid-1990s and generated a substantial amount of media hype. Brooks, a long-time journalist for *The Wall Street Journal*, describes her interactions with Muslim women across the Middle East, during the several years she spent working there. It reads like the travel diary of a modern-day Lady Wortley Montagu who had good intentions, but still saw “the East” through an Orientalist lens. In this book Brooks notes her experiences with Muslim men and women, painting a damning portrait of modern Arab and Muslim culture.

She describes modern-day Muslims as slipping back rather than moving forward, becoming more and more fundamentalist: “I went to live among the women of Islam on a hot autumn night in 1987. I arrived as a Western reporter, living for each day’s news. It took me almost a year to understand that I had arrived at a time when the events of the seventh century had begun to matter much more to the people I lived with than anything they read in the morning paper.”<sup>9</sup> Her opening anecdote, about not being able, as a woman, to book a hotel room in Saudi Arabia sets the tone for the rest of the book, which essentially documents and purports to explain how women in the Middle East are suffering under old-world, patriarchal customs. Chapter Two, for example, focuses on female genital mutilation (FGM) while also addressing honor killings. She criticizes Arab and Muslim women who point out that FGM and honor killings are not Islamic practices, quoting at length Arab feminist Rana Kabbani’s complaint that Western feminists have not “taken the trouble” to research these practices and discover they have been wrongly linked to the Islamic faith. As Brooks responds:

Could Rana Kabbani not have taken the trouble to reflect that one in five Muslim girls lives in a community where some form of clitoridectomy is sanctioned and religiously justified by local Islamic leaders? [...] Until Islam’s articulate spokeswomen such as Rana Kabbani target their misguided coreligionists with the fervor they expend on outside critics, the grave mistake of conflating Islam with clitoridectomy and honor killings will continue.<sup>10</sup>

The “grave mistake” that has been made here, however, is Brooks’ assumption that people like Rana Kabbani are *not* criticizing these practices. In fact, Arab feminists such as Nawal El-Saadawi have long written scathingly of the practice of FGM in some rural areas of Egypt and northern Africa. Western feminists like Brooks have themselves not “taken the trouble,” to investigate the activities of women’s groups in the Middle East, to learn how these groups are organizing to educate and empower other women in their communities and beyond. In other words, why did Brooks, a skilled journalist, not seek interviews with the activists as well as the victims? She does mention one short-lived Arab women’s group, Al Fanar, formed by Palestinian women to speak out against honor killings. Al Fanar fizzled out, however, when the Israeli press began highlighting their protests against honor killings in the Jewish newspapers, and “None of the West Bank Palestinian newspapers would touch the subject, steering clear of any criticism of Arab society that could be used as propaganda by Israelis.”<sup>11</sup> However, there are many successful women’s groups organizing on behalf of women’s rights in the Middle East, but Brooks does not highlight these. The overall effect of her book is to portray the current state of Arab women as one of failure and victimization and to promote the notion that Arab women cannot advance their agenda in such a stifling culture and need Western feminists like Brooks to infiltrate their “hidden world” and take their story back to the rest of civilization.

The impact of books like *Nine Parts of Desire* on Arab American women’s own feminist struggles is devastating. It reinforces the political message and stereotypes against which we battle. Arab American women must find a way to articulate the hypocrisy of the Western notion of Arab women and translate it back to Western culture, to uproot the deeply implanted stereotype of the Faceless Veiled Woman.

This articulation is happening, and it is most exciting to see it in the growing body of literature by Arab American women. For example, in her poem, "Hijab Scene #2", from her collection *E-Mails from Scheherazad*, Mohja Kahf writes:

'You people have such restrictive dress for women',  
she said, hobbling away in three-inch heels and panty hose  
to finish out another pink-collar temp pool day.

The impact of the poem slams the reader in the gut, a reminder of the blatant hypocrisy of viewing Arabs and Muslim women as victims of a backwards culture while forgetting the way one's own culture often exploits women.

It is not unrealistic or paranoid to assert that the stereotypical image of The Faceless Veiled Woman is being deliberately perpetuated in American culture so that people who cannot even point out Arab countries on a world map somehow still know that Arab women are oppressed. Books like that of Brooks command media attention because they are viewed as daring and insightful, helping to uncover hidden abuses, even though all they really do is confirm and perpetuate a stereotype. Furthermore, Arab American feminists feel frustrated by the fact that current U.S. policy in the Middle East is very Islamophobic and pro-Israeli, and yet it is allegedly being waged in defense of "their rights." In addition, Arab American feminists have not found much help in American feminists: "Instead, they [American feminists] have sometimes seemed to have a vested interest in broadcasting stories of savage Arab men and perpetuating the stereotype of the passive, pathetic Arab woman, needing to be roused from her moral, intellectual, and political stupor", writes Evelyn Shakir.<sup>12</sup>

However, for Arab American women, articulating feminism inadvertently becomes a political statement. Because the negative American view of and current foreign policy towards the Middle East is often justified by pointing out the oppression of Arab women, an articulation of Arab feminism becomes an attack on the government because it calls the government's policy into question. If Arab women are already so vocal and visible, Americans might begin to question, this stated "need" to insert ourselves into their domestic affairs? And then maybe, just maybe, the current policy of neocolonialism - based on the false logic of defending American freedom by fighting Arab countries - will begin to crumble.

## CONCLUSION

What has become clear is that Arab American women span a variety of countries of origin, socio-economic classes, and religious affiliations and attitudes. They come from Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine, and, more recently, from North Africa and the Persian Gulf states. More and more are born in the United States, growing up between the Arab culture at home and the American culture at school and at work. Some are Christians, more are Muslims; among both groups, some women are deeply religious while others are not. Some Arab American women are doctors, lawyers, professors; some are factory workers or have retail jobs; some own their own businesses while others work at home raising their children. Some are forbidden to work outside the home at all. Many find support from their families for pursuing careers while some feel pressure to get married early.

In other words, the great variety one finds among women in the Arab American community mimics that of other ethnic-American communities: Latinas, Africans, Asians, and Southeast Asians. In terms of dealing with their community and its

more patriarchal elements, Arab Americans also share the same feminist concerns as other ethnic American women: the culture clash often experienced by those born to immigrant parents; the burden of bearing the native culture on one's shoulders, manifested in such ways as feeling pressure to marry someone from the "homeland"; and seeking an education and establishing a career. These challenges are faced by Arab American women at all levels of intensity. While some Arab American women live closely sheltered, restricted lives, others have a degree of freedom and independence that would surpass that of American feminists and surprise them as well.

And yet, Arab American women face a universal problem: the political agenda of the U.S. that perpetuates a false stereotype of Arab women. The Faceless Veiled Woman, whom Mona Fayad describes and who appears on the cover of my book, continues to harass the Arab American woman and feminist. Even if she resembles nothing in our lives (and for the vast majority of Arab American women, she does not), we must still confront and recreate her. While no less important than the struggle of battling sexism within our community, this other battle is one shared by us all. The only way to win it is to organize and begin, more intensely than before, to reconstruct our own portrait, to present not the monolithic image of Arab women that everyone seems to want – that seems convenient – but the collage of Arab American women's faces, voices, and perspectives to America and the world.

Reconstructing that portrait is, of course, a complicated process. The struggles of Arab American feminists are generally with the larger American culture, as we attempt to find ways to challenge the dominant stereotype of the Faceless Veiled Arab Woman, but also within our own communities as we seek to recognize and address elements of sexism. Furthermore, non-Arabs who vocally support us might themselves fall into the trap created by the stereotype, despite their good intentions and best efforts, forcing us to criticize our few advocates – a precarious position indeed.

Steinem's political and personal are one entity with two sides, but, for us, the political and the personal are two very different entities, both requiring a simultaneous investment of energy and effort. How to succeed without exhausting our resources will be the challenge for the Arab American feminist movement.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See for example, Gloria Steinem, *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self Esteem* (New York: Little, Brown and Company Publishers, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> JA Khawaja, "The Queen, Carcasses, and Other Things" in *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminist*, ed. Joanna Kadi (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1994), p. 43

<sup>3</sup> Nada Elia, "A Woman's Place is in the Struggle", in *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminist*, ed. Joanna Kadi (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1994), p. 118

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Suhair Majaj, "Boundaries: Arab/American" in *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminist*, ed. Joanna Kadi (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1994), p. 77-78

<sup>5</sup> Evelyn Shakir, *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), p.146.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>7</sup> Mona Fayad, "The Arab Woman and I" in *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, ed. Joanna Kadi (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1994), p. 170

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>9</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), p. 5-6

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 52

<sup>12</sup> Shakir, *Bint Arab*, p. 3.



# WHY ARE WE ALWAYS FIGHTING AND WHAT ARE WE FIGHTING FOR?

## ALTERNATING DEFENSIVE POSTURES AND THE RELEVANCE OF RIGHTS TO ARAB AND ARAB-AMERICAN WOMEN

Alia Malek\*

### INTRODUCTION

My sister's feminist consciousness began with *tabouleh*.<sup>1</sup> I share her moment because I cannot pinpoint my own and because hers so perfectly sums up how we became feminists long before our education could give us such notions, back when we were being raised as any good *bint arab*<sup>2</sup> would be. What was it about *tabouleh*? Quite frankly, it was the parsley. Heaps of it that my mother would have us gather into perfect bunches where leaves did not overlap with stems. We would hand her these bunches, and she would chop the parsley into little flecks that combined with *burghul*, tomatoes, mint, green onions, lemon, and olive oil to make the typical Syrian salad that now is a staple in health food cookbooks and restaurants everywhere.

To be more specific, though, it was the gathering of the bunches of parsley, while my brother was outside playing perfectly in our view through the kitchen window that did it. My sister locates that moment as when she realized that the rules, expectations, and privileges were different for boys than for girls and that she did not think that was particularly fair or right.

My feminist consciousness similarly began at home, and in the Arab-American<sup>3</sup> community, as resistance to the patriarchal constructs with which I was most familiar. In a house and community where we were all racially or culturally the same, what ultimately separated us was our respective sex. Being painfully aware of our roles and chores, inasmuch as they were sexually defined, facilitated developing a feminist consciousness from the beginning.

My racial consciousness, though, had to necessarily evolve. I attribute this to the fact that consciousness for me required living and experiencing the implications of my being an "other" and thus relied on experiences outside of the

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home, family, and Arab-American community. Since race is socially constructed, I was not aware I had “race” or was an “other” until I began to interact with society. Then, the clues began to accumulate. The first day of school always held the inevitable moment when my difference was flagged for everyone. During roll call, the teacher would move effortlessly through the list of names in front of her, pausing sometimes to pronounce a multi-syllable last name (maybe Slavic in origins) though the first name was always an easy “Brian” or “Tracey.” Only my name-- first and last-- challenged her. This happened every first day of class I ever attended. I also have vivid memories of difference in my hair-- short, curly, unruly, and incapable of supporting the barrettes all the other girls wore-- and differences in my lunch box, whose pita sandwiches were much too exotic in a world of peanut butter and jelly on white bread.

Should I have understood these differences right away to have something to do with race? Growing up, my interactions with society were filtered through my parents’ experiences and understanding. My parents, like others in their generation of Arab immigrants to the U.S., did not attribute our otherness to “race”, but to our being immigrants and “culturally” different.

Indeed these early childhood incidents were not manifestations of racial difference, but in fact cultural and physical differences. But such differences make us, like other differences (i.e. religious, political), *susceptible to racialization*, a process where differences are reduced to something biological and attributable to all members of the “race.”<sup>4</sup>

If only these clues remained so seemingly benign. It was not long before any discussion of Arabs, whether in history books or the nightly news, began assigning to us, collectively, less than flattering characteristics. Teachers and fellow students, parroting their parents’ sentiments, also brought their prejudices to either their interactions with me or to discussions of current events, that, whether they knew I was Arab or not, implicated me because I did firmly understand my roots to be Arab.

While the oppressive forces acting on us initially happened in quite different spheres, patriarchy in the private and racism in the public, they both triggered a similar defensive posture. In the Arab-American/private sphere, we were guarding against an assault on our humanity as women. In the greater-American/public sphere, we were guarding against an assault on our humanity as Arabs.

In addition, our defensive postures were made more defensive by the fact that our struggles against both assaults were quite solitary. Support from potential sources of solidarity had to be rejected; for example, the racism of the mainstream (i.e. white, liberal, heteronormative) women’s movement made it near impossible to engage the movement on equal footing.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, organizations or communities to whom we could have looked for solidarity in our racial struggle were not available to us<sup>6</sup> for two principle reasons: 1) Arab and Muslim culture had been posited as the ideological opposite/enemy of America and racialized as “foreign”,<sup>7</sup> leaving us either invisible or untouchable and 2) another minority group (Jewish-Americans), portrayed as our rivals, had already been incorporated into the greater racial-minority community, a community which initially seemed unable to accommodate both of us.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, I found myself constantly going through a revolving door of alternating defensive postures, switching almost daily as I moved from private to public spheres; I have found this to be a theme of my life. In talking to other Arab-

American and Arab women in both the Diaspora and in the Middle East, I have found many who have had similar experiences.

This paper will examine how these alternating defensive postures have manifested/impacted my evolving consciousness/activism and career as a “rights” lawyer, investigating separately the human rights and civil rights worlds. It will then look at how these closely related, yet different, rights regimes (as rhetoric and law) relate to Arab women in the case of human rights and Arab-American women in the case of civil rights and will discuss whether either are relevant to their struggles. This paper will also suggest that always being on the defensive has stymied our taking the offensive and will look at how to break out of that in both contexts.<sup>9</sup>

## PART I: ALTERNATING DEFENSIVE POSTURES

### *Consciousness and Activism*

As mentioned above, growing up Arab-American and female, I felt my humanity under assault in two distinct ways: as a woman in Arab-America and as an Arab in the U.S. Both assaults caused a reactive defensive posture on my part; one made me defensive for being female the other made me defensive for being Arab. But while these assaults had this reaction in common, they also had much that separated them.

They were different and had different implications for both my consciousness and how I engaged them because of 1) *who* was assaulting, 2) *where* the assault was happening, and 3) how I understood *what* was under assault.

In the gender context, the “assault” (which manifests to different degrees depending on the family or community) came from Arab society as it had been recreated in the Diaspora (which could mean a community, just parents, and/or any extended family that came to visit). It happened in a very private sphere - in our homes, as well as in our churches, mosques, and social circles. It was also quite clear that our relevant difference was our gender/sex, which marked and isolated us as different (and inferior) within our private, most intimate of units, the family. And this is what I knew: my great-grandmother, because she was female, was illiterate; my grandmother, because she was female, was not educated, while her brothers were; my paternal aunt, the only girl of six siblings, because she was female, was forced to leave school at age 12 to support her family, while her five brothers earned Ph.D.s and MDs. I, of course, would be educated, but I did know that there were certain rules to being a good *bint arab* and that the consequences of transgression were so severe (family and community excommunication) that I often wished I had instead been born a boy, or better yet, not Arab.

While there is no purely monolithic Arab-American female experience – many factors including religion, class, nationality, urban v. rural differentiate the experience - I believe the expectation to be a good *bint arab* is/was nearly universal, whether education for girls was valued (such as in my immediate family) or not. Some see a contradiction in the dual emphasis on being “traditional” and on education; I think none exists. In the “Western” mind, perhaps, being highly educated/professional is synonymous with independence and autonomy. I would argue that is not the case in the Arab world, where daughter doctors live at home until they are married. Financial realities and rewards here in the U.S. allow women the potential for autonomy, but many, while I was growing up, did not actualize it. For example, our neighbors were Palestinian immigrants; their daughter was an Assistant District Attorney who did not leave her parents house until she was

married in her thirties. In the minds of many, being educated makes us better women, mothers, and wives; it does not open the door to independence outside the family, let alone to some sort of sexual freedom. In fact, pursuit of studies would seem to have been mutually exclusive with pursuit of other “diversions.” Higher education was perceived as a modern day convent.

In the racial context, the assault happened by greater American society where we were educated and worked, whose popular culture, domestic and foreign policies permeated our lives, replete in great part with racist representations and interactions. What was clear to us was that there was something in “Arabness” that was problematic; what to call that, to understand it as I do today as “race”, was not as clear. But we did understand what Arabness meant, namely, not having the full benefits of American citizenship, which works optimally when one is seen as an *individual*. We were instead seen as part of a monolithic collective. In turn, we also felt part of a collective, for example, feeling involved when a crime was committed (or could have been committed) by an Arab.<sup>10</sup> That does not happen to peoples who do not “have race” in a negative way. I doubt many middle class white people felt guilty/implicated when Timothy McVeigh was found to have committed the Oklahoma City bombing.<sup>11</sup>

As my understanding of the U.S., though, grew more sophisticated, so did my understanding of “Arabness” as race, of feeling inextricably tied to a people, to individuals I had never met. Their crimes, achievements, and pains were ours as well, and this transcended nationality, religion, class, and gender.

The who, where, and what of the two different assaults held several implications for how I chose to engage these assaults, either in my activism or just in living. In the gender context, the persecutors are loved ones, the ones who protect us from outside attacks (which pitted all of us against greater American society), and the assault happens in private, which leads to a feeling of, “let *me* engage it where it is happening, in private.” Conversely, in the racial context, the assault is from outside, and it is done in public, which leads to a belief that it needs to be confronted there, in public.

Similarly, the “what” for which we as Arabs are being attacked, our race, has special implications because of the specific history of race in this country. This history has led many to prioritize the racial struggle over the gender one, given that the fundamental injustices of our society seem linked to race. Moving the U.S. towards a just society meant, for me, changing the racial paradigm.

These factors already pushed me towards a hierarchy of activism that prioritized the racial struggle, a choice that was bolstered by fundamental differences in the existing movements for gender and racial justice in American society, differences that will be furthered explored in the next section.

### ***Professional Choices: Women’s Rights or Civil Rights?***

It is important to note that both the movements for racial and women’s equality, historically, did focus on achieving certain rights in law (i.e. right to vote, to equal protection) as evidenced in these movements’ mobilizations for the Civil Rights Act, and their significant de-mobilization after its passage. Thus, as a “rights” lawyer, both movements and kinds of legal work are, in theory, available to me as I consider choices in my professional trajectory.

There are, however, several differences that ultimately have lead me to believe there is room for me in one and not so much in the other. The first is in terms of relevance of rights to those different struggles. Within the gender context,

and as will be discussed below the patriarchal forces acting on Arab-American women do not lend themselves easily to legal remedies as U.S. law pertaining specifically to “women’s issues” is currently designed. However, in the racial context, legal rights are in fact quite relevant as civil rights and liberties of Arab-Americans (and other racial minorities) are constantly being infringed upon, and the only remedy is often a legal one.<sup>12</sup>

The movements are also different in other ways. To begin with, the movements differ in terms of philosophical approaches. The mainstream women’s movement and legal organizations approach “gender” issues often in isolation from racial issues, reflecting an agenda of women who suffer oppression as women, but not as racial or economic minorities. Mainstream organizations also focus on certain manifestations of patriarchy, primarily those that can be addressed with legal remedies (such as the right to choose), as opposed to manifestations of patriarchy, such as harmful gender constructs, that would be better addressed through other means, like education. In a vicious cycle, these organizations fall short of representing the true diversity of American women because the agendas they pursue fail to reflect diverse needs of women.

Conversely, the civil rights world has proven itself much more effective at changing its paradigm to reflect American diversity. While the black/white paradigm still dominates civil rights thinking, given the U.S.’s specific racial history, it has also expanded to accommodate organizations and persons from all racial and ethnic backgrounds. This is, in part, because civil rights laws have made “national origin” and “religion” a protected status (like race); thus, people neither clearly black nor white (like Arabs) can and have availed themselves of the protection provided by such laws.<sup>13</sup> Also, as a movement, it is broader. An organization, whether it is governmental like the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice, non-governmental such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), or even a private plaintiff-side law firm, that specializes in non-discrimination litigation will handle cases of racial, religious, and gender discrimination.

Furthermore, those organizations working on racial injustice are attacking it from more than one side, focusing on making the opportunities available by the law meaningful through attempting to supplement the gaps that focusing on law/rights leaves wide open. (For example charter schools that seek to provide at risk youth with smaller classes, targeted tutoring, housing, etc.) In addition, they *are* addressing women’s needs by working for socio-economic-political justice of marginalized peoples; racial and ethnic communities after all, include women.

Lastly, and this is perhaps what is often decisive for women of color in choosing to prioritize the racial struggle, the mainstream gender struggle is steeped in a blatant racism that triggers a defensive posture whereas the same has not been *my* experience in the mainstream civil rights movement. That is not to say that I have not encountered sexism in the civil rights community, especially in Arab or Muslim-American civil rights organizations/movements, or that I have always felt safe in women of color feminist circles—they however are not the mainstream communities.

The racism of the mainstream women’s movement and its consequent exclusion of women of color has been discussed elsewhere. But for the purposes of my argument, I would like to note that women’s rights advocates often “champion” women’s rights by assaulting women’s humanity on racial grounds (“because your race or culture is inferior, you are suffering as a woman”), whereas advocates for minority groups’ rights do not champion them by assaulting the humanity of one of

the sexes in these communities (“because your men or women are inferior, you are suffering as a race”). It is not that such an argument is not made, as we can see for example towards African-Americans (consider all the focus on the “deficiency of the black male” and his “propensity towards criminality”); it is that it is not an argument made by civil rights groups, but rather by groups outside the civil rights world.

From my experience, these differences meant I felt safer in one world than I did in the other. In one world, I remain on the defensive, which means I cannot be on the offensive, whereas in the other, I can and have been effective in pursuing part of my agendas. For example, when I worked at the Civil Rights Division at the Department of Justice, the language and logic of civil rights was at that point institutional, and, thus, the atmosphere receptive to expanding the Division’s work to include Arab-Americans, especially after 9/11 when their rights were at high risk of being violated.<sup>14</sup> This, of course, depended on civil rights folk being there; unfortunately, because of the current Administration, there has been both voluntary and involuntary attrition.

### *Human Rights: The Debate Between Universalism And Cultural Relativism*

As a lawyer interested in people’s rights, I moved between the civil rights and human rights worlds frequently and quite naturally. I was interested in engaging the Arab world as well as the American one, and “human rights” is often viewed as an international parallel of “civil rights”, though the differences, as will be discussed below, are more than semantic.

The tension I had avoided by choosing to work in the civil rights community, rather than the women’s rights one, surfaced in the world of human rights, and I was again faced with alternating defensive postures. Whereas the world of women’s rights was often isolated from that of civil rights in the U.S. (separate organizations i.e. NOW versus NAACP), in the human rights world, issues of gender and racial rights are dealt with in one organization (women’s and race section in Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch). Human rights organizations/movement are arguably quite progressive (sympathetic towards the Palestinian plight for example, and I know for many Arab-Americans that is the litmus test), often understanding that women’s justice is linked to greater socio-economic-racial-development justice. Thus, they tend to advocate for women’s rights not in isolation (of course the record is not flawless). Yet, despite that, when they attack Arab countries’ abhorrent record on women’s rights, it recalls the trauma I still have from the domestic context.

However, the merits that set the human rights movement apart from the U.S. women’s movement mitigate that trauma. Ironically though, the movement is progressive or empathetic enough that numerous other members suffer instead from this trauma: in being (or trying to be) racially sensitive, they do so to the detriment of women’s rights. What I am talking about here is a debate that is central to human rights, the debate between universalism and cultural relativism.<sup>15</sup>

While the struggle for freedom from oppression is universal and characterizes all corners of the globe, the 20<sup>th</sup> century human rights movement, with its specific documents and law, arguably originates predominantly from one of those traditions, supposedly a “Western” one. To some extent it is true. The movement’s founding documents, the United Nations (UN) Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are descendants of Western thinkers’ writings such as the U.S. Bill of Rights and the French Rights of Man and Citizen;

they are the children of the specific and heinous crimes of World War II (such as the rise of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust). This leads some to mock the adjective “universal.”

The fundamental documents of the movement do in fact include rights that today we characterize as civil/political or 1<sup>st</sup> generation rights, which recognize people’s rights to be free from an abusive state and were formulated in response to the abuses of *European* monarchies. But they also include rights from different traditions: the socio/economic or 2<sup>nd</sup> generation rights that recognize the affirmative duties of the state towards its people and were formulated in response to the abuses of monarchy’s heirs, democracy and capitalism, and reflect a socialist tradition; as well as, group/collective or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation rights formulated in response to the excesses of imperialism and articulated by many different countries that suffer as colonized peoples.

Many countries violate human rights. Some justify these violations on socio-economic grounds (the poor and uneducated could not handle democracy, they would elect fundamentalists) without questioning the legitimacy or normative value of human rights. Others simply ignore the criticisms. But there are also those who question the very legitimacy of those rights, claiming cultural relativism. They argue that because these rights are expressions of “Western” values, they are irrelevant to non-Western countries. Not surprisingly, this argument is invoked most often over women’s rights and often by Arab and Muslim governments who claim that human rights (as they pertain to women) are inconsistent with Arab and Muslim culture and tradition (which they unilaterally define).<sup>16</sup> While these governments also violate other human rights (such as freedom of the press and speech), they never claim those violations to be expressions of Arab and Muslim values. Women’s groups and writers, however, have called into question the simplistic dichotomies -such as modernity and tradition; East and West; and authenticity and cultural importation - by which the discussion is stymied and bound.<sup>17</sup>

The argument is initially persuasive (which is why so many fall for it) because by taking a racially defensive posture, it appears that cultural relativists are defending against a potential assertion of Western culture’s primacy (admittedly, some who use human rights discourse/rhetoric are guilty of this). But cultural relativists, in asserting their culture’s primacy (or that of the culture they are defending), do so by invoking culture/tradition to cover for patriarchy, which is just as unjust as racism. The rights they tend to have reservations about are, of course, women’s rights.

Thus the movement can get stuck because a racial defensive posture is not necessarily unwarranted, but trying to respect that can come at the cost of accepting unconditionally how culture/tradition is represented (as if such things are reducible to a set of norms and practices). It becomes almost a zero-sum game—if one does not want to criticize or be perceived as criticizing a “culture”, one must excuse the oppression of women. However, this is absurd, especially when we consider that unlike the mainstream domestic women’s movement, the international human rights movement has been with us in our racial struggles, values our membership in this family of humanity, and includes Arabs in its ranks. We need to break this trap and call the argument - that women’s rights are inconsistent with Arab/Muslim culture - what it is: a cynical assertion of patriarchy’s primacy in the guise of resisting racism.<sup>18</sup>

I want to note here the “irony of location” when having this debate. In the “West”, with “white” audiences, I become a cultural relativist. I find myself forcing them to question universality, not because I do not believe human rights are universal, but because it is a legitimate point and worth the exercise to make them aware of other cultures’ contributions to the human struggle for freedom and dignity. This makes them consider how ubiquitous assumptions about cultural primacy are. Moreover, other cultures have ways of formulating or protecting rights that can offer valuable insight and input as we all try to improve global regimes that are supposed to protect all of our rights.

Conversely, when I am in the Middle East, I am quite the universalist. I challenge those who would take on a cultural relativist stance. Dismissing the human rights concept because of the movement’s early history (inextricably linked to Nazi crimes and Europe’s failure to stop them) seems a cop-out to me and leaves inequalities related to gender, class, sexuality, and religion in the Arab world untouched. Taking the other side of the debate forces both camps (and me) to become more critical in their thinking.

Regardless of my position (that we not be rendered impotent because we seek to challenge patriarchy as well as racism), is the reality such that the human rights concept, because it is rooted in “Western” history and mired by controversy, pointless to Arab women? I turn to this question in the following section.

## PART II: THE RELEVANCE OF RIGHTS

### *Human Rights and Arab Women*

To the question posed above, I have to say no, human rights are not irrelevant to Arab women. But we have to be savvy because “human rights” are not an uncontested good in parts of the Arab world. Unfortunately, the cynical use by people from outside the movement such as the Bush Administration, have made a mockery of concepts such as “human rights” and “democracy.” Thus, if citing a document such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights gets one nowhere, one option is to turn to “new” documents, which some are already doing quite successfully, for example, looking to the Koran to ground women’s equality.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, we can also *not* concede that the document such as the Universal Declaration is illegitimate. Perhaps such documents are *incomplete* in that not every organized state, cultural or religious tradition, or even individual had an input in their initial articulation. True, it was the specific abusive excesses of monarchy, capitalism, and colonialism that gave rise to the three generations of rights, and perhaps those are not histories that every society on this planet has lived, and in this sense the rights are not universal. But the rights are derived from things truly universal - *human suffering caused by the human tendency to abuse power*. This is what makes these rights universal, not the specific conditions/histories that gave rise to the suffering that led to an articulation of a right.

We can also add to the body of work out there by drafting our own documents. Not all rights have been articulated, in part because not everyone has been a part of the conversation. When I taught “Introduction to Human Rights” at the Lebanese American University in Beirut, many of the young women spontaneously and independently, declared a human right to be able to walk down the street without being ogled. Such an attack on humanity is one that the men who drafted the Universal Declaration in 1948 probably would not have thought of, just as they probably would not think to define domestic violence as terrorism.



### *Civil Rights And Arab-American Women*

The discussion about women's rights in the human rights context is to some extent a metaphysical one, questioning whether Arab/Muslim culture is even consistent with women's rights, let alone how these rights should become a part of those countries' laws. In the domestic context, however, civil rights (once so defined) are enshrined in U.S. law and enforceable in U.S. courts, which is often not the case with human rights, even when countries are signatories to international human rights documents.

In the U.S., "women's rights"<sup>20</sup> are part of our law because of the women's movement's focus on reproductive rights and on securing equal rights.<sup>21</sup> The way equal rights are "achieved" in U.S. law is by legislation that makes it illegal to discriminate against women in terms of employment, education, housing, public accommodation, and lending practices.

Are these rights relevant to Arab-American women's struggle against patriarchy? To begin to answer, this we have to first recognize that there are two different "patriarchies" acting on their lives: that of greater-American society and that of Arab-American society. This paper will not linger on the former, which requires us to answer whether the focus of the U.S. women's movement on rights/legislative action really disabled U.S. patriarchy.<sup>22</sup> Thus I focus on the latter, do equal rights under the law protect Arab-American women from Arab-American patriarchy?

Not really. The reasons being: 1) the short reach/scope of the law;;2) the appropriateness of law as a remedy, and 3) the conceptualization of rights in the American legal tradition.

As discussed above, Arab-American patriarchy acts on women in the private sphere where "private" actors are doing the discriminating. The law hesitates to go into the private sphere unless an act occurs there that escalates to the degree of breaking a criminal law. The discrimination Arab-American women suffer in their homes can take many forms that do not rise to the level of breaking any law, such as parents not funding a daughter's education while funding that of a son, not allowing her to live outside the home before marriage or not allowing her to date, while not placing the same restrictions on her brother. While this discrimination is rooted in notions of women's "difference", which is offensive to the spirit of American anti-discrimination laws and which could be prosecuted in an employer-employee situation, the law cannot be applied to the family.

Moreover, the law reaches "acts" not *inactions*; not funding a girl's education is an inaction that the law cannot punish whereas it can punish the act of beating a spouse. Thus, the law could not help Tina Isa when her parents forbade her to work or to date but could intervene once her parents murdered her.<sup>23</sup>

This brings up the very appropriateness of the law as remedy for women's inequality. Unequal rights for women are but one manifestation of patriarchy, and it is the manifestation that the mainstream women's movement has been most effective in battling. But, patriarchy also manifests itself in ways (perhaps less blatant) such as constructing the genders differently, that is, what it means to be a "true" woman and what it means to be a "true" man. Like all systems built on an unequal distribution of power, patriarchy makes victims of women and men alike (e.g. boys don't cry.) It is these constructs that determine different rules and expectations for the sexes, and sometimes rules and expectations do not rise to the level of unequal laws, thus equal rights in the law can be irrelevant. Recourse to the

courts might not be the right remedy for such manifestations of patriarchy as the pressures to get married and have children, to maintain virginity till marriage, to marry within the culture or religion, to study closer to home, and the pressure of having family honor located in your hymen. (Again, because our experiences are not monolithic, these examples are by no means universal. But they demonstrate how patriarchy can be oppressive without being technically illegal.)

The genders are also constructed differently in the greater American society, and it is these constructs that eventually lead to discrimination. But as U.S. law stands now, it can only punish the consequences (discrimination) of these gender constructs in the public spheres, when a public actor violates a civil rights law, or in private, when an actor violates a criminal law, which is what happens in domestic violence cases.

This does not mean that law and rights in general cannot be more central to securing women's equality. However, in U.S. practice, part of why law is not the ultimate remedy to patriarchy is because of how we define rights. A state's/government's relationship to rights can be defined both negatively and affirmatively. American law reflects a preference for the former. For example, a negative right, such as the right to *not* have the state conduct unwarranted searches and seizures, is enshrined in the Bill of Rights whereas the right to have the state *provide* healthcare is not. Affirmative rights are often associated with socialist/communist regimes. This is true of our civil rights laws as well, which pursue equality by saying the state, or in some cases other public sphere actors, *cannot* discriminate against persons on the basis of their sex, race, national origin, or religion; this has become a given in our society. But it is much less of a given, and in fact anathema, to do anything *affirmative* such as Affirmative Action to make equality meaningful. American law says the government or other public sphere actors cannot forbid you from getting on the playing field, but the government does not have to give you any equipment to play.

The general idea is if the opportunities are there and are protected by law, then if a person cannot enjoy those opportunities, the fault lies in that person. This is the argument generally made by opponents of Affirmative Action programs, which do not leave the "fault" found in just the individual but extend it to the entire race perceived to be benefiting unjustly. Thus, if Arab-American women cannot take advantage of these great opportunities available in the U.S., it is their fault, their failure to assert themselves within their culture, which, by extension, is also faulted in addition to their race. And since they become racially inferior, the idea is they do not really deserve these rights to begin with.

While the state provides an Arab-American woman the right to not be excluded from the rights that all Americans enjoy on the grounds that she is an Arab-American woman (whether for race or gender exclusively or in conjunction), the state does not have to provide financial aid, protected housing, contraception, etc. that would make that right meaningful and one she can enjoy. Rights, therefore, remain, to some extent, theoretical.

While the focus of this paper is not general American patriarchy, a brief note would be useful here: American patriarchy does act specifically on Arab-American women. One way it perpetuates itself is by positing American culture as superior to Arab culture because American women are more "free" than Arab women. Moreover, Arab culture is portrayed as the polar opposite of American culture; therefore if Arab culture is bad, American culture must be good; if Arab women are oppressed, then American women are not. Therefore, there is no need

to focus on American patriarchy. It also uses Arab/Muslim women to racialize all Arabs and Muslims.<sup>24</sup> But, again, is the law relevant to ending this process? The law cannot end the racializing directly; it can only punish its manifestations when they escalate to the degree of breaking non-discrimination (or other) laws. Arguably, prosecution of discriminatory acts can send a message as to what is acceptable by society, and thus, by some sort of trickle down effect, potentially erode a certain racialization.

### BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION: TAKING THE OFFENSIVE

So where does this leave us now? Though we must remain vigilant against harmful rhetoric and practice from supposed allies, we must also break our defensive postures. Unfortunately, we can no longer ignore the domestic mainstream women's movement, in part, because their racism is no longer located just in their isolated circles. These groups are mainstream in a relative, but not absolute, sense, but now, because of the focus on the evils of the Arab and Muslim world, they are getting considerably more attention. They use (or are allowed to use) the "inferior" status of Arab and Arab-American women to further racialize Arabs and Arab-Americans in general, which leads to activism on our "behalf", activism that can recommend bombardment to achieve liberation.

For example, when the Feminist Majority determined that Afghan women were suffering because they had to wear the *burka*, as opposed to suffering because they were living under a regime like that of the Taliban that the U.S. helped bring to power by funding the *mujabeddin* against the Soviets in Afghanistan or because they were living in a country that was destabilized by the proxy conflict between the US and the USSR in Afghanistan to the point where the Taliban could even come to power it was, at best, ignoring the racism that surrounded these foreign policy decisions and, at worst, promoting the racism that Muslim women suffer because "our" men as opposed to "their" men are backwards. And once we are a barbarian race, it is easier for "their" men to wage war on "our" men in Afghanistan and Iraq without having to question American complicity in creating the regimes from which they are now "liberating" people. The Feminist Majority's answer to this might be that they take care of "women's issues" and do not get involved in greater political questions. This is the precise problem with white mainstream liberal feminists' ideological approach to feminism, and why they will continue to scratch their heads and ask where all the women of color are and why we do not like them.<sup>25</sup>

I believe, to move forward, we must have a space where we do not have to alternate defensive postures, a space of our own for Arab-American women and feminists. The next step, I believe, is an organized Arab-American feminist voice; organizations like Arab Women's Solidarity Association and Arab American Feminist Forum are steps in the right direction. It will also fall to such groups, whether they are highly organized non-profits or informal gatherings of women, to think about how to fill the gaps civil rights law leaves wide open, whether these are consciousness raising among Arab-American women, fundraising for scholarships, mentoring programs for younger women, or living "unconventionally" openly amongst other issues.

As Americans, we can also work to try to incorporate more affirmative rights into the American tradition so that every powerful recourse to the law and the courts is available to us in our pursuit of equality.

Finally, in the human rights context, we need to continue working to reclaim our traditions and culture, and their dynamism—is change not an inherent part of culture?<sup>2</sup> Arab culture is, problematically, defined by those benefiting both politically and economically from maintaining a situation where women are stymied, if not completely prevented, from competing for scarce jobs and political power. It is in fact insulting to Arab culture to find that it is incompatible with equality.

Though human rights is a flawed tradition, and unfortunately even a bit tainted when it passes on the lips of persons who “liberate” countries under their banner, it is still a great one and can serve as a powerful tool as we seek to transform our societies for the better.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Syrian salad.

<sup>2</sup> Arabic for “proper (or role model) Arab girl.”

<sup>3</sup> The use of the term “American” in this essay refers specifically to “North America” and is not intended to deny the “American-ness” of our neighbors to the south or north.

<sup>4</sup> For more on racial formation, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, (New York, Routledge: 1994).

<sup>5</sup> This reality has been well documented elsewhere. See generally, Cherrie Moraga & Gloria Anzaldúa (eds.) *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, (New York, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> This has been changing as progressive communities have been newly galvanized on Palestine and Iraq, and the numbers of Arab/Muslim-Americans in progressive communities have increased.

<sup>7</sup> The civil rights movement in America, at its peak, did possess a global perspective, linking the oppression of African-Americans with the struggles of other peoples in the world. In many ways, it has forgotten those roots, in part because the racial situation here in the U.S. can be all-consuming and in part because some fear potential repercussions of a more diverse involvement in international relations. The result has been to see the civil rights movement here as a strictly *domestic* phenomena, which advocates on behalf of minority Americans. Similarly, Arabs are not seen as “American”, let alone minority-Americans, and thus we are rendered invisible. Nadine Naber in her paper, “Ambiguous Insiders: An Investigation of Arab-American Invisibility,” in *Ethnic & Racial Studies* 23 (2000), p. 37-61, writes that there are two separate processes racializing us as white and non-white and that accounts for our invisibility. I think, rather, that Arabs are racialized only as non-white and as “foreign.” The second part of that racialization is what makes us invisible *as Americans* and why we have failed historically to claim a comfortable position within circles of color. My full argument is laid out in my forthcoming article, “‘Dying with the Wrong Name:’ The Role of Law in Racializing and Erasing Arabs in America.”

<sup>8</sup> Naber, Nadine, Eman Desouky, and Lina Baroudi, “The Forgotten ‘-Ism’: An Arab American Women’s Perspective on Zionism, Racism, and Sexism,” *Time to Rise*, eds. Maylei Blackwell, Linda Burnham, Jung Hee Choi (Oakland, CA: Women of Color Resource Center, 2004). See also, Annalisa Jabailly, “1967: How Estrangement and Alliances Between Blacks, Jews, and Arabs Shaped a Generation of Civil Rights Family Values,” in *Law and Inequality* 23 (2005), p. 197-237.

<sup>9</sup> Looking at Arab-Americans as a subject of the law is in and of itself an homage to the Critical Race Theorists. For more on critical race theory, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, & Kendall Thomas (eds.) *Critical Race Theory: The Writings That Formed the Movement*, (New York: New Press, 1996). This piece, however, is not an academic piece; these are reflections on my own personal experiences and choices as an Arab-American woman who happens to be a lawyer. Where appropriate, I have noted academic writings available on the points I make.

<sup>10</sup> Thus that phenomena when, upon hearing of a plane crash or a bombing, praying it was not Arabs.

<sup>11</sup> See the opening paragraphs exploring how ordinary day events are perceived by people of color in, Richard Delgado & Jean Stefancic (eds.) *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, (New York, New York University Press: 2001)

<sup>12</sup> Though I do not believe that legal equality or remedies are enough to achieve true equality, I do believe that it is a very real reality that interactions with both the state and private actors are still

characterized by power imbalances and racism and its discontents. Thus, while the battle in courts will not achieve equality, it is nonetheless critical.

<sup>13</sup> However, the Supreme Court held almost 20 years ago that civil rights claims made on racial grounds where the plaintiff was Arab can stand because at the time the legislation (§1981) was written, “Arab” was considered a separate race. *Saint Francis Coll. v. Al-Khazraji*, 481 U.S. 604, 107 S.Ct. 2022 (1987). For more on the status of Arabs’ race under American law, see my forthcoming article mentioned supra in note 7.

<sup>14</sup> There is one exception where that safety is murky and that is when Arab-American civil rights are violated by those espousing a “zealous” pro-Israeli position. It has been my experience that animosity towards Arabs-Americans by pro-Israelis is not seen to be “as bad as” racism by whites against nonwhites because the animosity is perceived to be rooted in a political/religious debate, where either each has a valid position or where Arabs have the wrong position. Thus, the animosity is not seen as “irrational” as the racism that led to slavery and segregation. However, when our victimizers are “conventional” whites or the government, the arms of the civil rights world have been rather welcoming to me.

<sup>15</sup> Universalism is the belief that human rights as set forth by the “international community” are universal, apply to all of humankind, and are so fundamental that no departure from them is excusable. Cultural Relativism is the belief that human rights are not universal, and standards should be determined/defined by local custom and tradition. Its adherents believe that universalism is an attempt by Western cultures to impose their values on non-Western cultures.

<sup>16</sup> For a feminist challenging of other (non-Arab) traditions, see Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Nadjé Al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender, and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women’s Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Women activists have spoken to the point of cultural relativism. See for example, Azar Majedi, “Islam and Sexual Apartheid” in *116 The New Humanist 04* (2001); interview with Shirin Ebadi by Amistabh Pal in *The Progressive* (Sept. 2004), Azam Kamguian, “Cultural Relativism, Islam, and the Universality of Women’s Rights”, available at [www.middleeastwomen.org/html/relativism.htm](http://www.middleeastwomen.org/html/relativism.htm).

<sup>19</sup> See Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion challenging the rationale of “women” as a subject of law, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999), arguing that the “law” produces subjects like “women” as a way to perpetuate its own hegemony. The merits of such a discussion are not explored here; this essay is concerned with legislation, which already takes women as a subject of its reach and questions its relevance to Arab-American women specifically.

<sup>21</sup> Though the inclusion of “sex” in the Civil Rights Act was done to thwart its passing.

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of such a question, see Catharine MacKinnon, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward a Theory of Law and Patriarchy,” in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 8:635 (1983); Janet Rifkin, “Toward a Theory of Law and Patriarchy,” *Harvard Women’s Law Journal* 3:83 (1980); Diane Polan, “Toward a Theory of Law and Patriarchy,” *The Politics of Law: A Progressive Critique*, ed. David Kairys (New York: Basic Books, 3d. Edition, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> Tina Isa, an Arab-American living in St. Louis Missouri, was 16 years old in 1989 when her parents stabbed her to death for her disobedience and for tainting their “honor”; she had taken a job and had a boyfriend against their wishes.

<sup>24</sup> Stereotypes of Arabs or Muslims indeed include phenotypical attributes, but often, the stereotyped characteristics could also belong to other groups, such as Hispanics. The veiled or subjugated woman is a common attribute to make the stereotype dispositively Arab or Muslim.

<sup>25</sup> In the fall of 2002, I attended a Feminist Majority-sponsored event to celebrate the publication of Daisy Hernandez & Bushra Rehman (eds.) *Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today’s Feminism*, (New York: Seal Press, 2002) at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. The main speaker was a white woman and veteran of “The Women’s Movement”, and a recurrent theme of her talk and of the interventions of the organizers was, “How do we get more women of color interested in feminism?”

**HOME AND HOMELANDS—  
MEMORIES, EXILE, AND BELONGING**

# THE MEMORY OF YOUR HANDS IS A RAINBOW

By Amal Hassan Fadlalla\*  
Translated by Khaled Mattawa\*\*

My beloved is tall  
tall  
the color of stars  
the color of plains,  
and when my beloved surges  
the fires of the north and south are doused  
a flower is born from the sunset's mouth,  
kisses the brow of sunrise,  
and when my beloved floods  
the heads of those who steal  
children's happiness  
bend  
and the epoch of war ends  
and the time of those  
who do not laugh  
who do not cook  
who do not feed  
and who feel  
no dread when they kill?  
ends,  
and when my beloved melts in my hand  
the world gives birth to a thousand books  
and a thousand new women  
women the color of ebony and wheat

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pregnant  
 pregnant with history  
 with authority that divides lotus berries among the poor  
 naked women  
 naked clothed naked clothed naked  
 dancing on the streets of Boston  
 'al-lawl, al-lawl ya lawlia  
 they'll bewitch you my Ethiopian beauty'  
 and they liberate America  
 and they plant a seed of Karbala  
 and Mustafa Siyyid Ahmad sings  
 'my girl will soon come  
 the girl-the garden will soon come'

My love is a big child.  
 I birthed it with my mouth,  
 and my grandmother ululated  
 seven times  
 and planted in his hands  
 three date palms  
 one in the right and two in the left,  
 and my young sister sang  
 'that green one is my green  
 I'll hide him, not to be seen.'  
 She released many sparrows  
 bearing the rainbow's colors  
 and the nation became one,  
 the nation united, then scattered  
 and the people stepped out,  
 chanting  
*Laubaik laka Laubaik?*  
 We heard, here we come  
 'Penicillin O headnurse,  
 call out the doctor O headnurse'  
**Laubaik laka Laubaik**  
 and they drank water purer than pure,  
 and they danced  
 'Let that diesel engine work  
                   It's working that diesel train  
 Let that diesel engine work,'  
 and they fall in love on the street  
 and they make love in Maukwar,  
 Maukwar, its address of justice and freedom.

Sweet and generous Nile?  
 sweet and branched out for miles



wash my features with your water,  
release my wings and my hands,  
scatter my history with your rain,  
in the heart of the West Bank,  
break my bracelets and my chains,  
turn me into a sandalwood powder rubbed in a kaffiyeh  
for Rachel under the tank  
facing a bullet and a platoon  
and open a Mexican street  
for the girl going out to her shift.

My beloved is tall  
for the girl going out on her shift

## ذكري يداك قوس قزح

حبيبي طويل  
طويل  
يلونُ النجوم  
لونهُ بخضرةِ السهول  
سوادُ يكحلُ الغيوم  
و عندما يفيضُ حبيبي  
تتطفئُ حرائقُ الشمالِ و الجنوب  
تولدُ زهرةُ من شفةِ المغيب  
تقبلُ هامةُ الشروق  
و عندما يفيضُ حبيبي  
تتحني هامةُ الذين يسرقون سعادةِ الأطفال  
وينتهي زمنُ الحرب  
و الذين لا يضحكون  
لا يطبخون  
لا يطعمون  
و لا يخافون حين يقتلون  
و عندما يذوبُ حبيبي في يدي  
ينجبُ الكونُ ألف كتابٍ و ألف إمراةٍ جديدة  
نساءُ بلونِ الأبنوسِ و القمح  
حبايات  
حباياتِ بالتاريخِ و بالسلطةِ التي تُقسمُ النبقَ بين الفقراء  
نساءُ عاريات  
عاريات كاسيات عاريات كاسيات عاريات  
يرقصن في شوارعِ بوسطن  
" اللول اللول يا لوليا، بسحروك يا لولى الحبشية"  
ويحررن أمريكا  
ويشتلن كربلاء  
ويُغني مُصطفى سيد أحمد  
"حاجي البننت - الحديقة"

حبيبي طفلُ كبير  
أنجبتُهُ بطني  
فز غردتُ جدتي سبع مرات  
و غرستُ في يديه ثلاثة نخلات

واحدة باليمين وأنتين باليسار  
 وغنت أختي الصغيرة  
 " الخدار خدارى من العين بضارى "  
 وأطلقت عصافيرَ كثيرة  
 بلون قوس قزح  
 وتوحد الوطن  
 تبعثرَ الوطن  
 وخرجَ الناسُ يهتفون  
 لبيك لك لبيك، لبيك لك لبيك؟  
 " البنسلىن ياتمرجى نادو الحكيم ياتمرجى "  
 لبيك لك لبيك  
 ويشربونَ الماءَ صفواً صفوا  
 ويرقصون  
 "البابور جاز خلوه يشتغل، الشغل بالجاز، خلوه يشتغل"  
 ويعشقونَ في الشوارع  
 ويصنعونَ الحبَ في مكوار  
  
 مكوار عنواننا عداله وحرية  
 يانيل ياطيب وإنساني  
 يانيل ياطيب ومتفرع  
 أغسل بمويتك قسماتي  
 وأطلق أجنحتي وإيديا  
 شنتت بمطرك تاريخي  
 في قلب الضفة الغربية  
 كثير أسورتي وأغالى  
 حولني ضريره وكوفيه  
 لراشيل تحت الدبابه  
 نتحدى رصاصه ودوريه  
 وتفتح شارع مكسيكي  
 للبت الطالعه الوردية  
 حبيبي طويل  
 للبت الطالعه الوردية  
 ورديه  
 البت الماشه الوردية

آمال حسان فضل الله  
 جامعة ميتشجان

# THE LONG ROAD HOME

Sherene Seikaly\*

## BEIRUT REMEMBERED AND EXPERIENCED

At the lavish campus of the University of California in San Diego, on the shores of the city of La Jolla, my friend Krista told me about her creative writing class. Krista said her introduction to creative writing was to narrate her first memory. She explained - her mother showed her and her sister the patterns the sun made when you held a kiwi up to it.

A couple of years later in 1994 in my maternal family home in Beirut, working in Palestinian refugee camps and trying to come to terms with a childhood abruptly halted by immigration to the United States, Krista's story would resurface. The realities of the camps and the abandoned refugees who had given their lives and their children to the cause became more difficult to understand. I tried to recall my first memory.

Beirut was a treasured place in my memory; our entire extended family had settled in one place. It was perhaps the only time I felt belonging. My mother feels bad that my first memories are of war. But I am grateful. Being stuck in our building after it was hit by a bomb, seeing a man shattered to pieces fall off the balcony just above me, watching cars explode, and worrying constantly about my parent's lives, was more than just formative. It instilled in me a knowledge that I had seen, lived, and survived.

Sitting and writing in my latest stop, Haifa, I have come to understand that Beirut was (and in many senses continues to be) one part of Palestine for me. My aunt Lamia, who embraced me and welcomed my return, had taken me along as a child to the many visits she made to families in refugee camps. My youngest aunt, Randa, was also active; she was the focus of most of the family's worries when fighting broke out. Together my aunts shaped my ideal of what a young woman committed to the liberation of her people should be.

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These ideals were strongly called into question upon experiencing first hand how political parties and community-based organizations competed with one another at the expense of the people they were ostensibly serving. As the long civil war in Lebanon had come to a close in the mid nineties, community organizations – both in and outside the refugee camps – were shifting from service provision to what was being broadly defined as “development work.” Many of the people working in non-profit community-based organizations were certainly committed to effecting social and political change. However, their institutions were increasingly becoming donor driven – privileging agendas ill suited to community priorities and often compromising local needs. While quickly adjusting to these realities in my work with local and later regional non-profits, the realization that I was embarking on a career and not on a course for political change – however small – was a harsh one.

You were hard pressed to enter any house in Sabra and Shatilla without gaining new insight on human resilience and the various ways people resist and struggle against injustice. I came to revile one staple part of my job – taking foreign delegations to visit the camps. Researchers and human rights workers often had good intentions and were sometimes able to give back to the people they interviewed. All too often, though, it was a perverse situation where the Palestinian refugees became an object to be observed, studied, and interrogated. This process became more unbearable as the “Gaza-Jericho First” phase of the Oslo negotiations rendered a narrative of unavoidable defeat. The Palestinians of the refugee camps were to be forgotten. The desire to dig one’s hands in the ground and be part of something larger seemed increasingly naive. The liberation movement had given way to fierce competition over rapidly shrinking resources. The revolution that I imagined myself fighting in, like my aunts, was shattered to pieces. The collectivity Beirut had previously signified was emptied; my entire family would never be again in one place.

I found myself writing. Memory was both a burden and a gift. It was the memory of my grandmothers’ homes, the grocery store at the corner of Umm Simone’s house, and the schoolyard that had first drawn me back to Beirut. These places had been so large in my mind – they got larger as they grew to signify another life. I looked through the various images, locations, and scenes and found my first memory.

Sometime in the early seventies my father had taken my mother and I to the border of Jordan and Palestine. My parents were the world to me, a world made much more fragile by the ever present danger of war. They parked near a lookout. There we had a clear view of a long, winding road surrounded by high walls shielding a city in the distance. I asked where we were and why. They were both sad and wistful, as if there was meaning to this place that I couldn’t grasp. My father pointed to the city in the distance: “At the end of this road is Palestine. This is where you are from and where you should be, but you cannot go.”

## HAIFA

I searched for a view of Haifa. The views I found were incessantly marred by bars. I couldn’t find a house without bars, sometimes white, sometimes black. If I could find a house without bars the view might look prettier. The sea, after all, is beautiful and crisp - its blueness breathtaking, the sun shimmering, and the waves

softly pouring onto the shore exhilarating. The monumental beauty brings a wave of relief that temporarily washes over me until the pain of memory returns.

Ultimately I found a view, a spacious barless apartment owned by a young Russian couple. The building is not far from where one of our family homes still stands. When my family lived here, the street was called *shari' al jabal* (the Street of the Mountain). In 1948, it was renamed United Nations Street. When the United Nations declared that Zionism parallels racism, the street was renamed Zionism Avenue. When I pondered the violence of a nation built on the ruins of another, I was told that all nations are built on lies, massacres, and crimes. There is no denying that, but this place seemed more immediate.

I sit perched on my desk in a room converted from a balcony. Like a bird resting on a tall tree, I wonder what this view will offer me, what will it allow me to see? Cypress trees stand on one side, a reminder of the forestation programs all over the country. They nestle the Baha'i temple with its gardens dangling over what had been Karmel Street. Beyond the cypress trees and the Baha'i temple is the sea and the road to Jaffa. On the other side of the apartment is a full view of the city of Haifa and its coast all the way to `Acca. Every morning over coffee, I imagine my great grandfather traveling from his clinic in `Acca to visit his family in Haifa. The other Palestinian-American studying in Haifa had a different view. I envied her ability to adapt, to keep moving, when I was overcome so easily. One day I brought the subject up again – but isn't this place strange for you also? "No," she explained, "I don't live it as an occupation."

In a piercingly cold winter in Brooklyn, I spoke to my comrade Samar about the impossibility of Haifa. Even though born in Beirut, I had grown up believing myself to be from Haifa. When asked "where are you from?" my reply was always "Haifa." That changed in 1997 when I came to Haifa for the first time and realized that I was not from what seemed a terrifying place. It was abandoned and inhabited at the same time. I began saying I am "originally" from Haifa. And I believe in the right of my family and the hundreds of thousands of other Palestinian refugees to return. But I could never return to Haifa. My comrade challenged me, "Well, why not? You could actually return, you have an American passport, you can return. At least temporarily."

Samar had grown up in Haifa, originally from a village in the north, which is now an Israeli national park. Like over 500 other Palestinian villages, it was destroyed. Instead of being buried under trees, it lies as a site for visiting tourists to ponder a constructed national past. It was difficult to indulge my ideas with her about what was actually her city, about where she was from, even though both sides of my family had lived in historic Palestine for hundreds of years until 1948. But she had, from the beginning of our friendship, more than simply acknowledged my relationship to this place. She also understood it as being another way to think about Palestine. She challenged me with the possibility of return - the possibility of knowing Haifa.

On my first visit to Haifa in 1997, I kept insisting to my Nazarene friend, Mona, "Show me the stairs." She was perplexed, "What stairs? *Ma fi aktar minnun bon*, [Haifa is all staircases]." My parents had said that they used to play on staircases, they remembered a staircase next to their aunt's house where they had played together. It led to the sea. We found some stairs, and I photographed the place wondering if my parents had played here fifty years ago. Did Ramzi and Samia play here as children running and laughing under the Haifa sun? Fifty years is not a long time. In the spread of history, how long is it really? Barely a moment. It

turned out to be the right staircases, my uncle later told me. He pointed to the photograph “here, our aunt’s house was this one.”

Later in 2001, I took precise directions for all the different homes in Haifa, hoping to find them and photograph them for my aging grandmothers. My family’s history was jotted down on a small white piece of paper; a map that Samar, my Haifite comrade, and I held close. People reacted in turn. One man said that the places on my paper did not exist and that the person who had told me where to go did not know what he was talking about. Fighting the urge to scream, I held my feet firmly to the ground. Was he rejecting my claims? Or was the weight of the memory too heavy?

Samar was steadfast in our effort to find where my family had lived, but there was a bit of regret hinging around her sentences. “I just don’t know what this place is now, it is not called that any more”, but then “we will find it, we will find it.” After visiting the municipality and looking for the train station and searching different places, we retreated. On our way home, we went to visit a lawyer whom Samar knew. His reaction to my story was one of delight. Many Palestinians inside the green line reacted this way to me. Conversely, others justifiably saw that my “return” - as ephemeral as it was - was possible only because of my privileged position as an American citizen, from a middle class urban Palestinian family. Within minutes, the lawyer had found exact directions to the houses from an older relative over the phone.

He drove us around and pointed – it might be this one, or maybe that one. I photographed, numb and exhausted. Relief and sadness marked the death of something, and the birth of a new relationship to this place.

The next day, I took to the city by myself. The night before, there had been a bomb scare in Haifa. It turned out to be nothing more than assumptions about an “Israeli-Arab” going to a nightclub with a bag. The following morning, the streets and the beaches were empty. The inherited memories of my family accompanied me up and down the city’s hilly terrain - through the Hadar, down to Wadi an-Nisnas, over to Wadi as-Salib, back down to the sea. I walked all day and took photographs of what my eye could only see as violent juxtapositions - the reflection of Palestinian homes in relentlessly tall and overbearing glass buildings.

Later, Samar said that what was most interesting to her about the search was how I had just wanted to walk around Haifa. By talking to her, I realized that the searching was much more important to me than the finding.

Ultimately, I found a view. I can now see the houses. They are part of my daily life. In the beginning, each memory, place, and story would inspire emotion and a desire to document. I would think– that’s one house, that’s another. As time passed, I preferred not knowing which houses were which. I preferred to see them all as sites of collective dispossession and as possibilities for return.

Being immersed in the reality of what Haifa is today offered me a lesson about the gaps between inherited and lived memory. I still look at and tell people about my family’s house down the street – now owned by the Histadrut – the Israeli Labor Federation. The initial shock has dimmed. The study of Palestinian history became the next space to search. I learned to preserve my energy for coping with those spaces of the Israeli state that any researcher must face daily. My political work has been limited – partly due to my own caution as a “tourist” who can be denied entry every three months when I renew my visa and partly because both here (and from what I understand from friends, in the U.S. as well) political vision

and work has lost a considerable amount of momentum. History, thus, offered a refuge of sorts.

### THE ARCHIVE

An archive is a collection of documents kept for historical interest as well as the building or room that houses them. The archive is, in the conventional wisdom of social sciences, a neutral space – the culmination of objectivity. In theory, it is a site that any interested party can access, search for, and compile whatever version of truth they seek. In any context, the archive is essential to producing a nation-state. Like the museum, it often also constitutes a record of any given nation's brutality. The very compilation of archives is an expression of state power. Scholars must, thus, both attend to the documents they find as well as to how these documents are compiled and categorized. All the while, scholars must remain persistently aware and critical of the narrative in which the archive – in its inclusions and absences – is immersed.

As the very possibility of a Palestinian nation becomes increasingly tenuous, the absence of a Palestinian national archive should come as no surprise. Historians and scholars of Palestine must gather, explore, and dig for dispersed shards scattered between historic Palestine and the various localities of Palestinian diasporas. The process requires creativity and a rigorous, critical eye. Historians of Palestine are in the position of both constructing history at the same time that they must be critical of that very process. The difficulties are further compounded when the aim is to access subaltern histories, situated outside the official canon, that are defined by restricted notions of the “political.” Capturing subaltern history, in any context, requires the rethinking of history itself. Chipping away at scores of documents, newspapers, letters, and contracts in the context of Israeli institutions was personally and intellectually challenging.

My archival research began at a co-existence center named Giv'at Haviva, which was based on a kibbutz in the north and holds one of the most complete archives of Arabic language newspapers in the country. The center had been a bastion of the Zionist left, a vibrant place that hosted the various seminars and workshops on how the “two people of Israel” - that salient and problematic ethnic/religious categorization of “Jews and Arabs” – can live together in peace. This discourse, needless to say, is emptied of politics as well as any discussion of historical claims, equality, or justice. The site of Giv'at Haviva, I learned, was a British military base in the mandatory period. The British had confiscated the land of a Palestinian family, the descendant of whom is a professor who works on that site today. The knowledge of the historically loaded significance of this place was no more or less to bear than the many other places or histories in Israel/Palestine. One learns to cope.

Yet, this place was also loaded at the everyday level. During the October 2000 uprisings of the Palestinians in Israel, in solidarity with their brethren in the West Bank and Gaza, the battalion that had killed thirteen Palestinian citizens was boarded in Giv'at Haviva. In addition, since Giv'at Haviva was rapidly falling into financial ruin – co-existence work is apparently not what it used to be – the administration was exploring new venues. They found their solution with the Israeli army and hired the center out to soldiers in the last stretch of their service studying for matriculation exams. Most of the days I was researching there, about 230 soldiers were living on the site, fully outfitted and armed. As I searched



through newspapers, inspired and intrigued by the daily events of Palestinian life, I would look up to see soldiers saunter in with their M16s to check their e-mail or read a book.

On some days, as I conducted this time travel, I could hear the Israeli army shooting in the West Bank only a few miles to the east. The realities of Palestinians living under occupation was a world apart from Giv'at Haviva, but geographically, the two places were but a short distance from one other, a powerful reminder of both the smallness of this place and the impossibility of ever living it as one contiguous territory.

The Central Zionist Archive (CZA), the National Library at the Hebrew University, and the Israel State Archives are main stops on any archival search for Palestine. On entering the CZA in Jerusalem, I was interested to see an exhibit of posters from the mandate period. The posters were all designed in that unmistakable forties style of angular graphics and bright colors, reminiscent of that aesthetically intriguing "Rosie the Riveter" paraphernalia. It was an experience of simultaneous attraction and repulsion. Close up, I realized that the posters were all articulations of Zionist iconography, that, while intellectually interesting for me, entailed a great deal of othering and erasure of self. The archivist asked me several questions about my project, declared it unviable, and proceeded to inform me of the CZA's collection, "We have eighty million documents, four of which are digitalized." I was overwhelmed by the institutional capacity and power of the state. The place represented all that I did not have as a Palestinian, particularly in comparison to the colonial power that made that lack a reality.

The National Library at the Hebrew University was a more subdued experience. While the images and icons of the Israeli state were everywhere to be seen, the reading room was quiet and bare, and whatever book or newspaper I wanted to peruse was there to be found. Palestinian collections and documents were scattered throughout the collection. In her work on the history of the Palestinian women's movement, Ellen Fleischmann describes the journey of Hala and Hind Sakakini, the daughters of cultural and literary figure Khalil Sakakani, to the National Library at Hebrew University:

When Hala and Dumya Sakakini visited the Hebrew University Library after 1967, they saw their father's extensive collection of books, which had been confiscated after their family's flight to Egypt during the fighting in Jerusalem in 1948. They even recognized his handwriting on the margins of the pages but were not allowed to recover the books.<sup>1</sup>

One is left struggling with the desire to not only find these collections but also to reclaim them. Yet, access is often denied. Upon learning that the National Library had an extensive sound archive, I spent a day trying to listen to recordings of the Palestine Broadcasting Service (PBS). Of course, at each stop of this sort, I had to explain myself and the reason behind my quest. On this particular search, I was first told that the archive did not contain the Arabic recordings of the PBS. I found this hard to believe since the advertisements for radio programs in the newspapers showed that broadcasts were in Arabic, Hebrew, and English. When I pushed this point, I was told that there was an archivist who knew how to access the PBS records, but he was on vacation.

The Israel State Archive has turned out to be the space I spend most of my time in. It is a run-down building that is comfortably Third World – the way the

old Ben Gurion Airport used to be before its recent renovation. The guards at the entry to the building are Mizrahim – one is Tunisian and the other is an Iraqi Kurd. On cigarette breaks, we speak in Arabic about the weather, politics, and God. Upstairs, before entering the Archive, everyone is subject to a search and to leaving an identity card or passport. Being born in Lebanon has raised more than a few eyebrows, and once I was asked to wait while the clerk checked with his superiors. I asked him “so being born in Beirut makes me a security threat?” He shifted his weight and looked uncomfortable. Invariably, these guards ask me who I am, why I am here, and what I am looking for. Occasionally, the hostility is difficult to miss, but usually people are just curious about someone spending hours on end going through file after file. Inside the archive, the staff is friendly and helpful, now well acquainted with me and my project. On first entering the ISA, I surreptitiously photographed the foyer. On one side is an entire wall of medium sized photographs of the founding mothers and fathers of the Israeli state. On another are two laminated enlargements of the declaration of the Jewish state – “Long Live Our State”, reads the headline. Today, on lunch breaks, I usually sit with my back to the exhibit. I know it’s there, but I prefer to save my emotional and physical energy for the remaining hours of the search.

## BEIRUT

Home lives in my aging grandmothers – Umm Khalil and Umm Simone. I have spent hours at their feet listening to their memories and their Palestine. Their courage and their lives are an eternal source of pride and comfort. In 1982, when the Israeli invasion of Beirut forced the evacuation of their building, my aunt Lamia urged Umm Khalil to at least retreat to the shelter. My grandmother refused. Usually a cautious woman, she decided she would not be expelled again. She preferred to die in her home. A few years ago, I sat Umm Khalil down for three hours, and under the heat of a video camera, cruelly drilled her for proof that we existed. She was exhausted by the end, and a bit sorrowful. At every point she repeated exasperatedly, “look we lived normal lives. Our families had lived there for several hundred years. We had houses, belongings. We sent our children to school. We went to market. We prayed. We buried our dead and then we were displaced. It is really that simple.”

As for my other grandmother, Umm Simone, who housed, fed, and cared for me in her aging wisdom during my four year sojourn to Beirut, her stories were always a bit more verbose. A strong, large framed woman, she used to boast of nursing her five children and having enough milk left to send the neighbors. Her father, Na’im, was the first doctor in ‘Acca, they had a good life, they were proud people, and they lost everything. As she made her jams that tasted like there really must be a God, she told me about her ring, the sheets, and my father’s red bicycle that they took with them on their train ride across the Suez that morning in 1948. It was a Friday, and they had hoped to return that Sunday. As I was leaving Beirut that last evening in 1998, my two closest friends had gathered around to help me pack my bags, all of us in disbelief that this stage would soon be over. I had just started doing one of those personality tests that used to be so popular. I decided I would give it to my eighty-four year old grandmother before I left her old house with the deep green shutters that looked as if they were shipped from a toy factory by mistake. We got to the part where you are asked to imagine the afterlife. She

said, it is a grove, full of fruit, lemons, oranges, and, you know, a garden, a grove. She stopped and looked at me. “It’s Palestine.”

### CROSSING BORDERS

My grandmothers often told me about their trips from Haifa to Beirut. They would drive to Beirut for dinner and later return to Haifa. The distance is about three hours. One day, as I looked through the newspaper *Filastin*, I found an item about the train from Haifa to Beirut. It reminded me of the train tracks that people say are still there in the north of Palestine and the road that was called *ḵhatt il train* (the train line) in Beirut. I travel now from Haifa to Jerusalem every week and often think that if I drove the same distance in the opposite direction I could be visiting my ninety-four-year-old grandmother. One of the things I looked forward to in coming to Palestine was that I would be closer to her and the rest of my family and friends in Beirut. But in reality, I am further from them now than when I was in New York. While Beirut is only a stone’s throw away from where I sit, getting there from here can take up to two days. It is only possible, of course, because of my U.S. passport, but even with that key to the world there are a number of hazards one takes at each border crossing. After doing it once, it seemed wiser to wait until my research is completed before risking it again. The impossibility of traveling from Haifa to Beirut is a reminder of a large set of preposterous impossibilities – like the fact that coming here to get closer to my grandmothers has made me physically farther from them, or that on a clear day in Ramallah, a West Bank resident can see Jaffa but can never visit.

Today, I travel the very long road from one home to another. Every three months I have to leave this place. Each time, I leave specific instructions about my belongings with friends in case I am denied entry. I never take my computer, my camera, or my documents. If I take books, they are always in English. Despite my critical capacities and my knowledge of how authority works, I am always anxious, nervous, and afraid.

On both sides of the border, I am thoroughly searched and interrogated. The similarities in state intrusions on my life and on my body are mind-numbing at times. Inevitably, on both sides of the border, my identity is in question. At the Los Angeles International Airport this September, an armed officer asked, “Where are you from?” I hesitated, “California.” “No”, he insisted, “where are you really from?” On my return to Palestine, my Argentinean Israeli interrogator turned to me, “I see you are from Beirut, it is a beautiful city.” I replied, “You were there in 1982?” He responded in the affirmative and added, “It is a shame what the Lebanese did to that place.”

I remind myself, ultimately, I am free: My American citizenship assures me that privilege. I am different from the millions of people imprisoned by occupation in Palestine and the hundreds under illegal detention in the United States. I can cross borders, and I will continue to do so. I will carry my grandmother’s memories and find and document events, lives, and experiences of their generation.

### THE TRANSIENCE OF BELONGING

As Rosemary Sayigh has so aptly put it, the Palestinian people are experiencing a continuous *nakba* (catastrophe).<sup>2</sup> The tools of the occupation are

refined daily. Its most recent iteration is the onset of one of the largest and most expensive “separation” devices now being honed by the Israeli military apparatus. The very idea of Palestine, much less its actual landmass, is shrinking under the weight of over fifty years of oppression. Nature itself is assaulted, as more lives and olive trees are uprooted, displaced, and destroyed and more dunams of land are seized. The fragmentation of Palestine relies on a continuous process of removal and distancing - distancing people from one another, their land, and their history.

The long road home will be one I will always travel. The process of belonging has been and continues to be a violent one that is based on its very impossibility. As a daughter of refugee Palestinians, born in Beirut, and immigrating to Los Angeles, I remain outside all of the places with which I identify. My position within the margins has been one of power and privilege. It has also entailed loss – loss of collectivity, loss of language, loss of family, loss of home.

One late afternoon, as I stood in Abu Dis, the suburb of Jerusalem that is being butchered and ensconced by the “separation” wall, I met an old woman, Umm Hassan. She told me that the wall, part of which was already standing in front of us, was going to eat up most of her land that she and her family had farmed for generations. She was not going to be able to walk to Jerusalem to pray. One of her children’s homes would be on the other side of the wall, and her grandchildren were going to be separated from their school. I listened, helpless and angry. Where are you from, she asked me? I explained: My family was expelled in 1948 from Haifa. They were children. They wound up in Lebanon. I was born there. We immigrated because of the war. I grew up in the states. And now I am here doing my research. She looked at me: “All that my dear, and you are still Palestinian?”

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ellen Fleischmann, *The Nation and its New Women: The Palestinian Women’s Movement 1920-1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), fn. 51, p. 225-226.

<sup>2</sup> Rosemary Sayigh quoted from a talk delivered at a conference called, “Between the Archival Forest and the Anecdotal Trees: A Multi Disciplinary Approach to Palestinian Social History?” Institute of Law, Bir Zeit University, November 21-22, 2003.

# THE LEGACY OF EXILE

## *An Excerpt*

Emanne Bayoumi\*

### THE CAST

Yara: 11-year old daughter of Yasmine

Yasmine: Yara's mother. Has been living in San Francisco for the last 6 years. She is a janitor downtown. She has overstayed her visa, was stopped last year on the highway for speeding, and is now on parole awaiting her hearing with the INS.

Yasmine's mother/Yara's grandmother

### WAHID.

I sometimes think I see god when I look in the mirror. That sounds weird, huh? If my grandma heard me saying that I'd probably get whooped. Mamma says she's really really strict about god and praying and things like that. Mamma always says religious stuff to her when they talk on the phone. I don't even remember what she looks like anymore. I think she must be a little ugly cause her voice is really mean. But actually, mamma is pretty, so grandma can't be that ugly, right?

Mamma says I always look sad. And then *she* gets sad. I don't like it when mamma gets sad 'cause she locks herself up in the bathroom and I can hear her crying like she did when we first got here, through the peeling door because there's no windows in the bathroom so the humidity from the shower makes it peel all the time. I can always hear mamma hitting her head against the wall like that wooden thing she pounds the garlic in, and at first I got kind of scared but now it happens all the time and she doesn't do it really hard, so I sorta got used to it. Like the loud ugly man's voice upstairs when he's really angry at something which is oh my god--ALL the time. But I get a little uncomfortable cause I'm not sure what I should do and I think she thinks I can't hear it but I can. I'm not that dumb.

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### ITNAYN.

“You make us miss you, Yasmine. Why don’t you come visit us anymore? We all wish to see your daughter, Yara. She must be so big now mash’allah.”

“Mama, you know that I would if I could—it’s complicated. I’ve told you over and over.”

“I’m getting old my daughter. I can’t walk to the market anymore, your poor sister has to take me everywhere in the Peugeot. Everything is so expensive here now, you won’t believe it. A kilo of potatoes is 3 guineas now, can you imagine? And the cost of a loaf of bread is different every day. Your brother, Khaled, doesn’t ask about me anymore. I always knew that boy was going to be difficult. From the minute he came out wrong at his birth I knew it...”

“Mama, why don’t you come visit me here? I can work extra hours at the company—you know how they always need an extra engineer in San Jose and—”

“Yeeeeee, no, no my daughter! That’s impossible. No, I like my feet firmly planted on the earth. I will go when God wishes to take me. I will be buried here in the place I was born insha’allah. What if I die in Amreeka? Yeeeeeeeeee!”

### TALATA.

The clicking of Yasmine’s heels against the cement always brings with it the waves of loss more profoundly. The mundane can be dangerous that way. It is days like this Yasmine misses her mother most. She crosses the street to catch the 9 bus. As always, it is late. She finds a seat near the middle and rests her head against the cool pane of the window. Her makeup leaves a smudged mark where she rests her face, and somehow this fills her with satisfaction - proof that she’s really been there. It is sometimes difficult to have a sense of presence when people pretend they don’t see you. Nobody has ever smiled at her on this bus, and Yasmine thinks that she must remind them of the hysterical Iraqi women on CNN. As if she’s about to start screaming allahu akbar suddenly and pull out a Kalashnikov. Usually she looks out the window, following the golden hilltops with her gaze. She always thinks of that Joni Mitchell song as she watches the hills pass across the horizon.

Her uncle Gamal had first introduced her to Joni Mitchell years ago. They were sitting together on the steps of the apartment a few meters away from the shore of the Mediterranean, enjoying the jasmine entangled through the metal gate of the garden, smoking cigarettes and swatting at flies. They were alike in so many ways, but it wasn’t something they talked about. Yasmine had always known that Gamal was gay, but there wasn’t a language to talk about those things with family. The silence between them was more fluent than any language when it came to those matters. He never said a word about her either, but it was as if their secret instinct about one another strengthened their friendship. It was a silent pact with one another, and words would only complicate things. Spending time with him, although rare, was always good. Her guard would come down a little and they would talk for hours about their favorite music, his painting career, her hopes and dreams. He was the one who had first encouraged her to leave for America. If only she could sit with him now by the shore of the Mediterranean. She wanted to tell him that America was not the sanctuary they’d thought it would be. That here, in this country, there was nothing left unspoken. That queers had created a language for themselves, but it was being used against her. That last night she had found a

letter on her doorstep: *ayrab dyke go back to the desert where you came from you whore. P.S. This note is written in pigs blood.*

A wash of loneliness hits hard between her breasts, and she holds her breath as it passes. She hopes that her daughter Yara can somehow leave this cruel solitude behind, that it is not a legacy of exile.

### ARBA'AA.

Her lightly calloused hands caress my belly, border crossings along the boundaries of my breasts. When we lay together as we lay now, facing each other, tracing the edges of our desires with dark fingers, the solace is within reach. Her kisses are like the visa that I need to escape the grind of this country that traps me here like an animal. My tears trickle down the hollow of my neck and the sadness soon grows indistinguishable from the desire that races as she licks the salt droplets from my neck. Her arms soften the anger that we hoard like mementos from back home, her kisses erase for a short time the powerlessness, the fear, and the flashes of dead bodies from Al-Jazeera that swim in my head, that follow me like daily companions, keeping me awake at night. Palestinian mothers, fathers, Iraqi babies, the young men, the little girls - all those who have lost the privilege to choose whether to live or die. Sex blurs the boundaries of sadness, quenching for a moment the thirsty grief of bringing up a young child alone in this unforgiving place. Her tongue is relentless. She calls my name, Yasmine. Nothing has ever sounded sweeter, and I live. For a few fleeting moments, curled against each other, I rest in solace of the way things were before I left, the vastness and the brine of the Mediterranean, of what was left behind. The sound of our hearts beating sometimes in time, sometimes not, tunes out the sound of the bombs. As we lay, the borders come down and we are free. For a moment, the war stops. For a time, I safely return home.

*Nassim alayna'l hawa  
Bil mafra'a il wadi  
Ya hawa, ya lil hawa  
Khudni ala'a bladi'*

### KHAMSA.

“Mamma, when are we going to do anything fun?” Yara looks through her mother’s dresses and pulls out her favorite—a red cotton gauze gypsy dress that is hidden in the very back of the closet. “My counselor at school says that I need to do more fun things because she thinks something is wrong with my head.”

“What are you talking about baby? What do you mean she thinks something is wrong with your head?”

“Well, she said that my teacher gave her some of my writing to look at, and I overheard them talking in the hallway and they said my writing borders on the macabre. I looked that word up in the dictionary and it means that I like to write about death and bad things like that. She thinks I need help.”

“Yara habibti, who is this counselor? She has no right to say things like that to you. What’s her name? First thing tomorrow I’m going straight to her office—how dare she say things like this to you!”

“Mama, don’t get mad. I knew you’d get mad. It’s not that bad. I’ll bring you my stories.” Yara rushes to her backpack and pulls out a pink Hello Kitty folder. “Here, this one is my favorite. It’s a choose your own adventure story that I wrote all by myself! It’s about this girl who is the last girl on the face of the planet, and she has to save the world from destruction.”

“Baby, go to bed. I’m going to school with you tomorrow morning.”

“Don’t you have work mamma?”

“Yes baby, but its okay. This is more important.”

“Okay, we’ll ride the bus together, yay! Goodnight mamma.”

“Goodnight baby.”

That night, Yasmine cries herself to sleep over her daughter’s stories. The bed shakes gently as she whimpers, the pillow soaking up the grief.

### SITTA.

Those stupid kids at school, they don’t know anything. Mamma doesn’t know that I can swear in English. Don’t tell her, ok? She wouldn’t be very happy with me. My mamma is almost never happy with me ‘cause I cause a lot of trouble around the house. Yesterday she got really mad at me ‘cause I wouldn’t talk to her in Arabi. It’s not like I don’t like my language. I love my language so much. I like the way it bounces in my head so soft like sugar or my hair after mamma puts olive oil in it. The stupid kids at school don’t think so, but who cares about them. Sometimes I forget the word in English and it comes out accidentally in Arabi, but I swear sometimes I can’t control it. And boy do I get whooped after school. They call me things like sand nigger—I have no idea what that means and I even looked it up in the dictionary in my class. And they call me Osama’s wife. I really, really hate it when they do that. Osama’s fucking ugly—who’d want to marry him anyways? Oh, don’t tell my mamma I said the f-word. I don’t want her to be mad at me. I love my mamma very much. I don’t want nothing to happen to her. I usually go home as fast as I can and I try to hide the scratches on my arm. I really hate those days ‘cause I really, really try hard, but I just can’t see god in the mirror. But I put on my favorite tape that my mamma said she used to play for me when I was still in her belly, and I feel better.

*Summertime and the livin' is easy  
Fish are jumpin' and the cotton is fine  
Oh your Daddy's rich and your ma is good lookin'  
So hush little baby, don't you cry<sup>2</sup>*

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Rahbani Brothers, “Nassam Alayna al-Hawa,” Safarbarlek/Bint el-Haress, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> The Best of Billie Holiday, “Summertime,” Intersound, 2000.



**FEMINIST SOLIDARITIES  
AND COLONIAL FEMINISMS**

## SILENCING RELIGIOSITY

### SECULARITY AND ARAB AMERICAN FEMINISMS

Lara Deeb\*

Despite recent interest in and awareness of what has often been termed “Islamic feminism” in the Arab world, the potential link between religiosity and feminist activism has not been accepted to the same extent when it comes to Arab American feminisms in the United States. Instead, a secularist silencing of religion, sometimes in the form of disdain or mistrust, pervades many of our discussions and much of our work. Women who may reject feminism semantically, but embrace a notion of gender equity that plays out on the ground in ways that often fit within the rubric of what many feminists would themselves embrace as feminist, are invisible in Arab American feminist circles. In what follows, I want to take a closer look at this secularist silencing. In so doing, I begin in the Arab world and travel transnationally to the U.S., in the hopes that a comparative analysis will provide a useful foil for similar dynamics that emerge here in North America.

#### A LEBANESE CONTRAST

Between 1999 and 2001, I conducted ethnographic field research in the southern suburbs of Beirut. A mostly Shi'i Muslim area, the neighborhoods in which I worked forms the urban locus of a longstanding Shi'i Islamist mobilization in Lebanon, most prominently represented today by the political party Hizbullah. My interlocutors were mainly devout Shi'i women,<sup>1</sup> some of whom were members of Hizbullah while others followed the religious leadership of Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah.<sup>2</sup> During these two years, I participated as a volunteer with an Islamic women's social welfare organization and interviewed women volunteers at this and a number of other Islamic organizations in the area. Everyday I would have long conversations with women who believed that they were inherently different

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from men, that their strengths and weaknesses were gender bound, and that those “natural” differences made them more suitable to different kinds of work and behavior than men. And everyday these same women discussed politics, economics, religion, and gender relations with far more confidence, openness, and eloquence than many women students and colleagues I knew in the United States. The Lebanese women with whom I worked and who I interviewed spent long hours running, working in, and volunteering with organizations that essentially provided the only available means of support for the poor in their neighborhoods, literally forming the backbone of their community.

Whenever I asked about feminism, they would laugh and say that it was terribly misguided of women in the West to think that it was desirable to be equal to men. They proposed *equity* (*‘adala*) instead as an alternative ideal, rejecting equality (*masawa*) because to them equality meant the erasure of differences between men and women—differences which were, in their view, essential to their identities as strong women. Pious Shi‘i women I spoke with based a rejection of “feminism” on their definition of the concept as the desire for equality (read: same-ness) with men (a definition with which many self-identified feminists might also take issue). Their understanding of equity, as an alternative, was an understanding based on equivalent but not identical rights, and an understanding that promoted interpretations of Islam that emphasized what Leila Ahmed terms its “ethical egalitarianism.”<sup>3</sup>

When I pursued my question, defining feminism in terms of social justice and women’s rights, many Shi‘i women readily accepted that the definition applied to them; their struggles, goals, and methods could be defined as feminist, but they continued to resist the term for reasons having to do with its problematic history and its linkage to colonial and neoimperialist powers. They felt that the term “feminism” was not broad enough to embrace their entire vision, which included working for greater educational and employment opportunities for women, concerns about economic survival, and opposition to Israeli military bombings of villages in south Lebanon.<sup>4</sup>

I offer this example of a typical rejection of “feminism” as a point of departure in order to emphasize how the terms we choose make a big difference not only in communication across languages; more importantly, they speak to the content of what feminism is and to whom it is relevant. Setting aside the term, “feminism”, then, I will use a similar argument to discuss how some feminists here in the U.S. as well as in Lebanon respond to “religiosity.”

Moving across Beirut to another neighborhood and to a secular feminist organization with whose members I had a number of conversations about my research, I found a curious reaction. When I discussed the work pious Shi‘i women were doing, and how outspoken and eloquent they were, I was often met with skepticism and doubt. One woman dismissed my observations by attributing Shi‘i women’s views to false consciousness. This was not particularly surprising to me, given the Lebanese history of division among people of different religious backgrounds, conflict between the “religious” and the “secular”, and a sixteen-year civil war that—though it did not begin as a primarily religious conflict—had the effect of entrenching sectarian divisions in the spaces of Beirut and the nation.<sup>5</sup> In the late 1990s, a long and necessary process of discussion and debate among various feminist groups (whether self-identified as such or not) was only beginning to take place.

Today, Hizbullah's women's committee is one of the 170 groups that make up the Lebanese Women's Council, and the Shi'i party recently had one of its representatives elected to the Council's administrative committee. Women party members with whom I spoke explained that they were able to work with other groups through the Council, including secular groups, provided that everyone focused on discussing only shared issues, usually focusing on Palestine and combating neoimperialism. When the recent headscarf debates exploded in Europe,<sup>6</sup> Hizbullah's women's committee invited the other Council members to discuss the issue and carefully framed the discussion around concepts of religious freedoms, drawing on a shared understanding, rather than engaging in the pros and cons of the headscarf itself. However, such cooperative efforts are recent in Lebanon and remain infused with a secularist disregard for religiosity.

### RELIGIOSITY AND SECULARITY IN THE UNITED STATES

The Lebanese discussions seemed to accompany me as I traveled back to the United States. I have been active in a number of Arab American arenas for over a decade now, most recently in Arab American feminist circles. Throughout, I have noticed an almost clear-cut division between secular and religious activists, particularly among feminists. A disdain for religiosity seems to infect our discussions in ways similar to those I encountered in the Lebanese contexts—ways that reinforce many of the stereotypes and divisions that we often intend to combat. Despite recent Islam-based interventions in struggles for women's and community rights, the moment religion enters the discussion, a number of secularist activists—those who believe that social change necessitates the separation of religion from other aspects of life—respond warily or patronizingly, contemptuously looking at those who identify or are identified as religious as “backward.” This view is rooted in an Enlightenment ideal that defines progress, in part, through the separation of religion from politics and other aspects of public life, a legacy most clearly conveyed by the Weberian linking of modernization and secularization, also discussed as “the secularization thesis.”<sup>7</sup>

This is most readily apparent in relation to the relatively small numbers of devout Arab American women in our feminist circles. And while many Arab American feminist groups accept women who wear the *hijab*, and indeed actively recruit women “for a religious perspective”, there sometimes exists an unstated assumption that such women, who express their religiosity on their bodies in public space, must either “prove” their feminism or accept being reluctantly embraced in feminist circles with the understanding that they are there “to learn.” Secularist feminists, on the other hand, are often unwilling to comprehend or allow for a religious perspective. Furthermore, secularist and religious activists alike share an assumption that a person's views on or expressions of religiosity somehow determine their views on other issues. For some secularists, this means that religious expression is incompatible with feminism. The two examples that arise most frequently here are the notion that religiosity implies homophobia and that religiosity implies support for Palestinian rights. With regard to the former, there are numerous ongoing debates *within* faith communities about sexualities that cannot be ignored, and it is crucial within feminist circles to embrace these debates and dialogues as we work against homophobia in our communities. And with regard to the latter, support for Palestinian rights - and equally critically, the specific ideas and views expressed in that support - does not necessarily map onto

religiosity. Again, dialogue and debate around the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as around other political and military conflicts like the current U.S. occupation of Iraq, exists *within* both Arab American secularist and faith-based communities. These examples of complex political dynamics within communities also remind us that the category “Arab American” is also implicated in the erasure of other differences, including those of generation and national origin.

The silencing of, and assumptions about, religiosity in Arab American feminist circles, to a certain extent, mirror particular problematic aspects of certain liberal white feminisms in the United States. Dominant white U.S. feminisms have long been suspicious of religiosities, assuming that all forms of religious commitments are by definition patriarchal and thus bad for women. Of the major world religions, Islam is seen as being especially detrimental for women. Hegemonic feminist interventions and analysis are often filtered through standard assumptions about the oppression of Arab and Muslim women, or more nuanced assumptions about the ways that Arab and Muslim women experience sexism and patriarchal structures and about their limited abilities to act as agents within and against those structures. Arab or Muslim “patriarchy” is assumed to be essentially worse than other patriarchal systems, and Arab and Muslim women are seen as being incapable of their own agentive actions within and against that system.

When Arab American feminists insist on secularism as part of their current agenda, or assume that religious women and women who are visibly pious are somehow less empowered than those who are not, we fall into a pattern of privileging secularity at the expense of other forms of commitments and worldviews. One of the problematics of this slippage lies in its elision of the intimate history that dialectically links secularism and Christianity in Europe.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, while secularist feminists often see all expressions of religiosity as suspect, Islam is particularly singled out. Wearing a cross is not assumed to be inherently conflictual with feminism as often as wearing the *hijab* is.

Relationships between religious and secularist feminists are further complicated by the intersections of other axes of identity - such as class, nationality, race, and sexuality - with both Arab Americanness and religiosity/secularity. In addition to whether the women in question are practicing Muslims, Christians, or Jews - and Arab Americans are Christians, Muslims, Jews, and atheists, to name a few standpoints vis-à-vis religiosity - aspects such as how long they have lived in the United States, nation of origin, and socio-economic status play into this dynamic as well. A dominant trend among earlier Christian Arab immigrants to the U.S. was assimilation in ways that were not possible or necessarily desirable for newer and/or Muslim Arab immigrants.

Another layer of complexity emerges when the dynamics of religion, politics, and identity come into play, especially, but not exclusively, in the Lebanese case. By this I mean the ways in which persons who are not pious or do not practice the faith into which they were born continue to identify with - or are identified with - a particular religious community. Some secularist Arab Americans consider non-religious Muslim-born activists to have more political credibility than non-religious Christian-born activists. This assumption stems from the homogenization of all Lebanese and “Christians” as one and the same as the right-wing Phalangist political party and militia in Lebanon, which played a role of complicity with Israel during the Lebanese civil-war and, after Israel’s invasion of Lebanon, participated in the Sabra and Chatila refugee camp massacres in 1982. Such a conflation problematically assumes that some essentializable religious

identity is determinative of a person's political views. While many Arab American feminists would agree that a person's religious background does not determine either her religiosity or her political perspective, these same feminists are less likely to accept that a woman's experiences or expressions of piety do not determine her views on all sorts of social and political issues; as I have noted, a pious woman's sartorial practices do not necessarily indicate that she is homophobic, pro-Palestinian, or, for that matter, anti-feminist.

### MOVING PAST SILENCE

The dynamics I have described clearly point to the need to treat religious background, religiosity, and political perspective as plurally constructed, experienced, and practiced, and as existing in complex and non-determinative but mutually constituting relationships to one another. Conflating political position with religiosity makes it all too easy to erase or negate what Lila Abu-Lughod has termed "uncomfortable politics"<sup>9</sup> in favor of issues that can be cast as "cultural" and therefore politically "safe" for discussion—thus allowing issues like the "veil" to displace critical questions, such as the effects of Israeli state terrorism on Palestinian women's lives or the effects of years of U.S. imposed sanctions, or its more recent occupation, on Iraqi women's lives.

For Arab American feminist agendas to take shape and be productive, we need to take seriously the attempts of my Hezbollah interlocutors in Lebanon to collaboratively work with secular and other women's groups around shared perspectives and commonalities. Such a step would allow Arab American secular feminists to work with religious Arab American women activists on questions of global politics and political-economy, as well as on domestic violence and civil rights in the U.S. I am convinced that far more social justice struggles are shared between women for whom conversations are derailed as soon as God is invoked and those who insist that no conversation can continue with God's presence than not. Halting our conversations because of the inclusion or exclusion of a deity does not allow for the potential for people's ideas and beliefs to shift with time and experience, in a wide range of directions. Building alliances within our communities sometimes comes down to language, sometimes it amounts to listening to what is being said in the spaces around and between the words; above all, it is about appreciating the complementarity of the various social, political, and economic justice struggles in which we are all engaged on a daily basis.

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### ENDNOTES

I would like to thank Nadine Naber and Rabab Abdulhadi for their comments, as well as all the participants on the Arab American Feminisms panels at the American Studies Association meeting in 2003, and the many inspiring Arab, Arab American, and SWANA activist and feminist women I have had the privilege of working with in both Lebanon and the United States

<sup>1</sup> In the interest of space and returning quickly to my main purpose in this reflection, I am glossing shamelessly over variation among my devout Shi'i interlocutors – differences in class, ideology, and politics, among other things. These have been detailed at length in other forums, including in: Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, Forthcoming 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Every practicing Shi'i Muslim looks to a *marji' al-taqlid* – a religious leader who is emulated with regard to his interpretations on all religious matters. Sayyid Fadlallah is an internationally prominent *marji'*. Hezbollah is a Shi'i political party that officially follows Khamenei in Iran as the party's *marji'*. In the southern suburbs of Beirut, it is possible for an individual to be a member or supporter of

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Hizbullah and a follower of Fadlallah at the same time. Religious emulation and political allegiance are two separate issues that may or may not overlap for an individual.

<sup>3</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992)

<sup>4</sup> During most of my field research, the south of Lebanon was still under Israeli occupation. Israel, and its proxy army in the south, withdrew their forces in May 2000. Women in this community remain concerned about smaller conflicts along the border, as well as about the long process of rebuilding their villages and reconstituting the lives of those who live in or have returned to the recently liberated south.

<sup>5</sup> In brief, during the French Mandate, an unwritten national pact between Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims was instituted, and then later written into the 1943 constitution of Lebanon at independence. This pact left Lebanon with a legacy of religious sectarianism, as it ensured that government and Parliament were divided along strict sectarian lines. For example, the President is always a Maronite Christian, while the Prime Minister is always a Sunni Muslim, and Parliamentary seats are similarly allotted to various communities in the country by sect. Demographic trends have ensured that this system is not representative of the populations of Lebanon's many communities. Sectarian political power translated to selective access to resources for various areas of the country, with the under-represented Shi'i Muslims historically constituting the most marginalized group.

<sup>6</sup> In the wake of the French government's banning the wearing of the headscarf in public schools.

<sup>7</sup> For discussion and critique of the "secularization thesis," see Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> I am aware of the religious conflicts that eventually produced the Enlightenment in Europe, but still insist on understanding secularism as drawn from the Christian canon. See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (California: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslims Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others" in *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002):783-790

# ARABIYA

Noura Erakat\*

*“I thought you were Latina.”*

*“Why?”*

*“Because you’re loud and outspoken. Girl, you’ve got attitude.”*

*“Lucy, you just described most Arab women.”*

*“I always thought Arab women were demure and submissive. Besides your hair is wild.”*

*“No one’s as loud as my Mama and she wears hijab. Wait, and besides not all Arabs are Muslims, Lucy.”*

Lucy is an African-American woman. She is a student at Boalt Hall Law School at UC Berkeley. There is little room for anyone to make excuses for her ignorance. She is neither sheltered by her privilege nor removed from progressive cultures. Her misconceptions of Arab women are due to her social complicity. Mainstream media fed her a line about “Middle Eastern” women generally, and by the time she had met me, she had not bothered to question it.

I do not regard Lucy as exceptional, only honest. Most other students in the progressive community at Boalt Hall do not have a much better understanding of Arab-American female identity. The difference is that they mask their ignorance with silence. If I do not bring it up, they can treat me as Latina. I have dark skin, brown eyes, curly brown hair, and I do not speak with an Arabic accent. There are no clear physical markers to distinguish me from many other Latinas in Northern California. I do not mind “looking Latina”, but, as I am an Arab woman, or *Arabiya* [Arab woman], I take issue with “being Latina”, not only because my upbringing, language, history, culture, and heritage are completely different from Latina experiences, but because being seen as Latina illuminates the ignorance and misinformation about Arab women.

As the daughter of displaced Palestinians, I grew up in a community that struggled to resist its assimilation into American society. For my large extended family, assimilation meant evisceration of its Palestinian identity. As such, my parents spoke only Arabic at home, traveled to the Arab world regularly, limited

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their social life to the extended family, and listened to classical Arabic music. My parents also feared that if left to roam free in the U.S., their children would shed their Arab-Muslim identities and become “Americanized.” For that reason, they limited our social mobility outside of the family circle. For example, I was allowed to go to school dances—if one of my male cousins also went. I was allowed to participate in school activities like journalism and theater—but only during school hours. I was allowed to go to a friend’s slumber party—but I could never spend the night out of the house. My parents consistently tried to limit my immersion into American society. They did their utmost to shelter me in an Arab-Muslim community. When I stepped out of line, they threatened to send me “back home” where I could be raised without the threat of becoming Americanized.

My upbringing is simultaneously unique and common. Unique, because it has been created within the context of Arab diasporas amongst Arab immigrants in the U.S. Common, because most Arab-American women who I have encountered can recount similar stories. This upbringing has shaped me into the woman I am today: proud, culturally rooted, politically active, and family-oriented. I never hesitate to assert my Palestinian identity. I am frustrated by the U.S. government’s colonization of Iraq, its support of Israeli colonization of Palestinian land, and its economic and military domination of the Arab world in general. I am even more frustrated by media coverage of the Middle East. I believe that imperialist ambition of conquest and the accumulation of wealth drive U.S. foreign policies. I believe that people of color within the U.S. and the Global South, generally, incur similar repression and marginalization due to U.S. imperial exercises; I, therefore, identify as a person of color from the Global South. Consequently, I share similar struggles with Latina women, but I am *Arabiya*.

Taking the specificities of my history and experiences seriously, I wonder where I fit in the consciousness of progressive law students of color who can barely identify where Palestine is on a map, let alone understand what it means to grow up as an Arab woman in America?

Without the assistance of an empirical study, I can only describe the space that I feel shoved into. In the eyes of my “allies”, I am a fiery and passionate activist. My struggle, whatever it may be, must be a noble one. Whether or not I defy the role of Arab women or comport with it is irrelevant. Our solidarity is little more than an ostentatious exercise. We attend the same talks, cheer at the same time, anger at the same racist remarks, sign the same petitions, and support the same progressive faculty members. What does it matter whether I am Latina or *Arabiya*?

For me, it matters a great deal. As part of a movement that aims to counter Orientalist conceptions of the Middle East, as a woman who had grown up constantly battling stereotypes and enduring biased media coverage, it matters a great deal that I am *Arabiya*. It especially mattered when the U.S. declared war on Iraq on March 19, 2003. Amongst the progressive students of color on campus, the war seemed to be no more than an expansion of the war on Afghanistan. The U.S. brutally attacked Afghanistan because Osama bin Laden, a Saudi Arabian national and purported leader of al-Qaeda, took refuge there. Although bin Laden is Arab and Muslim, he is not Afghan. Like Saudi Arabia, the Taliban that ruled Afghanistan espoused a Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. Pursuant to their Wahhabi beliefs, the Taliban imposed harsh restrictions on the mobility and dress of Afghan women. In its belligerent rhetoric, the Bush Administration used the subjugation of Afghan women as a case for war in Afghanistan—the U.S. would go

in and “save” the women from their barbaric men. Still, neither the Taliban nor Afghanistan, nor bin Laden, had any demonstrable connection to Saddam Hussein. Despite the lack of evidence either connecting al-Qaeda to Iraq or demonstrating Iraq as a national security threat, the Bush Administration declared war on Iraq. To the American national audience, the U.S. was fighting the “war on terror.” To them, the Islamic Wahhabists who ruled Afghanistan were the same as the national-socialist Baathists that ruled Iraq. All terrorists were Arab regardless of the fact that Farse is the national language of Afghanistan. And as in Afghanistan, Iraqi women, according to this new doctrine, needed to be liberated and saved from their savage male counterparts.

Similar to other places in the region, the student body of color on campus did not embrace this cultural complexity and nuance. And even *when* students on campus began to publicly oppose the U.S. government’s preemptive strike against Iraq—their response never transcended the boundaries of political opposition to U.S. foreign policy. In other words, anti war activism on campus never made efforts to distinguish the Taliban’s strict reading of Islam in Afghanistan from the religion itself. It never made an effort to distinguish the Taliban from the Iraqi Baathist Party. The progressive students of color never challenged the characterization of Arab women as subjugated victims of their culture and religion. It seemed as though it was only too natural to accept the notion that Arab women are an oppressed and helpless population. No one said anything...except for Lucy.

Aside from Lucy, who honestly confessed her conception of Arab women, no one ever mentioned it. It was as if my history, my upbringing, my family, and my language were non-existent. The invisibility slowly crushed my enthusiasm for people of color solidarity work. And even if I wanted to believe that students of color didn’t acknowledge my identity as an Arab-American woman because they already understood what that meant, what transpired on campus shattered any lies I may have tried to make myself believe.

*“Boalt is the only place at UC Berkeley, where I feel that it’s safe to be Jewish.”*

*“Privilege! As an Asian-American transgender male, I can’t feel safe anywhere. You’re complaining because Students for Justice in Palestine is protesting Israel’s Apartheid policies—what does that have to do with your Jewish identity?”*

*“They’re calling Jews murderers!”*

*[Caroline] “Look—I don’t know what’s going on over there in the Middle East. It’s too confusing, too emotional, whatever. Right now I am concerned with the fact that the Berkeley Law Foundation’s scholarships for students of color are under attack. It is offensive to me that anyone or any group would attack the presence of students of color on campus for any reason.”*

Upon beginning law school at Boalt Hall, I formed the *Law Students for Justice in Palestine* (LSJP) along with a couple of other students. The idea was to create a sister organization for Students for Justice in Palestine-UC Berkeley at the law school. The mission of both organizations was to urge the UC Regents to divest their holdings from corporations with subsidiaries worth \$5 million or more in Israel. Presently, those holdings total more than \$7 billion. The divestment movement was inspired by South Africa’s during the 1980s. One of the first events we organized was a lecture by Na’eem Jeenah, a South African activist who was then on a speaking tour throughout the States. The topic of his talk was a comparison of South African and Israeli Apartheid. LSJP used Jeenah’s transnational analysis to obtain the sponsorship of nearly all the progressive

organizations at Boalt, including the Berkeley Law Foundation (BLF). The BLF is a public interest law foundation with 501 (c)(3) status dedicated to increasing the number of students of color at Boalt by providing scholarships to two incoming students every year among other things. BLF is able to generate funds for the scholarship by organizing an annual auction as well as directly soliciting funds from students and faculty.

Jeenah's talk stirred a huge controversy before he even came to campus. Accusations of anti-Semitism began flying around, and a new group called *Friends of the Middle East* mysteriously appeared on campus. Only two members of this new organization attended Jeenah's talk. One of them painted Jeenah as an anti-Semite by drafting a memo that took four of his comments out of context and distributed it to all of Boalt's faculty and student body. Thereafter, the *Friends of the Middle East* threatened the BLF that if it would not retract its co-sponsorship of the event and publicly apologize to Boalt's Jewish community, then it would divest from the BLF. In effect, the *Friends of the Middle East*, predominantly comprised of Ashkenazi Jews, threatened to divest from students of color on campus. As the controversy escalated, LSJP became increasingly marginalized from the debate. At a BLF student board meeting, one African-American woman said that she had no idea what was going on in Palestine or in Israel but that this was offensive to her as a woman of color working to increase the number of people of color on campus. Another Jewish woman explained that she felt that BLF should retract its co-sponsorship because since SJP launched its divestment campaign in February 2001, Boalt was the only safe space for her on the UC Berkeley campus. The issue was no longer about the Palestinian struggle for self-determination but about anti-Semitism and Affirmative Action.

The *Friends of the Middle East* tactic, of equating anti-Semitism to anti-Zionism, is only too familiar. Anti-Semitism refers to the historic oppression and vilification of Jews that led to such tragedies as the Nazi engineered Holocaust. Zionism is the theoretical notion that the global Jewry should have a homeland. In its practical application, Zionism has meant the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Israel's establishment necessitated an ethnic cleansing project that destroyed 450 Palestinian villages and displaced 750,000 indigenous Palestinians. Zionism demands that a Jewish majority exist in historic Palestine. To sustain this demographic status, Israel has institutionalized discrimination against its Palestinian citizens. Moreover, it maintains that "Jordan is Palestine" and that Palestinians should be transferred to neighboring Arab nations. To drive out Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and to control the water and land resources in the territories, Israel also maintains a belligerent military occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Anti-Zionism, therefore, refers to the opposition of the establishment of a Jewish state in historic Palestine and its incendiary apartheid tactics. By equating anti-Semitism to anti-Zionism, the *Friends of the Middle East*, threatened to label all students critical of Israel or its policies as anti-Semitic. The group, thereby, silenced all dissent on campus.

Behind the scenes, the BLF board decided not to apologize, but it discussed the possibility of adopting a new policy whereby the BLF would not sponsor any talks related to the Israel-Palestinian conflict. I nearly suffocated on my own silence. As the only Palestinian woman of the approximate 1,000 law students on campus, as the co-founder of LSJP, a member of BLF, and an organizer of the Jeenah event, I did not just feel invisible, I felt erased. I thought that surely if I appealed to the students of color on campus, they would have our back as pro-

Palestinian solidarity activists. So I drafted a counter memo to the one written by the *Friends of the Middle East*. Entitled, "Silence is not the Alternative", the memo encouraged the Boalt community to promote debate about sensitive topics pursuant to BLF's mission statement, which reads, the BLF seeks to "promote dialogue on difficult, and often controversial issues." I wrote a separate memo strictly for the student of color community, and I insisted that Arabs and Arab-Americans are part of a people of color movement and that the community should not abandon us now in a moment of controversy. Rather than build on my political gesture, an Iranian Jew quickly silenced me by insisting that Jews are and have always been the marginalized community among the people of color movement. This was the same person who led the divestment campaign from the BLF and from the funds available to people of color at Boalt. Yet no one publicly responded to him about his contradictory stance as a person of color who sought to divest from the BLF. No one responded to me either. The fear of being labeled anti-Semitic was too great.

More than two years have passed since then and student organizations are still afraid of being associated with the LSJP for fear of being labeled as anti-Semitic. Zionist students subjected LSJP to a smear campaign and thereafter Boalt's community contained it as one of its shameful secrets. Progressive students know that I currently chair LSJP and consistently organize events in that capacity, but these students neither ask me questions to clarify their confusion nor do they take the initiative to work with LSJP as an organization. In a recent case, the Boalt Hall Women's Association (BHWA) sought to sponsor a student talk for a blind female student who had done research on the disabled population in the West Bank. The BHWA solicited the co-sponsorship of other organizations but explicitly rejected the idea of approaching the LSJP because of its "reputation." Instead of resolving the issue regarding LSJP's political stance, progressive students masked their ambiguity about LSJP with silence. If they don't say anything, they can be considered neutral; they're neither anti-Semitic nor unprogressive.

As a Palestinian, Arab-American woman who has chosen to engage in the movement for Palestinian self-determination, such blatant disregard for the movement's political complexity works to marginalize me as a political actor. In fact, students critical of my work falsely signed my name on a petition and in the comment column wrote that I support terrorism, and, if nothing else, at least I annoy my law professors. It feels as though I am tolerated as an activist because of my progressive beliefs, but that my political beliefs vis-à-vis foreign policy are not accepted.

In a similar vein, my identity as an Arab-American woman has been obscured by the progressive student of color community. I am tolerated but not understood. I deliberately say "not understood" as opposed to "misunderstood" because it is not as if there was something that the student community knew about me that they just did not grasp. I feel that students consider me an anomaly rather than an accurate representation of Arab women. In effect, my identity as a strong Arab woman is marginalized, and I am silenced as a pro-Palestinian political activist.

At a political moment when the Bush Administration uses the concept of subjugated Middle Eastern women as a justification for war, this dual process of marginalization and silencing is incredibly dangerous. Recently, an announcement was sent out to the BHWA listserv that invited the group's members to attend a Women in Black rally. Women in Black planned a silent vigil in protest of the

occupation of Palestine, Iraq, and Haiti. In response, an Israeli member of the group, Oly, responded with the following:

“...It is absolutely unfathomable to me how feminists and gay activists can denounce Israel -- a democracy, and the only country where women and homosexuals enjoy basic rights, and not hold three times as many protestations against the Palestinians... Just a few examples: Palestinians conduct honor killings. Palestinians execute homosexuals...I simply don't understand. Israel can be criticized for many things.... but THE LAST THING Israel deserves is to be attacked by women and gays in the name of \*Palestine.\* Moreover, the Israeli occupation has NOTHING to do with Arab oppression of women and gays.” [Cap letters inserted by original author].

This student asserts that misogyny and gender inequality are inherent to Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular. According to her, “the Israeli occupation has NOTHING to do with Arab oppression of women and gays.” She fails to consider that structural violence waged on women in the context of war and occupation is the most extreme of its form. Moreover, she swiftly disregards the nexus of colonial occupation and patriarchy. Cynthia Enloe, a scholar on gender and militarism, writes that “when a nationalist movement becomes militarized...male privilege in the community usually becomes more entrenched.”<sup>1</sup> For Oly, this may be true in other situations, but amongst the Palestinians, gender inequality has nothing to do with military occupation—it is just their culture.

The erasure of context in the discussion of gender equality and Palestine is an irresponsible act. It is nothing short of racist to attribute a society's behavior to its character rather than its environment. Countering this discourse is made increasingly difficult when one's identity as a strong Arab woman is taken for granted, and her political activism is conceived as extreme and irrational. Like Lucy, other students on campus do not conceive of me as an Arab woman because of my outspoken character and “wild hair.” According to mainstream media, to be an Arab woman, I should be demurrer in personality and modest in dress. Had my fellow students embraced me in my totality, Oly's statement would have held little water. My presence alone could have countered her assertion that “empowered” and “Arab female” do not belong in the same sentence. Furthermore, if my activism is considered extreme then whatever rational rebuttal I present can be disregarded with ease thereby diminishing my efficacy as a political activist.

A dual and inseparable process of marginalization and silencing has shaped my experience as a Palestinian woman and an activist. The denial of Palestinian self-determination is justified by racist notions of Arabs as sub-humans, including, but not limited to, the beliefs that Palestinian mothers send their children out to kill themselves and that Palestinian women and men are inherently patriarchal. The continuing denial of Palestinian self-determination limits the potential of gender equality in Palestinian society while the lack of gender equality among Palestinian society is offered as a justification for the denial of Palestinian self-determination. Consider the following critique of a *Students for Justice in Palestine* talk entitled, “Occupation 101” and published on *Campus Watch*:<sup>2</sup>

“And then as I looked at the Palestinian coeds dressed in the current Berkeley coed uniform of tight jeans and tighter pullovers, I wondered if they would feel comfortable living in the Sharia-

dominated state advocated by Hamas. Would they be able to walk down the streets of Ramallah the way they do the streets of Berkeley? Would they be free to buy *Lolita* in Jericho and read it without first closing the blinds and locking the doors?”<sup>3</sup>

Whereas the author wonders whether or not I would be able to comfortably walk around in tight jeans in Palestine, I wonder, if this man is truly concerned with my personal freedom, why isn't he protesting the 25-foot high Apartheid Wall built between my village of Abu-Dis and Jerusalem? If he really cares whether or not I can read *Lolita* comfortably, shouldn't he be more concerned that Palestinian children are denied a roof over their heads because of consistent home demolitions? His concern with my personal liberation seems disingenuous in light of the fact that he fails to mention Israeli military occupation as a significant, if not the most significant, factor contributing to the subjugation of Palestinian women's rights. Instead, he uses the lack of gender equality in Palestine as a justification for its continued colonization.

This dialectical tension between national liberation and gender inequality works to maintain the status quo of foreign colonization and gender inequality. Shattering this cyclical paradox requires the end of Israel's gendered violence against Palestinian women and men, as well as the gendered ways that the U.S. and Israel use negative images of Arab women to justify colonialism and war. Simultaneously, we must work to end gender oppression within the Palestinian movement for liberation and Palestinian society. Failing to recognize the interplay between gender inequality and the struggle for self-determination will only exacerbate existing misconceptions, including Lucy's understanding of Arab women as passive, progressive students' fear of being labeled anti-Semitic for their criticism of Israel, and Oly's assertions that “the Israeli occupation has NOTHING to do with Arab oppression of women and gays.” Not only does Israeli occupation have EVERYTHING to do with the oppression of Palestinian women, but the Israeli Occupation of Palestine would not be so successful were it not for its insistence that it is a more civilized alternative to Palestinian society. The only civil, just, and humane alternative to a military occupation is its absolute destruction. Anything less will fail to afford Palestinian society its right to self-determination and, subsequently, its ability to realize gender, economic, and racial equality.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 56

<sup>2</sup> Campus Watch is a watchdog organization that monitors universities for professors and students who express criticism of U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis the Middle East, particularly anti-Israel sentiments.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, Abraham, *Revising History at Berkeley: Israeli 'Occupation 101'*, February 16, 2005 available at <http://www.campus-watch.org/article/id/1656>

**ON RACHEL CORRIE**  
**AND THE MEANING OF FEMINIST**  
**SOLIDARITY**

**Therese Saliba\***

*... And how do I  
scream when I have no voice left? And who  
will answer these questions for me?*

*Not Rachel Corrie. She is dead. And no matter  
what any army says, I have seen the photos  
and that woman was wearing orange,-  
bright and alive one minute and dying  
under rubble the next. Even I, it seems,  
have developed a callous to the deaths of  
Palestinians, because the murder of this white  
girl from Olympia Washington has  
my heart breaking and my blood faint.  
Something like ten Palestinians have been killed since  
yesterday, when a Caterpillar bulldozer driven  
by a man demolished the home that was her body.*

Suheir Hammad "On the Brink of . . ."

*"I also think it's important for people in the United States in relative privilege  
to realize that people without privilege will be doing this work no matter what,  
because they are working for their lives. We can work with them. . . or we can  
leave them to do this work themselves and curse us for our complicity in killing  
them. I really don't get the sense that anyone here curses us."* Rachel Corrie,  
email correspondence

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Above this desk where I write, I keep a newspaper photo—two Palestinian women, one in a black headscarf, the other in white, walking with their eyes downcast. On their shoulders they bear a coffin wrapped in a Palestinian flag. The coffin could be any of the thousands of Palestinians killed since the Al-Aqsa Intifada, any woman or child. The women's faces, strong and solemn, marked with a quiet dignity, remind me of the beautiful faces of the young women I taught at Bethlehem University back in 1995-1996. They remind me of the first time I went to Gaza in 1991 to interview Palestinian women involved in the *intifada*, despite my advisor's warning that I would risk getting an academic job by including a chapter on Palestinian women activists in my dissertation. The coffin, though empty, is carried in memory of Rachel Corrie. The photo reminds me of Rachel. It reminds me of a similar procession where I lent a hand with a similar coffin (heavy even in its emptiness), carried up to the steps of our Capitol building in Olympia, Washington, where Rachel grew up, attended college, and became a young community activist. Two days after that AP photo was taken, hundreds of us gathered in the pouring rain to protest the renewed war on Iraq, the continuing assault on the Palestinians, and Rachel's brutal death. As the skies opened up in downpour, I took the bullhorn and read Suheir Hammad's poem, "On the Brink Of. . ." each word like a salve to my soul and this broken world. Hammad's words, the community before me, the image of Palestinian women bearing Rachel's coffin through the dusty, devastated streets of Gaza—all resonate in resistance and feminist solidarity.

On March 16, 2003, Rachel Corrie was crushed by an Israeli bulldozer as she tried to prevent the demolition of a home in Gaza. Rachel was a student at The Evergreen State College, a public liberal arts college where I teach. Through her letters and involvement with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), Rachel bore witness to the extremes of violence that Palestinians have been subjected to in the name of "combating terrorism", especially in the Gaza Strip and was vilified (or ignored) by the U.S. mainstream media and government for her expression of solidarity. She became a national and international figure of "sacrifice, killed by the forces of violence and oppression to which they were offering nonviolent, principled, dangerous opposition."<sup>1</sup> I start with Rachel, killed beneath the blade of a D-9 Caterpillar bulldozer, to honor her life and commitment and to examine the reactions to her death, which came from across the seas and close to home. These varied responses reinforced for me the advances we have made, as well as the many obstacles we face as Arab American feminists working both within academia and in the community in solidarity with Arabs, Muslims, Palestinians, and other oppressed peoples as we stand against the multiple violences of this purported "war on terrorism." Moreover, Rachel, through her dignified actions and writings exemplified the meaning of feminist solidarity in that she consciously used her privilege to stand with the Palestinians and to support their most basic human rights—to their homes, their water and fields, and to a homeland—against a massive, U.S.-made machine of destruction.

I start with Rachel because as Suheir Hammad wrote, I felt her death tore at my heart, even as many of us who knew Rachel know, she would have hated to have her life mean more than the lives of those she sought to defend. Rather, she recognized her white, U.S. privilege and used it to stand with the Palestinians. As the graffiti on the walls of a demolished building reads in Rafah, "Rachel was a girl from Olympia who came to stop the tanks," and on the wall across from the ISM office, "Rachel has Palestinian blood." And I start with Rachel because the



concerted response to her death in our community was often a shockingly vicious attempt at silencing. In her poem in response to the massacres of Sabra and Shatila, African-American feminist poet June Jordan wrote, “I was born a Black woman/ and now/ I am become a Palestinian.”<sup>2</sup> When my friend and colleague, Anne, who is Jewish and was very close to Rachel, told me she didn’t understand the vehemence with which Rachel was attacked in the wake of her killing, I told her simply, “She has become Palestinian, and she will be attacked in the same way the Palestinians have always been attacked and their struggle discredited. She will be called a terrorist or a terrorist sympathizer.” I write this now with a certain distance, but for Anne and me, in those first days and weeks after Rachel’s death, we couldn’t speak or come together without tears welling, throats tightening, without a deep emptiness that tore at our hearts.

### ON FEMINIST SOLIDARITY AND RACHEL

I first met Rachel Corrie in the Fall of 2001, when she contacted me to be on a panel about “Women, War, and Militarization.” A group of young women activists were coordinating this discussion to counter the growing male-dominated anti-war movement in our community. Like many feminist activists in the wake of 9/11, the student organizers and speakers, faculty, and community members were trying to formulate feminist and grassroots interventions to the Bush administration’s policies in the “war on terrorism.” As Arundhati Roy has said, few of us (activists) “can afford the luxury of retreating from the streets for a while in order to return with an exquisite, fully formed political thesis replete with footnotes and references.”<sup>3</sup> With this sense of urgency, we spoke out against the militarization of women’s lives, the racist and colonialist invocation of women’s rights used to justify war, the rising assault on women in the military, the erasure of social programs supporting welfare, health, and education to enhance an already monstrous military budget, and the marginalization of women’s voices, both in the “war on terror” and in the global justice movement. But a feminist, or gender analysis, is not only about the lives of women; it also offers a critique of the workings of power and privilege— the power of men (or patriarchy) over women, but also the power of occupier over occupied, the power of the economically advantaged over the poor; the power of a country with the fifth largest army in the world against a stateless, dispossessed population without rights. And feminist analysis also looks at, for example, the relative privileges enjoyed by Palestinian urban women as compared to women in the villages and refugee camps, who are often characterized as “the most oppressed of the oppressed.” In addition, feminist analysis examines the intersecting forms of oppression faced by certain groups. For Palestinian women, these intersecting oppressions include the occupation and ongoing Israeli military dispossession (since 1948), the patriarchy of Palestinian society, the corruption of the Palestinian Authority and the deliberate and systematic impoverishment of an entire people (over 3 million within the territories alone) by the Israeli government. That is gender, class, racial/ethnic, national and militarized oppression. It is this multi-layered feminist critique that leads June Jordan to identify as “a Palestinian” and not exclusively as “a Palestinian woman.”

“The greatest struggles of resistance”, argues Zillah Eisenstein, “are located with anti-racist feminisms against Empire.”<sup>4</sup> Many of us sought to place those struggles at the center of our activism and academic work, even as we strove to build broad-based coalitions, both locally and nationally. With the rise of

transnational feminism in the 1990s, we challenged global power structures in the form of economic and cultural globalization, as well as the globalization of militarized violence. Lisa Suhair Majaj, addressing the imperatives of Arab American activism, has written, “At this time of global interconnection, individual causes can no longer be viewed in separation from the global structures of power that situate them, nor can the effects of these structures of power be isolated to a single group.”<sup>5</sup> Through “hate-free zones”, international solidarity and coalitions, these global interconnections were forged quickly after 9/11—in defiance of the limiting borders of identity, both discursive and spatial, set for us.

People often ask how Rachel became interested in the Palestinian issue. I cannot say for sure, but she seemed to see that global interconnection that Majaj describes—she worked at the Evergreen Labor Center, had done environmental work and education for youth and mentally disabled adults. After 9/11, it seems, I saw her at every community event and anti-war demonstration, often working diligently behind the scenes to pull things together. In February 2002, she stopped by my office because she heard that I needed help putting up flyers to advertise a talk/reading by Joanna Kadi and Trevor Baumgartner (who had just returned from ISM work in Palestine). I remember Rachel in the audience that evening, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, her sandy blond hair in rain-damp strings, listening attentively to the speakers. I never had Rachel in class, though she sat in at times on our lectures in International Feminism, but I came to know her through her committed anti-war organizing with the Olympia Movement for Justice and Peace, then with our local chapter of United for Peace & Justice. On the anniversary of 9/11, she took leadership in organizing a city-wide conference called, “Choosing Peace,” and stood out on the Olympia pier all day while young school children wrote messages of their hopes for peace, and local religious leaders and activists spoke of their visions for a more unified world.

I spoke with Rachel a few times before she left for Palestine. Rachel wasn't naïve—she had studied the conflict, as well as the Arabic language, had friends who had worked with ISM in Gaza and the West Bank, and built connections with both Israeli and Palestinian non-violent activists prior to and during her six-week stay in the Palestinian territories. Before she left, when she told me of her intentions to go to Gaza, I said, “Gaza's a rough place. Have you seen the film ‘Gaza Strip?’ You really should.” Later, with intense insight, she wrote in a letter from Gaza, “No amount of reading, attendance at conferences, documentary viewing and word of mouth could have prepared me for the reality of the situation here. You just can't imagine it unless you see it—and even then you are always well aware that your experience of it is not at all the reality. . .”<sup>6</sup> Yet, like a parent, I had wanted to affirm her commitment, but provide her ample warning for her safety. Rachel went to Gaza because she feared the ethnic cleansing that might take place under the cover of the renewed U.S. war on Iraq. When she told me she wanted to set up a sister city project with Rafah, I told her it would be easier to have such a relationship with a West Bank town, like Bethlehem. I don't remember her exact words, but she looked at me like, “That's why it's so important to go to Rafah.” I had been to Rafah in 1991, when I visited a family of 15 living in the ruins of their demolished home. At that time, the father told me, “Lots of people come and take pictures, but nothing ever changes.” Rachel was determined to change things. On a small scale, she initiated pen-pal exchanges between the children of Rafah and Olympia, but on a larger scale, she saw the need for more political intervention. As she wrote to her mother a few days before her death: “This has to stop. I think it is

a good idea for us all to drop everything and devote our lives to making this stop. I don't think it's an extremist thing to do anymore.”<sup>7</sup> What Rachel conveyed was an extreme urgency, the sense that many of us have felt, especially after the violent Israeli repression of the second intifada and the post-9/11 assault that have so imperiled our communities and made activism imperative to our survival.

Edward Said, in his essay, “The Meaning of Rachel Corrie: Of Dignity and Solidarity” (first presented at the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee Annual Conference, 2003) offers a sharp critique to the Arab and Palestinian community in the U.S. who have failed to embrace with self-respect and dignity the struggles that so many, like Rachel Corrie, have come to embrace. He concludes,

“Isn't it astonishing that all the signs of popular solidarity that Palestine and the Arabs receive occur with no comparable sign of solidarity and dignity for ourselves, that others admire and respect us more than we do ourselves? Isn't it time we caught up with our own status and made certain that our representatives here and elsewhere realize, as a first step, that they are fighting for a just and noble cause, and that they have nothing to apologize for or anything to be embarrassed about? On the contrary, they should be proud of what their people have done and proud also to represent them.”<sup>8</sup>

According to Said, the problem for Arab and Palestinian Americans may be in our shame for our own people and struggles, our failure to recognize the importance of our cause, as others, like Rachel have done, so eloquently through her letters and her dignified actions. Feminists might call this internalized oppression or even assimilation to the mainstream American construction of citizenship. Indeed, while a few in our communities have taken leadership roles, speaking out to the media in demonstrations and protests, many of the major Arab and Muslim organizations have taken a more apologetic approach to the current crisis and sought to minimize our visibility in a charged political arena. For example, the National Chapter of the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee publicly supported the war on Afghanistan and encouraged Arab American cooperation with FBI officials in the wake of 9/11.<sup>9</sup>

Said draws on Rachel's example to inspire Arab Americans to action, much in the same way that Rachel draws on Palestinians' daily resistance to inspire U.S. citizens to take responsibility for U.S. economic, military, and political support for Israeli human rights violations. Rachel expresses a human solidarity with the Palestinians, but I also see her actions in Gaza as expressing feminist concerns and consciousness, as she did in her local Olympia organizing. Rachel's email messages (published in *The Guardian*, *Ha'aretz*, *The Monthly Review*, *Harpers*) became a powerful testament to the world of her impressions of Gaza, her intentions in her solidarity work, and her fears for the people she came to share meals, tea, blankets, and cartoon videos with. Many wrote of Rachel's heroism: Susan Sontag compared her to Archbishop Romero, as well as Israeli Refuseniks, in her ability to move beyond her “tribe” and to stand in solidarity with others; the Palestinian ambassador to Cuba called her “the beautiful face of America” in contrast to Bush's ugly face; and Egyptian Ahmad El Khameesy said she represented “the conscience of America” at a time when it seemed the U.S. had none, especially in its policies toward the Arab world.<sup>10</sup> Joanna Kadi captured the outpouring of gratitude from Palestinians and Arabs, as an overwhelming response because we (Arabs) are “not used to the

presence of folks like you standing up for us.”<sup>11</sup> As Gould points out, the word in Arabic for martyr, *shahid*, also means “witness”, and she takes Rachel’s life as “a feminist manifesto for the 21<sup>st</sup> century” because “her political consciousness did not end with a desire to overcome her own oppression.”<sup>12</sup> In a similar vein, June Jordan draws on the words of Etel Adnan to capture the foundation of this feminist solidarity: “It is when we women, the New women of the world, ‘stand up to our brothers to defend the Stranger’, it is only then that we can hope to become innocent of the evil that now imperils the planet.”<sup>13</sup> In this way, Rachel’s depth of compassion for the Palestinians, her attention to their daily indignities, her witness to their ability “to remain human” and maintain their dignity “in the direst of circumstances”,<sup>14</sup> and her deep connection with the women and children captures this sense of feminist solidarity.

### E-RACING PALESTINIANS/ARABS AND THE POLITICS OF ANTI-SEMITISM

Rachel Corrie recognized the racist nature of the Israeli military occupation with its U.S. backing. She wrote, “If the Israeli military should break with their racist tendency not to injure white people, please pin the reason squarely on the fact that I am in the midst of a genocide which I [as a U.S. citizen] am indirectly supporting, and for which my government is largely responsible.”<sup>15</sup> One of the most contentious issues in our community after Rachel’s death was around the racist nature of the occupation and charges of anti-Semitism affecting the campus climate. Shortly after Rachel’s murder, a few members from the Jewish community and a couple of Jewish faculty met with college administrators to voice their concern about rising anti-Semitism on campus. Middle East Studies faculty (including myself and Simona Sharoni) were accused of promoting “covert anti-Semitism” and a lively debate ensued, most of it carried out on campus e-mail, about a student-initiated plan to wear kuffiyah at graduation to commemorate Rachel and to carry on her vision of solidarity with the Palestinians. One Jewish colleague suggested that wearing kuffiyah could be considered “hate speech”; others invoked free speech in support of wearing kuffiyah. Many campus members quickly learned that once they supported building a park bench bearing Rachel’s name, they would be charged with anti-Semitism or not understanding the complexity of the issue. These charges effectively intimidated and silenced many; however, there were also many students, staff, and faculty (including many Jews) who felt they knew enough about the issues to talk back and challenge the discourse. In an absurd twist of logic, those of us mourning Rachel’s death and condemning the U.S. government’s political, economic, and military backing of Israel’s occupation suddenly became the purportedly guilty party.

Rabab Abdulhadi argues for “a more nuanced understanding of [how] Zionism, anti-Semitism, discrimination, racism, and prejudice work; where we apply certain terms; and how we produce a complex analysis of these labels’ particular flavor and context.”<sup>16</sup> In the U.S. context, Said has asserted a particularly American brand of Orientalism that is tied to our country’s special relationship to Israel. In discussion of Palestine, I see the denial of racist treatment of the Palestinians as a variation on what Edward Said termed denying the Palestinians victim status because they are the victims of victims. While references to the racist occupation seem to invoke the controversial “Zionism is Racism” resolution passed by the UN General Assembly in 1975 then revoked, under considerable pressure, in December

1991, it is perhaps instructive to recall the complexity with which Said dismantled Zionist ideology in *The Question of Palestine*, its expansionist designs, assumptions of cultural superiority, and denial of Palestinian rights or even existence. He concludes that “Zionism is Zionism”<sup>17</sup> an inherently colonialist project to its victims, one more complex than the concept of “racism” can contain. Nevertheless, unlike other European countries with a marked history of colonization in the Arab world, the U.S., with its special relationship with Israel, consistently denies the racialization of, and therefore, the racism projected against Arabs in general, and Palestinians in particular. Moreover, there is a consistent denial of a racialized motivation for Israeli policies and a clear investment in de-racializing the Arabs to promote this illusion.

In response to the conflict at Evergreen, the college agreed to hold a lecture series entitled, “The Search for Peace: The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict”, dealing with issues of dialogue, historical narratives, religious dimensions, human rights, and women and peace movements. In the opening presentation on “Difficult Dialogues”, the local rabbi stated that “. . . too often, the apartheid metaphor obscures dialogue because it adds a rhetorical dimension of race to a conflict that is not race-based.” He went on to argue that “racism” is ill applied to the conflict because, “Zionism is a multi-ethnic national movement and Israel is a multi-racial society.”<sup>18</sup> Of course, such an argument can be made that the U.S. is also a multiracial and multiethnic society, but this does not mean that it is incapable of promoting racist policies. While charges of anti-Semitism made up a substantive part of his speech, with arguments such as “Anti-Zionism is insensitive at best, and anti-Semitic at worst”, the rabbi rejected paradigms of colonialism, racism, apartheid, and globalization as applicable to the Israel-Palestine conflict. In this moment, it struck me that while Jews had the charged claim to anti-Semitism, Palestinians and Arabs were denied a similarly charged claim of “racism” and left bereft of a charge on which to base their oppression, apart from what the rabbi described as their “struggle with stereotypes and stigma”, certainly not a systematic form of oppression. Moreover, the discourse of “balance” in approaching the conflict assumes both peoples are on equal footing (although anti-Semitism, as usual, was not applied to Arabs), that a “balanced approach” is necessary with no critique of power relations. In effect, deracializing distracts attention from the exercise of power and privilege and denies the immense inequities between Israel and the Palestinians, and closer to home, between American Jewish communities and Arab and Muslim American communities.

While real anti-Semitism does exist and should be combated, the use of the charge to silence political critique of Israeli policy is well-documented in Cockburn and St. Clair’s *The Politics of Anti-Semitism*. Indeed, when Jeffrey St. Clair visited Olympia, he explained how the book was inspired by Rachel Corrie’s death and the virulent charges their website, Counterpunch.org, received in response to their reporting on her death.<sup>19</sup> Just as the anti-war movement was increasingly addressing the occupation of Palestinian lands and incipient divestment campaigns bloomed on campuses across the country, charges of anti-Semitism both in the mainstream and on the left reached an increasing pitch. The most famous case involved Harvard University President Lawrence Summers who argued that, “a petition signed by 600 Harvard and MIT faculty, staff, and students to divest university funds from companies that do business in Israel to protest the occupation . . . [was], along with other criticisms of Israel ‘anti-Semitic in their effect if not their intent.”<sup>20</sup> As we confronted similar charges on our campus, I was

reminded of June Jordan's critique of the feminist community and the political left in 1984, in the wake of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon:

“There were those for whom Israel remained a sacrosanct subject exempt from rational discussion and dispute, and there were those to whom Israel looked a whole lot like yet another country run by whitemen whose militarism tended to produce racist consequences; i.e. the disenfranchisement and subjugation of non-white people, peoples not nearly as strong as they . . . Now it is one thing to disagree and quite another to prohibit disagreement.”<sup>21</sup>

Jordan brings up two simultaneous critiques here: a racialized understanding of the conflict as the subjugation of non-white peoples, and Israel as exempt from critique, and thereby, the suppression of discussion or disagreement regarding Israeli policy.

Clearly, the charges of “covert anti-Semitism” leveled against Middle East Studies at Evergreen were not isolated events, but rather part of the larger national discourse and assault on academic freedom and the long-standing attempt to silence any critical discussion of U.S. and Israeli policies. For example, House Resolution 3077, which passed in Fall 2003, includes a provision to establish an advisory board to monitor campus international studies centers in order to ensure that they advance the national interest. In fact it mainly targets the 17 federally funded Middle East Studies centers. This bill, along with the attack on the Middle East Studies Association by Martin Kramer and Daniel Pipes in their “neo-McCarthyite Campus-Watch website”<sup>22</sup> show that Middle East Studies is merely first in the neo-conservative line of assault against academics. Indeed, the discourse of “academic freedom” and “diversity” is being used by conservatives to argue for more hires that support conservative perspectives, all in the name of “political diversity” at universities.

Moreover, these debates on racial/ethnic inclusion and strategies have larger implications in the ongoing “war on terrorism”, which masks its political-economic intentions of “remapping the Middle East” in the guise of fighting terror. In fact, while US and Israeli policies deny the racialization of Arabs to promote an illusion of “just [nonracist or imperialist] wars”, Arabs are continually racialized both domestically and internationally through U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, which equates “Arab-looking” persons with terrorism.<sup>23</sup> In effect, the tragic events of 9/11 and the readily available discourse of terrorism accorded victim status to both the U.S. and Israel and further reified the terrorist trope of Arab as other. Twenty years ago, in response to events in Lebanon, June Jordan wrote,

“The problem was that the Lebanese people, in general, and that the Palestinian people, in particular, are not whitemen: They never have been whitemen. Hence they were and *they are only Arabs, or terrorists, or animals*. Certainly they were not men and women and children; certainly they were not human beings with rights remotely comparable to the rights of whitemen, the rights of a nation of whitemen.”<sup>24</sup>

Today, as scenes of the destruction of Falluja, of Mosul, and of Baghdad call to mind the bombardment of Beirut, we can replace depictions of Lebanon's fate with Iraq, while Palestine remains Palestine, even as it is reduced to rubble, and its people fragmented into bantustans or reservations.

## PALESTINIAN WOMEN AND OUR SISTER CITY, RAFAH

When Rachel was in Rafah, she stood watch by night over the last remaining water well in the area that Israel was trying to demolish, and she described what she saw there as a kind of “genocide”, the systematic destruction of people’s ability to survive. Her predictions for Rafah were prophetic, and the violence of the Israeli invasion that initially shocked the world has since become normalized. Over a year after her death, in May 2004, Israel mounted a massive assault against Rafah, which has been documented by Human Rights Watch in their recent 135-page report, *Razing Rafah: Mass Home Demolitions in the Gaza Strip*. The report also calls for the Illinois-based multinational company, Caterpillar Inc. to suspend sales of D9 bulldozers, the vehicle used by the IDF to carry out illegal home demolitions (and to kill Rachel). The report documents the destruction of 298 homes in Rafah, many far inside the border, and describes the indiscriminate destruction of roads, shops, agricultural fields, and water and sewage systems. It documents how IDF operations to “widen the buffer zone” have left “16,000 people or ten percent of [Rafah’s] population homeless over the past four years, regardless of whether their homes posed any genuine military threat, as the IDF has always claimed”<sup>25</sup> In short, it describes the process of clearing Palestinians from the border areas that Rachel described a year earlier in her letters home (at that time, she reported 600 homes destroyed), or what many Gazans, such as Mona El Farra, with the Union of Health Work Committees in Gaza have been reporting since November 2000.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, one of the ironies of solidarity is that the Palestinians still need international solidarity workers and human rights organizations to lend legitimacy to their first-hand reports of suffering.

This ethnic cleansing operation that Rachel witnessed in Rafah is part of a larger assault on Palestinians, in general, and Palestinian women, in particular. In February 2004, the United Nations issued a report on the situation of Palestinian women. It states that “Israel’s repressive policies in the West Bank and Gaza have had a devastating impact on Palestinian women and children” and that “only an end to Israel’s occupation will reverse that trend.”<sup>27</sup> The capacity of women to cope with the situation is declining, and more women have become dependent on emergency assistance, especially food assistance. In addition, women are subject to increasing Israeli military violence, and responsibilities within the household have expanded due to death, imprisonment, or unemployment of male members. In the five months following September 2003, the number of poor in Palestine had tripled to nearly 2 million and 50% of Palestinians are unemployed according to the World Bank. Similar reports document that a third to a half of Palestinian children are suffering from malnutrition, and 2/3 of the population live below the poverty level of \$2/day. Much of this malnutrition is caused by water shortages, for Israel controls aquifers in West Bank and Gaza and channels water for use by Israeli citizens and settlers. Israeli restrictions on movement have increased the number of births at home or in ambulances. In the last 6 months of 2003, 46 women delivered babies while waiting for permission to pass through checkpoints. As a result, 24 women and 27 newborns died in a 6-month period.<sup>28</sup> These structural violences of deliberate starvation, denial of medical care, and livelihood are other methods used to make life untenable for the Palestinians.

Since Rachel’s death, nearly twenty people from our community, including Rachel’s parents Cindy and Craig Corrie, have gone over to Palestine as witnesses in

solidarity with the Palestinians. Some have engaged in direct non-violent action with the ISM, others have worked with children and women cooperatives in Rafah to build support and promote exchanges of women's craftwork at a fair trade store in Olympia. The Olympia-Rafah Sister City Project (orscp.org) has raised thousands of dollars in medical relief for Palestinians in Rafah. Many young women and men are spreading Rachel's work. Most have been unable to enter Rafah because of the extreme closures on the Gaza Strip, but those who make it in remind those in Rafah that they are not forgotten by the world.

In the wake of Rachel's death, some activists made hopeful predictions that her death would "mark the end of the alliance between Israel and the United States"<sup>29</sup> or that it would spur increased activism against the occupation. Naomi Klein erroneously reported that, "more than 40 students . . . at Evergreen State have signed up to go to Gaza this summer." More likely 40 people were attending ISM meetings and considering travel, but even this news reached Rafah with anxious anticipation of our visits. The hope that House Resolution 111 calling for a U.S. investigation into Rachel's death would receive significant congressional support has long faded. Indeed, the U.S. government response to Rachel's death was pathetic—the usual endorsement of Israeli policy with impunity, giving the IDF a green light to kill other internationals.<sup>30</sup> Still, for many in the Olympia community, especially Rachel's family, it has been a painful, yet awakening, lesson in what it means, at least in small part, to "become Palestinian." In other words, Rachel's courage and sacrifice have given the community a point of identification with the Palestinians (as well as Iraqis, Afghanis, and others) struggling for their lives and dignity against a huge military machine bent on their erasure.

### FEMINIST SOLIDARITY & ARAB AMERICAN FEMINISM

The model of feminist solidarity that Rachel embodied - a feminism beyond the borders of "tribe" or identity - comes often from privilege, the privilege to act or not. As Rachel wrote, Palestinians will be doing the work anyway, because their survival depends on it. Yet Said, in pointing to Rachel as an example of the international solidarity expressed towards Arabs and Palestinians, challenges, especially relatively privileged Arab Americans, at the root of our complacency and inaction. In the Olympia community, given Rachel's sacrifice and her parents' unrelenting commitment to pursuing Rachel's vision in ending the injustices of the occupation, many of us have been compelled into action. Yet many in our community have seen their privilege quickly erased when they stood in solidarity with the Palestinians. As a graduate student, I was forewarned that Palestine was a dangerous subject, despite the work done by Edward Said, June Jordan, and others to lend it legitimacy. And despite our gains over the years in many spheres, Palestine and "Palestinian" remain unspeakable subjects, or if you speak them, your words will be edited, molded, and distorted in the most violent ways. For example, when Rachel's mother, Cindy Corrie, submitted an op-ed piece to the *New York Times* on the anniversary of Rachel's death, she was told she had to insert a false sentence that said the home that Rachel was protecting had underground tunnels used by terrorists to bring in weapons. When she refused to be (in her words) "a mouthpiece for the Israeli government", the *New York Times* pulled her piece; it was, however, published in the *Washington Post*.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, I live in a community with very few Arabs where most of the activism is carried out by allies struggling against occupation, war, and U.S.



imperialism. Since 9/11, I have often felt that Arab and Muslim communities are so under siege that we are struggling for our survival - for the Palestinians, the Iraqis, for Arabs and Muslims in America - on a daily basis, that it is difficult to extend ourselves beyond the borders of our community in the way Rachel did. How do we extend ourselves beyond this “virtual portal of luxury” to those on the frontlines of the war zones? As Said argues, we need to gain “respect for ourselves as Arabs and understand the true dignity and justice of our struggle” in order to appreciate the solidarity extended to us.<sup>32</sup> I would add that without a critical mass of participation from within the Arab and Muslim communities, we will remain defined by the discourse of others. Moreover, as Nada Elia has written, “Coalition building is vital to our visibility, to our very survival.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, we need to continue to make the necessary links with other folks that will pull us out of our isolation, not just strategically, but also out of real concern for their struggles. As Arab Americans working in a climate of urgency and crisis - of occupied peoples, profiled, and under surveillance - we need to maintain this globally connected view. And as Arab-American feminists, we must constantly ask how we can assert a “radical, anti-racist, and non-heterosexist” feminism<sup>34</sup> as we stand on the frontlines in this “war on terrorism.”

I have often asked myself this question when I hear young people of color here say there is too much focus on the Middle East at Evergreen and not enough on the racism on our campus and in our communities. Or when I read a book about Arab women and globalization and wonder about the lack of reference to other third world women (Filippinas, Sri Lankans, etc.) who are brought to Arab countries to serve as maids, or even prostitutes, to the Arab elite or the U.S. military.<sup>35</sup> And how do we speak of the occupation of Palestine and Iraq without attention to Native Americans, for as Suheir Hammad reminds us, “In America/right now you are standing/on stolen land no matter/where you are reading this poem.”<sup>36</sup> And what do I tell my queer student who just returned from the Palestinian territories with the ISM and is disillusioned by the silencing of issues of sexuality in Palestinian society? How do we build hope when non-violent resistance is met with militarized force? As Hammad writes:

What can we theorize from all this?

What do we tell young  
people? How do we say, "Your  
voice means nothing to those  
who think life is about power  
over others and greed?" And where  
is it safe to think for yourself and try  
real hard to not want to hurt nobody?<sup>37</sup>

The need for solidarity with ourselves and coalition building with others is still imperative for “subverting the mechanisms of occupation”,<sup>38</sup> and subverting all the destructive mechanisms of militarized violence - war, imprisonment, occupation, torture, the apartheid wall - that destroy life, homes, and the security of our planet. As a feminist, I take my inspiration from the many Palestinian women I worked with, taught and learned from, and interviewed over the years - women who are engaged in creative collective actions in the face of their people’s systematic displacement and dehumanization. I take my inspiration from Rachel

Corrie who worked with Israeli human rights groups to document the water crisis in Gaza and stood with Palestinians to defend their most basic right to their homes. Rachel perceptively described the Palestinian struggle “to defend such a large degree of their humanity against the incredible horror occurring in their lives and against the constant presence of death.”<sup>39</sup> I take my inspiration from Rachel’s family who has been tireless in their commitment to meet with people on all sides of this struggle and to carry out Rachel’s vision to stop these injustices. I am inspired by the actions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which recently approved a resolution requiring its management to selectively divest the Church of shares in corporations, like Caterpillar, that are directly benefiting from Israel’s repression of the Palestinians in the occupied territories. I take my inspiration from many feminists of color who argue for a feminism without borders to counter the globalizing inequalities of capitalism, racism, and militarization, and from the tireless Israeli human rights and peace activists, like Tikva Honig-Parnass who told me quite simply, “I believe in human beings, I believe in their need for freedom, so nothing that we see now is going to last forever.” Indeed, Palestinians should not have to prove that they are worthy of the basic rights and dignity that we take for granted. As many feminists have argued, and as Rachel Corrie stood for, the future worth living for is one that affirms life, justice, dignity, and security for all peoples.

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#### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, “On Courage and Resistance”, *The Nation* (May 5, 2003), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> June Jordan, “Moving Towards Home” in *Living Room: New Poems* (New York: Thunders Mouth Press, 1985), p. 132.

<sup>3</sup> Roy quoted in Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Zillah Eisenstein, *Against Empire: Feminisms, Racism, and the West* (London: Zed Books, 2004), p. xix.

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Suhair Majaj, “Arab-American Ethnicity: Locations, Coalitions, and Cultural Negotiations” in *Arabs in America: Building A New Future*, ed. Michael Sulciman (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), p. 332.

<sup>6</sup> Rachel Corrie, “Rachel’s War” in *The Guardian* (March 17, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Edward W Said, “The Meaning of Rachel Corrie: Of Dignity and Solidarity” in *Peace Under Fire: Israel/Palestine and the International Solidarity Movement*, eds. Josie Sandercocok, Radhika Sainath, Marissa McLaughlin, Hussein Khalili, Nicholas Blincoe, Huwaida Arraf and Ghassan Andoni (London: Verso, 2003), p. xxii.

<sup>9</sup> See Nadine Naber, “So Our History Doesn’t Become Your Future: The Local and Global Politics of Coalition Building Post September 11th” in *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, (October 2002), p. 223.

<sup>10</sup> El Khameesy, Ahmed, “Rachel Corrie: The Conscience of a Rose” (Trans. Somaya Ramadan) in *Akbbbar El Adab* (Cairo, March 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Joanna Kadi, “In Memory of Rachel Corrie” in *Mizna* Vol. 5, Issue 2 (2003), p. 68.

<sup>12</sup> Rebecca Gould, “Rachel Corrie: A Witness for Our Times” in *to kill, to die: feminist contestations on gender and political violence* (New York: New School for Social Research, 2004), p. 3; Kadi, “In Memory of Rachel Corrie,” p.4.

<sup>13</sup> June Jordan, “Life After Lebanon” in *On Call: Political Essays* (Boston: South End Press, 1985), p. 84.

<sup>14</sup> Corrie, “Rachel’s War”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>16</sup> Rabab Abdulhadi, with Reem Abdelhadi, “Nomadic Existence: Exile, Gender, and Palestine (an E-mail Conversation between Sisters)” in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, Eds. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 168
- <sup>17</sup> Edward W Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage Books, (1979) 1992), p. 112.
- <sup>18</sup> Seth Goldstein and Mohammed Abu-Nimer, *The Search for Peace [videorecording]: the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: Difficult Dialogues* (Olympia, WA: TVW, 2004).
- <sup>19</sup> Cockburn, Alexander and Jeffrey St. Clair, eds. *The Politics of Anti-Semitism* (Petrolia, CA: Counterpunch, 2003).
- <sup>20</sup> Joel Beinin, “The new American McCarthyism: policing thought about the Middle East” in *Race & Class* 46:1 (2004), p.112.
- <sup>21</sup> Jordan, “Life After Lebanon”, pp. 82-3.
- <sup>22</sup> Beinin, “The new American McCarthyism” p. 104.
- <sup>23</sup> Salah D. Hassan, “Arabs Race and the Post-September 11 National Security State” in *Middle East Report* 224 (2002), p. 18.
- <sup>24</sup> Jordan, “Life After Lebanon”, p. 81 (my emphasis).
- <sup>25</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Razing Rafah: Mass Home Demolitions in the Gaza Strip* (October 18, 2004).
- <sup>26</sup> Mona El Farra, “Diary of the Dispossessed: Women’s Misery and Suffering under Israeli Occupation” in *Women and the Politics of Military Confrontation: Palestinian and Israeli Gendered Narratives of Dislocation*, eds. Nahla Abdo and Ronit Lentin (New York: Bergham Books, 2002), p. 159.
- <sup>27</sup> Thalif Deen, *Palestinian Women Hard Hit by Israeli Occupation*, United Nations, February, 2004 ([www.palestine-monitor.org/Reports/palestinian\\_women\\_hit\\_hard\\_by\\_occupation](http://www.palestine-monitor.org/Reports/palestinian_women_hit_hard_by_occupation)).
- <sup>28</sup> Deen, *ibid*
- <sup>29</sup> Gould, “Rachel Corrie: A Witness for Our Times,” p. 3.
- <sup>30</sup> Soon after Tom Hurdall and James Miller were killed by the IDF and Brian Avery was severely wounded.
- <sup>31</sup> 16 March 2004.
- <sup>32</sup> Said, “The Meaning of Rachel Corrie”, p. xxii.
- <sup>33</sup> Nada Elia, “The ‘White’ Sheep of the Family: But Bleaching is like Starvation” in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, eds. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 230.
- <sup>34</sup> Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 124.
- <sup>35</sup> See Eleanor Adbella Doumato, *Women and Globalization in the Arab Middle East: Gender, Economy, and Society* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003).
- <sup>36</sup> See Hammad website, [suhairhammad.org](http://suhairhammad.org).
- <sup>37</sup> Suheir, Hammad, “On the Brink Of. . .” in *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway . . . and More*, ed. Danny Simmons (New York: Atria Books, 2004), p. 197.
- <sup>38</sup> Gila Svirsky, “Feminist Peace Activism during the al-Aqsa Intifada” in *Women and the Politics of Military Confrontation: Palestinian and Israeli Gendered Narratives of Dislocation*, eds. Nahla Abdo and Ronit Lentin (New York: Bergham Books, 2002), p. 244.
- <sup>39</sup> Corrie, “Rachel’s War”

# PALESTINIAN WOMEN'S DISAPPEARING ACT:

## THE SUICIDE BOMBER THROUGH WESTERN FEMINIST EYES

Amal Amireh\*

My interest in writing this essay was sparked by an encounter I had in the spring of 2004 with a British reporter who called my office to interview me about Palestinian women suicide bombers. After introducing herself and the topic on which she was working, she asked her first question: "Can you please talk about the treatment of Palestinian women?" When I started to talk about the hardships Palestinian women experience living under occupation, she interrupted me. "I meant for you to talk about how Palestinian society treats its women", she explained. "But the occupation", I stammered. "Well, the occupation is really another topic for another article." At that point, I asked the reporter how she knew there was a connection between the way women were treated by their society and suicide bombings. From her answers, it became clear to me that she had no evidence to support that connection, but rather an assumption, which I, the Palestinian feminist native informant, was being called upon to validate. For the rest of the conversation, I questioned that assumption and insisted that she consider the occupation as a relevant issue for her piece. The rest of this essay is specifically an extended questioning of the connection the reporter assumed between suicide bombings and culture. More broadly, it is also a critique of some problematic paradigms in Western feminist writings about gender and Palestinian nationalism.

### MISTRANSLATING GENDER

To illustrate some these problematic paradigms, let me begin with two examples of gender related mistranslations from Arabic into English. In an article

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about Arab women's war-writing in her book *Gendering War Talk*, and in a section devoted to a discussion of the first Palestinian uprising, Miriam Cooke translates the Arabic word "*intifada*" for her readers by writing: "It is worth noting that *intifada* is a domestic term referring to the shaking out of the dust cloths and carpets that illustrates so brilliantly the process of these women's almost twenty-five-year-old insurrection." Cooke maintains, "the naming changed the nature of the war."<sup>1</sup>

The second example is from a recent book called *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers* by Barbara Victor. Early in the book, Victor focuses on a 2002 speech by the President of the Palestinian Authority, Yasser Arafat, to a crowd of Palestinian women who came to his bombed-out quarters in a show of support. In this speech, Arafat reportedly uttered a phrase, which according to Victor, "changed forever the nature of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict" and "would become his mantra in the weeks and months ahead." What was this amazing phrase? According to Victor, Arafat said "*Shahida* all the way to Jerusalem", thus "coining on the spot the feminized version of the Arab word for martyr, *shahide*, which previously existed only in the masculine form."<sup>2</sup>

In the first case, Cooke's statement is a mistranslation because "*intifada*" is not a domestic term. It is true that one of the uses of the root verb "*nafad*" may be to shake up the carpets, but it can also mean to shake hands, cigarette ashes, a part of the body, or anything else. To select that one possible use and generalize it as the main meaning of the word to underscore the domestic or feminized nature of the *intifada* is a stretch. It is to ignore that, after all, "*intifada*" also comes from the verb "*intafada*", which is an intransitive verb meaning to shake off, often the body or part of it. According to this meaning, "*intifada*" describes the Palestinian rebellion in the West Bank and Gaza as a shaking off of the chains of Israeli occupation and/or of Palestinian inertia by the collective Palestinian national body that includes men and women, adults and children. This is the generally accepted meaning of the word "*intifada*." While it is true that the first *intifada* witnessed a more visible role for women (one of the icons of that *intifada* is the Palestinian woman deploying her body between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian youth to prevent the latter's arrest), it is an exaggeration to say that it was a women's uprising or that, to use Cooke's words, it was "the most explicitly feminized of all postmodern wars."<sup>3</sup> It is significant that at the very moment Palestinian women were assuming a more visibly public political role (as opposed to their more traditional private political role), their actions are mistranslated into a language that emphasizes their domesticity. This domesticating language is the effect of a Western feminist paradigm that, in the name of politicizing the personal, ends up domesticating the political in Third World women's lives. In the process of this domestication, the dichotomy between the political and the personal, the public and the private, is upheld.

The second example is also an attempt to draw attention to the role of Palestinian women but this time in the second *intifada*. Victor takes one of Arafat's familiar statements, "*Shahada batta al Quds*", (which literally translates to, "Martyrdom till Jerusalem", a variation on, "*shahada batta al nasr*", or "Martyrdom till victory") and transforms into "*shabeeda*"; meaning female martyr (both have the regular feminized ending, but they are different words). Not only that, she claims that the feminine form "*shabeeda*" did not exist before and was invented by Arafat on that wintry morning. As anyone who is familiar with the Arabic language knows, "*shabeeda*", the feminine form of "*shabeede*", preexists both Arafat and Victor. It is the regular feminine form of a regular noun. Victor goes even further by arguing

that on that same day, and after that explosive speech, a woman called Wafa Idris exploded a bomb and herself in Jerusalem, becoming the first Palestinian *shabeeda*. So not only did Arafat invent a new word for the Arabic language, but he also invented a new woman for the Palestinian people. Like the sorcerer of a thousand and one nights, Arafat used his magical words to conjure up the Palestinian woman suicide bomber. Victor mentions his amazing feat on page 20 and goes on to write 300 more pages on the basis of this mistranslation. Ignorant of the existence of the word, she erases the hundreds of women martyrs in Palestinian history through an act of mistranslation.

### GENDERING SUICIDE BOMBERS

These mistranslations are symptomatic of a deeper problem relating to discussions of gender and nationalism. While recent feminist scholarship has drawn attention to the relevance of gender to the study of nationalism, the specific ways by which gender and nationalism inform each other remain under theorized and captive to certain feminist paradigms that are limited in their relevance and application.<sup>4</sup> When Western feminists, for instance, address gender and nationalism in relation to Palestinian women, they privilege sexual politics to the exclusion of all else, such as history, class, war, and occupation. The result is a privatization of the political instead of a politicization of the private. One important consequence of this privatization is the disappearance of women as national agents. This is nowhere more evident than in the Western feminist discourse on Palestinian women suicide bombers.

Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, a whole industry has evolved to explain the motive of the suicide bomber. Much ink has been spilt in an attempt to develop a profile for the male suicide bomber. The more serious studies tend to emphasize a complexity of motives and thus the elusiveness of a fixed profile while the more ideological ones focus on psychological aspects, with special emphasis on pathology.<sup>5</sup> Sex has figured prominently, with U. S. and Israeli media advancing the “*hour el ‘ain*” theory of suicide bombing, according to which men become suicide bombers because they are promised 72 virgins in paradise.<sup>6</sup> One thing that can be discerned from most of these studies is that the image of the male suicide bomber could fit easily into the preexisting dominant discourse about Muslim and Arab men as violent and licentious others. The female suicide bombers, however, have posed more of a challenge.

The female suicide bomber challenges the image of Muslim and Arab women as docile bodies that is dominant in the Western context. While this image of docility has its roots in the long history of Orientalist stereotypes of Muslim women, it has become more visible in recent years. Certainly, in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the veiled and beaten body of the Afghan woman under the Taliban was deployed on a massive scale and came to stand for Muslim and Arab women generally. U. S. feminists played a key role in disseminating this profile, when the Feminist Majority, a prominent U.S. feminist organization, joined forces with the Bush Administration to “liberate” the bodies of the downtrodden women of Afghanistan. The oppressed body of the Muslim woman was inserted into debates about American national security and was offered as an important reason to justify a war. In contrast to this image, the female suicide bomber’s body is far from being dormant or inactive, passively waiting for outside help. It is purposeful, lethal, and literally explosive. Sometimes veiled, sometimes in “Western” dress, this body

moves away from home, crosses borders, and infiltrates the other's territory. It is a protean body in motion and, therefore, needs a translation.

Another reason the woman suicide bomber poses a challenge to feminists in particular is the ambivalent view feminists have concerning women's relationship to nationalism. Despite recent scholarship that attempts to provide a nuanced analysis of women's connection to national institutions, the dominant view continues to see women of the Third World as victims of nationalism, simultaneously embodied by their governments, countries, and cultures. While U. S. feminists may acknowledge that American women have a complex relation to their country and its patriarchal institutions (such as the military), they often deny that same kind of relationship to Arab and Muslim women, who are usually seen as a monolithic group always tainted with victimhood. As a result, the nationalist Arab and Muslim woman, with the suicide bomber as her most sensational embodiment, urgently needs an explanation.

To make this incomprehensible woman figure accessible to a Western readership, some U. S. feminists have deployed what Uma Narayan has called, in the context of her critique of Western feminist discourse on *sati*, a "death by culture" paradigm.<sup>7</sup> This paradigm abstracts Palestinian women suicide bombers from any historical and political context and places them exclusively in a cultural one. Culture is opposed to politics and is seen as "natural", "organic", "essential", and therefore unchanging.<sup>8</sup> Doomed to this cultural context, Palestinian women are seen as victims of an abusive patriarchal Arab culture that drives them to destroy themselves and others.<sup>9</sup> Thus, their violent political act is transformed into yet another example of the ways Arab culture inevitably kills its women.<sup>10</sup>

### **GOING BACK TO BASICS, OR, ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK**

The uncontested spokeswoman for this paradigm has been Andrea Dworkin, who wrote an essay for the online feminist magazine *Feminista!* about "The Women Suicide Bombers."<sup>11</sup> When I first read Dworkin's essay, I was simply irritated by it, regretting that with such publications, feminist solidarity between First and Third World women takes a step backward. But when I re-read it through my graduate students' eyes, I was angered. At the time the essay came out, I was teaching a seminar on postcolonial fiction and theory. Since one of the sections dealt with postcolonial feminist theory, I thought Dworkin's essay would be a good example of problematic Western feminist writings about Third World women, an easy exercise for the students to analyze using the feminist theory they had been reading. I e-mailed the essay to my 19 students (17 of whom were women) without comment, just asking them to read it and post their responses to the rest of the class.

Their responses shocked me. The two self-identified feminists among my students admired the essay greatly. The others agreed. None of them questioned Dworkin's racist characterization of Palestinian women and their society. On the contrary, those claims were assumed to be correct. The one dissenting post came from the Arab-American student in the class. But her response was delayed, making me suspect that she was intimidated by the consensus. I then emailed the class a letter to the editor responding to Dworkin's essay written by Monica Tarazi, an Arab-American woman who was once a student of mine at Birzeit University. Unfortunately, Tarazi was attacked for her lack of sources, something the students

never demanded of Dworkin. More ironically, she was chastised for daring to speak about women she did not know.

As I stood in front of my students the next class, I could not hide my distress and spent some time explaining it. I spoke as a Palestinian, a feminist, and a teacher. Although there were several uncomfortable moments, I could tell that my students heard me, and that, by the end of the day, we all had learned something: They learned to be more alert to their unexamined preconceptions about women of “other” cultures, particularly Arab and Muslim women, and not to let their misconceptions undermine their critical faculties. I learned that as sophisticated as postcolonial feminist theory has become, it might still fail, as it did in this case, in shaking deep-rooted assumptions about Arab women and their culture. The following critique of Dworkin’s essay is an attempt to go back to basics, that is, to a critical examination of these faulty feminist assumptions that continue to undermine the efforts to consolidate a transnational feminist movement.

### **DEATH BY CULTURE AS RACIST DISCOURSE: ANDREA DWORKIN**

Dworkin confidently gives her readers three reasons why there are Palestinian women suicide bombers. The first reason is sexual abuse. She states that Palestinian women are raped “often by men in their own families”, and since they will be killed by their families, they “trade in the lowly status of the raped woman for the higher status of a martyr.” While one cannot deny that Palestinian women, like women everywhere, are subject to sexual assault and that so called “honor killing” does exist in Palestinian society, the second part of Dworkin’s statement is baseless. Dworkin offers no evidence whatsoever to support a link between sexual abuse and suicide bombing. The only evidence she provides to support her claim is that Palestinian and Israeli feminists have worked together in rape crisis centers to repair torn hymens of Palestinian women. That no one else has uncovered the truth of the suicide bomber as sexual abuse victim “has to do with the invisibility of women in general and the necessary silence of injured victims.” Indeed, an American feminist is needed to expose these women for the sexual abuse victims they really are.

It is fascinating that despite the loud explosions, Dworkin can only hear the “silence of injured victims.” Blind to the hundreds of Palestinian women whose bodies have been torn to shreds by Israeli missiles and bullets during the past four years, she can only shed tears for the torn hymen between Palestinian women’s legs. According to Dworkin’s logic, Palestinian suicide bombers are really victims of their culture, a culture that systematically rapes them and then punishes them for the act. The only context that matters in understanding their action is a reified cultural one that completely supersedes all historical and political contexts.

The other two reasons Dworkin gives illustrate that not only abused women, but the “best and brightest” also die by culture. She claims that the suicide bombers are Palestinian women who are trying to “rise up in a land where women are lower than the animals.” Their societies are so oppressive and demeaning that these women are left only with the option of exploding their bodies to advance the cause of women in their societies: “The more women want to prove their worth, the more women suicide bombers there will be” is Dworkin’s ominous prediction. She does not explain whether these women are recruited by Palestinian feminist organizations or whether they are free feminist agents working on their own.<sup>12</sup> But



worried that she may have assigned too much agency to them, she does remind us that they are really just dupes of nationalism. To seal her argument, she invokes what has become the scarecrow of Arab women nationalists, the “Algerian woman”, who heroically fought for her country but was “pushed back down” after liberation.

Not only are Palestinian women dupes of nationalism, they are also dupes of their families, according to Dworkin. “The best and the brightest are motivated to stand up for their families” who, Dworkin begrudgingly admits, suffer from Israeli occupation. While Palestinian women’s violence against Israel is highlighted right at the beginning of the essay and even given a “long history”, this is the first time that Dworkin mentions the occupation and its violence against Palestinians. This violence, however, is reduced to “beaten fathers”, “destroyed homes”, and “angry mothers.” There is a tentative mention of “the brothers”, but before one thinks that the brothers too must be suffering from Israeli aggression, Dworkin adds, “who are civilly superior to them [their sisters].” In other words, Palestinian women are acting on behalf of brothers, fathers, and mothers who, as we were told earlier, abuse and kill them. At no point in her article does Dworkin consider that Palestinian women themselves can be subject to Israeli violence.<sup>13</sup>

On the contrary, Dworkin works hard on suppressing Israeli violence against Palestinian women. At some point she quotes an unnamed Palestinian woman as saying:

It is as if we were in a big prison, and the only thing we really have to lose is that. Imagine what it is like to be me, a proud, well-educated woman who has traveled to many countries. Then see what it is like to be an insect, for that is what the Israeli soldiers call us—cockroaches, dogs, insects.

This testimony undermines Dworkin’s main argument: the Palestinian woman here is not speaking as a victim of her patriarchal society; she is educated and proud. She, like others, is imprisoned and treated like “less than animals” not by the culture but by Israeli soldiers. She sees herself in unity with, and not in opposition to, Palestinian men, who, like her, are oppressed by the racism and injustice of the occupation.

Dworkin, however, turns a blind eye to all of that. She quotes this woman to prove that “the best and the brightest” are dupes who find it easier to blame “the Israelis for women’s suffering than to blame the men who both sexually abuse and then kill them according to honor society rules.” This woman’s complaint about Israeli oppression, is, according to Dworkin, misplaced. Dworkin, the American feminist who has not spent one day in her life living under occupation, clearly knows what is oppressing Palestinian women better than the women themselves. She can only shake her head in disbelief that a woman who is treated like a cockroach by her Israeli occupier is directing her anger at him and not at the men of her culture, who, after all, can only be rapists and murderers. Dworkin’s imperial and racist discourse regarding Palestinian women blinds and deafens her to their suffering for which she can allow only one reason-- culture.<sup>14</sup>

### ROBIN MORGAN’S DEMONS

The racism of Dworkin’s essay is so blatant that it is tempting to dismiss her argument as an exception. But, unfortunately, the death by culture paradigm

seeps into the discourse of feminists who have expressed more sympathy towards women of the Third World and who have worked hard to build bridges among women globally. One such feminist is Robin Morgan, founder of the Sisterhood is Global Institute, editor of the landmark *Sisterhood is Global* anthology, and former editor-in-chief of *Ms Magazine*. Morgan entered the fray when she wrote an article in *Ms Magazine* explaining the phenomenon of the Palestinian female suicide bombers.<sup>15</sup> In this article, Morgan extends to them the argument she made in her 1989 book *The Demon Lover: The Roots of Terrorism*, a new edition of which was issued after September 11<sup>th</sup>. According to Morgan, these women are “token terrorists”; they are “invariably involved because of . . . the demon lover syndrome, their love for a particular man: a fraternal or paternal connection but more commonly a romantic or marital bond.” While men, according to Morgan, “become involved because of the politics”, the women “become involved because of the men.” To support her point, she mentions that two of the women had fathers and/or brothers who had been tortured while in custody of the Israeli army. Morgan undermines the women’s political motivation by privatizing their political agency. She ignores all the signs that framed their action as a political one: the fact that the would be bomber publicly declares her allegiance to a political group (by leaving a video taped message in the hand of that group, by allowing her picture to be used on their posters, and by inscribing their slogans on her body), that she declares in a read statement her motivation to be nationalist, not personal, that she commits the violent act in a public place for all to see (restaurant, supermarket, checkpoint, street)—all these facts are ignored and Morgan can see this woman’s action only in “private” terms.

Moreover, Morgan belittles the women’s political agency by casting the demon lover syndrome as a form of false female consciousness that women should transcend. This is another version of the “they are duped” argument that Dworkin propagates. But this time, Palestinian women are dupes because they are adopting a male form of political expression. While the Palestinian woman has engaged in non-violent resistance, Morgan maintains that such a woman discovered that “to be taken seriously--by her men, her culture, her adversary, and even eventually herself—she must act through male modes, preferably violent ones.” By “acting through male modes”, she is not really exercising her full agency or will; she is under the spell of the “demon lover.” Only non-violent activities can be accepted as genuine expressions of women’s will since, according to Morgan, women are essentially non-violent.<sup>16</sup>

To be fair to Morgan, her essentialism has a universal sweep and does not target specific cultures. Still, Palestinian culture as a source of the suicide bomber’s motivation does creep into her argument. After mentioning the two women who fit the diagnoses of the “demon-lover syndrome”, Morgan refers to a third suicide bomber, one who “was reported to be depressed about [her] impending arranged marriage.” Although this example obviously does not fit Morgan’s theory, the “demon lover” explanation slips in nevertheless. In this case, the violent act is seen as an expression of female agency, but this agency is allowed only because it is to “escape” the woman’s oppressive culture, metonymized by “the arranged marriage.” We are back, then, to the formulation of “death by culture.” The woman destroys herself and others in order to escape a traditional oppressive patriarchal culture, the root cause of her violent act.

Morgan has written about Palestinian women’s relation to their culture in more detail in a chapter in *The Demon Lover* entitled “What Do Men Know about

Life? The Middle East”, in which she relates her encounters with Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza in the late 1980s. Morgan is eager in this chapter to dispel stereotypes of the Palestinian woman as either “a grenade-laden Leila Khaled”, or “an illiterate refugee willingly producing sons for the revolution.”<sup>17</sup> She acknowledges the Palestinian women doctors, nurses, dentists, midwives, social workers, educators, researchers, professors, architects, engineers, and lawyers that she meets. Still, she admits that the “focus of this journey was the women in the refugee camps, who suffer from the sexuality of terrorism with every breath they inhale.”<sup>18</sup> While Morgan does not explain what “sexuality of terrorism” is, the meaning of the phrase becomes clearer as she proceeds in her narrative. It becomes evident, for instance, that “sexuality of terrorism” cannot be referring to the Israeli military occupation, for while Morgan mentions it as a factor in refugee women’s lives, she minimizes its effects (for example, she calls the houses the Israeli army demolishes “shelters”). Soon we realize that the one issue that seems to plague refugee women’s lives and terrorize them is multiple pregnancies. In fact, the body of the Palestinian mother haunts Morgan, and by the end of her journey, it assumes demonic proportions. Ironically, this is the image with which she concludes her chapter in solidarity with Palestinian women:

The form is also grossly misshapen. This specter has a protruding belly, and balances a bucket on the head. Dark, cheap cloth shrouds the body, and smaller forms cling leechlike to every limb like growths on the flesh—children at the hip, thigh, calf, waist, breast, back, and neck. She is trying to refuse the job he requires of her. She is almost dying, almost surviving.<sup>19</sup>

What we have in the above image is a description of the body of the Palestinian woman as an “other.” This is a non-human body, a “grossly misshapen form,” a “specter”, made up of disjointed body parts, such as a “protruding belly”, a head, a hip, thigh, calf, waist, breast, back, and neck. It is a zombi-like body, wearing a shroud, and invaded by alien, non-human “smaller forms” that “cling leech like”, “like growths on the flesh.” This deformed, diseased, silent body of the Palestinian mother can only put her in the range of our condescending pity, rendering Morgan’s profession of empathy in the chapter’s concluding words “she is ourselves” completely hollow. Morgan can express solidarity only with women abstracted from men, country, and history; she certainly has little sympathy for real women of flesh and blood and is almost terrified by those with children.

The horror that permeates Morgan’s description of Palestinian women’s bodies echoes the racist Israeli anxieties about the high birth rate among Palestinian women. Morgan’s reference to disease-like growth brings to mind those Israeli officials who always saw the Arab presence as a “cancer” in the body of the Jewish state. Morgan’s feminist rhetoric, then, coincides with the colonialist racist discourse about Palestinian women’s bodies. With this view of Palestinian women’s bodies, it is not surprising that any explanation of their political involvement would be seen as an example of their subservient bodies and minds to their demon lovers or as a desperate attempt to escape from their repressive culture.

### BARBARA VICTOR’S SENSATIONAL DESIGNS

But if the death by culture discourse is implied in Morgan’s narrative, it is the structuring principle in Barbara Victor’s *Army of Roses: Inside the World of*

*Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers*. While Victor is not a feminist theoretician and activist, as Dworkin and Morgan are, she does employ a feminist language in addressing her general reader. Using investigative reporting to construct a profile for the first four women suicide bombers, Victor discovers “that all four who died, plus the others who had tried and failed to die a martyr’s death, had personal problems that made their lives untenable within their own culture and society.”<sup>20</sup> Victor offers a parable that “tells the story of four women who died for reasons that go beyond the liberation of Palestine”, a feminist morality tale that serves “as an example of the exploitation of women taken to a cynical and lethal extreme.”<sup>21</sup> Political motives are allowed only in relation to the men. Thus we are told, without any evidence, that Arafat “shifted the emphasis on his military operations onto a very special kind of suicide bomber”<sup>22</sup> because he failed to find any men who would do the job. Then he sent out his men to “seduce” the women. When it comes to the women’s motives, politics is jostled to the background by seedy narratives of sex and seduction. Victor writes a book full of egregious factual errors, unsubstantiated claims, distortions, and suspicious evidence to prove that culture, not politics, is indeed the main factor behind these women’s violent actions.

The erasure of politics is evident even when Victor mentions the role women played in the first Palestinian Intifada. She writes that the Palestinian woman became a symbol “who for the first time in the history of her culture was involved in and indicted for acts of subversion and sabotage and jailed in Israeli prisons.”<sup>23</sup> This statement erases a long history of women’s political involvement and foregrounds culture by using the curious phrase “history of her culture.” It reflects the reductive view that Palestinian women’s history has always to be a cultural history, because their lives are mostly shaped by culture even when they are asserting their political wills. Not surprisingly, women’s political involvement, according to Victor, takes the form of them “shorten[ing] their skirts, wear[ing] trousers, and leav[ing] their heads uncovered.”<sup>24</sup>

The erasure of Palestinian women’s history of victimization by, and resistance to, the occupation is glaring when Victor declares Wafa Idris the first *shabeeda*.<sup>25</sup> In Victor’s hands, “*shabeeda*”, meaning female martyr, becomes a synonym for “suicide bomber.” This “mistranslation” ends up writing off hundreds of Palestinian women martyrs and makes incomprehensible statements such as “the whole question of the religious legitimacy of martyrs in general prompted debate within the Muslim community.”<sup>26</sup> According to Victor, suicide bombing marks the beginning of Palestinian women’s history. But, of course, martyrdom, defined as dying for one’s country and/or faith, has the highest national and religious values ascribed to it and, contrary to Victor’s claim, at no point has it been a subject of debate in the Palestinian or Muslim community. What has been debated is suicide attacks (*al ‘amaleyyat al intihareya*) against Israeli civilians, which the Palestinians prefer to call (*al ‘amaleyyat al isteshbadeya*). The man or woman who undertakes such an act is referred to as “*Isteshbad?*” and “*Istishbadeya*” respectively, which can be translated as “that who seeks martyrdom.” This word distinguishes him or her from the regular “martyr”, whether a member of an armed militia or a civilian bystander, by underscoring the individual will and purposefulness behind the act.

So perhaps Victor intended to say that Idris was the first Palestinian woman “*istishbadeya*.” Even this statement, however, is not totally accurate. Both Palestinian and Israeli sources raise questions about her being an *istishbadeya*/suicide bomber and speculate that it is likely she was a carrier of a bomb that may have gone off prematurely. Victor herself quotes an Israeli eyewitness, for instance,

saying that Idris's backpack was caught up in the door of the store in her way out, which may have led to the explosion. Others point out the fact that unlike in every other case of a suicide bombing, no taped or written statement was found left behind from Idris. Such evidence should alert us to the possibility that Idris's *isteshhadeya* identity was constructed by both the Palestinians and the Israelis after her death. Nevertheless, Victor ignores this evidence and takes Idris's *isteshhadeya* status for granted, then goes on to focus on the motives that drove her to suicide.

In exposing the motives of the female suicide bombers, Victor constructs a fictional narrative that casts the women as always victims of their culture. According to this narrative, Wafa Idris and Hiba Darghmeh may seem confident and independent on the surface but are in fact brutalized by their culture, one as a divorced and barren woman and the other as a rape victim. Darine Abu Aisheh is a "brilliant"<sup>27</sup> student and an ambitious "feminist"<sup>28</sup> who is thwarted by a culture that values only defeated women. Shireen Rabiya, "a beautiful, long-legged girl with all the attributes and grace of a fashion model"<sup>29</sup> is demoralized by a culture that teases its "too attractive"<sup>30</sup> women. A ubiquitous Arab "honor code" is invoked to explain the actions of some: thus Ahlam al Tamimi (a.k.a Zina), for example, was pushed by her family to become a suicide bomber to redeem the family honor after becoming pregnant out of wedlock while Ayat al Akhras sacrificed herself to redeem the honor of a father accused of collaboration with Israel. And when the woman has "no sensational story"<sup>31</sup>, and Victor is unable to conjure up any scandal to explain her motivation, as in the case of Andaleeb Takatka, we are told that she wanted so much to be a "superstar"<sup>32</sup>, and suicide bombing was her only rout to stardom (the evidence for this is that as a teenager she had pictures of Arab entertainers on her bedroom wall). In other words, marginalized, talented, and ordinary Palestinian women are all persecuted by their culture in one way or another and therefore are viable candidates to carry out suicide bombings.

Non-cultural reasons that may explain the women's actions do appear in Victor's book, but only to be subtly dismissed or transformed into cultural effects. Thus Victor reports the stories about how Idris was moved by the injuries of children which she witnessed as a volunteer paramedic, that she herself was shot twice, that Ayat al Akhras was shaken by witnessing the killing of a neighbor, that Abu Aisheh was humiliated on a checkpoint by Israeli soldiers who unveiled her in public and forced a cousin to kiss her on the mouth. These reasons, however, along with the women's public political activism (as in the case of Abu Aisheh and Daraghmeh) invariably recede into the background once Victor uncovers the "secret" reason which supersedes all others and which becomes the basis for her psychoanalysis of dead women she has never met. As a result, Victor's narrative predictably dwells on Idris's marital problems, on al Akhras's "disgrace", on Abu Aisheh's desire to escape a marriage, and on Daraghmeh's alleged rape. Even when a certain "cultural" practice is not relevant to her story, Victor still uses it the way a prosecutor prejudices the jury with immaterial yet tainting evidence. An example of this strategy is her going on about "wife beating" as a practice in Muslim society only to conclude that Idris's husband did *not* beat her.<sup>33</sup>

However, the nature of the evidence Victor uncovers and her way of uncovering it are both problematic. Her sensational information usually comes in the form of gossip whispered to Victor by a friend or relative of the dead woman or a "confession" of some juicy detail that hitherto has been kept secret. An example of the first kind of revelation is the statement by Abu Aisheh's friend that Darine "told me she would rather die" than marry.<sup>34</sup> Victor uses this statement to construct

a profile for Abu Aisheh as a desperate feminist rebelling against her culture. There is no other evidence to support this conclusion, and Abu Aisheh's public political commitments as a student activist at An Najah University are eclipsed by this friendly revelation.

More sensational are the "confessions" Victor receives from, for instance, Hiba Darghmeh's mother and the woman she calls "Zina." In the first case, the mother tells Victor that her daughter was raped by a mentally retarded uncle and in the second Zina, who was indicted for aiding a suicide bomber, reveals that she had a child out of wedlock. These confessions are problematic because Victor does not explain why these women would trust her with information that was not revealed to anyone else. Why would Hiba Daraghmeh's mother allegedly reveal to Victor, a foreign reporter she is meeting for the first time in her life, a much guarded secret about her daughter, now celebrated as an *estesbhadeyeh*, that would tarnish the family's name? In Zina's case, Victor claims that at the request of the woman's family she gives her an alias. But this attempt at protecting her identity is not convincing because the moment we read that "Zina" is the woman who helped transport Izz el Deen al Masri, the bomber of Sbarro's restaurant, her real identity as Ahlam al-Tamimi is revealed. Al Tamimi is well-known; in fact, her posters are all over the walls in the West Bank, and her defiant words in court after her sentencing are quoted all over the Internet. Why would a woman who has the status of a national celebrity, whose story is common knowledge, make such a gothic confession of secrets she and her family supposedly guarded for years? And if we assume that Victor is not really slandering al Tamimi in this underhanded way and is truly ignorant of her public image, how could she justify such ignorance when she supposedly researched the minutest detail of this woman's life? It does not help matters that Victor does not explain how she conducted her interviews: how did she introduce herself to her subjects? What language did she use in interviewing them? Were these "confessions" made in front of an interpreter as well? Were the people aware that she was researching a book and that she would be making the intimate details of their lives public?

The veracity of Victor's "evidence" is further undermined by the many factual errors that riddle her narrative. According to her, the late Syrian President Hafez al Asad is a Christian Alawite<sup>35</sup> (no such thing exists; he is a Muslim alawayte); Birzeit University is Christian and its student council was Christian before it was over taken by Islamists<sup>36</sup> (both the university and the council are secular; different political groups, including the Islamists, run for the council's elections); the color of mourning in Palestinian culture is white<sup>37</sup> (it is black); and Darine Abu Aisheh is Hamas's first female suicide bomber<sup>38</sup> (a simple Google search would reveal that Reem al Reyashi was, Abu Aisheh was claimed by Al Aqsa Martyr's Brigades who prepared her for her mission after Hamas refused to). In addition, Victor either gets the names of her interviewees wrong (Wafa Idris's mother, Wasfeyeh, is renamed Mabrook) or consistently misspells them beyond recognition (I counted 22 such instances). The accumulative effect of the egregious factual errors, the misspellings, and the mistranslations should undermine Victor's authority as someone reporting from "inside the world of Palestinian suicide bombers" as her subtitle claims. But while reviewers of her other books, such as her recent biography of Madonna, point to Victor's love for sleaziness and her penchant for unnamed sources,<sup>39</sup> none of the reviewers of her book on Palestinian women seems to be bothered by the sloppiness of her evidence and her, at best, questionable relationship to her Palestinian informants.<sup>40</sup>

## THE CONSUMING GAZE: THE WOMAN SUICIDE BOMBER AS AN OBJECT OF DESIRE

In Victor's narrative, Palestinian female suicide bombers, and Palestinian women generally, are objectified through a voyeuristic Western perspective that can only see them as sexual beings violated by their culture. When Victor meets Idris for the first time, she presents her as an object of Western desire: she lingers on Idris's attractive physical features, then concludes: "It was not surprising, given her cheerful personality and good looks, that I later learned that several western journalists had asked her out, although, as a good Muslim woman, she had refused their advances."<sup>41</sup> Then there is the odd description of Idris's body after the explosion: "I rushed over to see it, and while the entire scene was horrifying, the sign of Wafa's body lying in the middle of Jaffa Road in Jerusalem, covered haphazardly with a rubber sheet, was stunning. Even more shocking was the image of an arm, her right arm, which had been ripped from her body, lying bloody and torn several inches away."<sup>42</sup> The choice of the word "stunning" (synonyms: "beautiful", "gorgeous", "lovely", "irresistible", "breathtaking", "awesome") in this context shows how Victor's gaze is fixated on sexualizing and objectifying Idris's body, even in death.<sup>43</sup> Victor's voyeurism is not unique. Mainstream Western media has referred to Palestinian female suicide bombers as "lipstick martyrs", who are "dressed to kill."<sup>44</sup> Writing for the *Observer*, Kevin Toolis could not hide the sexual undertones in his description of Hiba Daraghme's poster: "On the walls of Jenin she stares out from her poster like a vengeful nun. Her eyes are defiant, her pupils enlarged, and her eyebrows are plucked."<sup>45</sup> This is the same Toolis who offers the following sexually loaded mistranslation of Hanadi Jaradat's will: according to him, Jaradat declared in her videotaped statement: "By the will of God I decided to be the sixth martyr who makes her body full with splinters in order to enter every Zionist heart who occupied our country."<sup>46</sup> It is a statement that is, in Toolis's words, "suffused with sexuality." But in fact Jaradat did not say what Toolis attributes to her. A more accurate translation of her Arabic words is: "I do not have but this body, which I will make into splinters to uproot anyone who had tried to uproot us from our homeland." By using the word "uproot", Jaradat is employing a familiar national metaphor used by the Palestinians to describe their experience of displacement and exile. The sexual connotations that Toolis reads in Jaradat's words are but a figment of his overheated imagination—an imagination more interested in the women's "plucked eyebrows" and "ruby lips" than in the causes and consequences of their act.

Early in her book, Victor recalls an encounter she had with a Palestinian woman in the Shatila refugee camp in Lebanon right after the phalangist militia, with Israeli complicity, massacred hundreds of Palestinian men, women, and children. Sitting in the midst of a scene of carnage and destruction, cradling a dead child in her arms, this survivor confronts Victor, whom she recognizes as an American: "You American women talk constantly of equality. Well, you can take a lesson from us Palestinian women. We die in equal numbers to the men." Victor chooses to understand this woman's bitter and ironic statement as an expression of a "tragic concept of women's liberation",<sup>47</sup> that is, Palestinian women cannot be equal in their society except through death. By ignoring the context of the encounter, Victor misses the obvious—that the woman is condemning the hypocrisy of Western feminists who clamor for women's rights but turn a deaf ear

to Palestinian women suffering at the hands of Israeli soldiers and their friends. Victor's blindness to the context in which this woman is speaking—the scene of death and devastation around her, the dead child in her arms—is astounding. She is so fixated on seeing the woman as a victim of her culture that even when the woman's loss and suffering, as a result of political violence against her and her family and neighbors, is staring Victor in the face, she is blind to it.

This Western feminist discourse on Arab women has a chilling effect particularly on the relationship between Arab and Arab-American feminists, on the one hand, and their American counterparts, on the other. Arab-American feminists and activists have long shouldered a double burden: not only do they work against sexism and patriarchy in their communities, but they also have to contend with the harmful stereotypes propagated about them and their Arab culture in the mass media. Due to their hard work and their forming of important alliances with other women of color in the U.S., who also had to struggle against the racism and classism of mainstream white feminists, their voices have made some impact and better channels of communication have been opened. However, since the tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, these little gains in feminist solidarity seem to have been eroded in the face of the mobilizing of U. S. feminists in the service of nationalism and militarism. The discourse on Palestinian women suicide bombers, just like that on Afghan women, is bound to widen the gap separating Arab-Americans from feminists like Dworkin, Morgan, and Victor.

But beyond feminist solidarity, invoking the “death by culture” paradigm to understand why some women become suicide bombers leads to a dead end, for this understanding implies a Kurtzian “exterminate all the brutes” solution, the “brutes” in this case being all those who are made by Arab or Palestinian culture. For those who do not believe this is a viable solution, it is crucial to acknowledge that suicide bombings by women, just like those by men, are, first and foremost, forms of political violence. The culture that is implicated in this phenomenon is not a fetishized, oppressive “Arab culture”, but rather a culture of militarization whose effects are by no means limited to Palestinian society. The recognition of suicide bombing as a political form of violence neither trivializes nor idealizes the suicide bomber/*el isteshbadeya*. On the contrary, seeing her as a political agent is a first and necessary step for launching a feminist critique of women, militarization, and nationalism that goes beyond casting Palestinian women as demons, angels, or victims of a killer culture.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Miriam Cooke, “Women's Jihad Before and After 9/11”, in *Women and Gender in the Middle East and the Islamic World Today*, UCIAS Edited Volumes Vol. 4 (2003), Article 1063. <http://repositories.cdlib.org/uciaspubs/editedvolumes/4/1063>, p. 195.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Suicide Bombers* (New York: Rodale, 2003), p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Miriam Cooke, “Women's Jihad”, p. 195.

<sup>4</sup> For works on gender and nationalism, see Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1998); Valentine M. Moghadam, *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies*. (London: Zed Books, 1994); Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Mino Moallem, (eds.). *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalism, Transnational Feminism, and the State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990); Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger, eds., *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1992). For works that address gender and



Palestinian nationalism, see Julie Peteet, "Icons and Militants: Mothering in the Danger Zone" in *Signs* 23.1(1994): 103-129; Nahla, Abdo, "Gender, Civil Society and Politics under the PA" in *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Fall 2002, p. 20-47; Frances S Hasso, "Feminist Generations? The Long Term Impact of Social Movement Involvement on Palestinian Women's Lives" in *The American Journal of Sociology* 107.3 (2001), p. 586-613; Frances S Hasso, "The 'Women's Front': Nationalism, Feminism, and Modernity in Palestine" in *Gender and Society* 12.4 (1998), p. 441-486; Tami Amanda Jacoby, "Feminism, Nationalism, and Difference: Reflections on the Palestinian Women's Movement" in *Women's Studies International Forum* 22.5 (1999), p. 511-523; Rhoda Ann Kanaaneh, *Rebirthing the Nation: Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Rajeswari Mohan, "Loving Palestine: Nationalist Activism and Feminist Agency in Leila Khaled's Subversive Bodily Acts" in *Interventions* 1.1 (1998), p. 52-80; Rita Giacaman, Islah Jad, and Penny Johnson, "For the Public Good? Gender and Social Citizenship in Palestine." *Middle East Report* 198 (1996), p. 11-16.

<sup>5</sup> For examples of works on suicide bombing, see John Borneman, "Genital Anxiety" in *Anthropological Quarterly* 75.1(2002), p. 129-137; Joyce M. Davis, *Martyrs: Innocence, Vengeance and Despair in the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Hilal Khashan, "Collective Palestinian Frustration and Suicide Bombings" in *Third World Quarterly* 24.6 (2003), p. 1049-1067; Lori Allen, "There Are Many Reasons Why: Suicide Bombers and Martyrs in Palestine" in *GSC Quarterly* (Summer 2002) Ghassan, Hage, "Comes a Time We Are All Enthusiasm: Understanding Palestinian Suicide Bombers in Times of Exigophobia" in *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003), p. 65-89; Sylvain Perdigon, "Life of an Infamous Woman: The Funerals of Wafa Idris, Palestine's First Female Suicide-Bomber", Unpublished Paper, 2004; Valentine M. Moghadam, *Gender and National Identity*.

<sup>6</sup> According to this "theory", young Muslim men become suicide bombers because they are promised sex with 72 virgins in the afterlife. This "theory" joins two Orientalist views of Muslim societies by casting sexual repression as a marker of their present and sexual excess as a marker of their future. For a refutation of this explanation of suicide bombing, see Asa'd Abukhalil, "Sex and the Suicide Bomber", [http://archive.salon.com/sec/feature/2001/11/07/islam/index\\_np.html](http://archive.salon.com/sec/feature/2001/11/07/islam/index_np.html) (2001)

<sup>7</sup> *Sati* refers to the practice of widow burning in India. The word also refers to the woman who engages in such an act. For insightful work on *sati*, see Mani.

<sup>8</sup> In this context, culture is equivalent to "nature" in the nature/culture dichotomy that second wave feminists have engaged with much passion.

<sup>9</sup> This is the favorite propaganda argument of Israeli security. See, for instance, "The Role of Palestinian Women in Suicide Terrorism" [http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000\\_2009/2003/1/The%20Role%20of%20Palestinian%20Women%20in%20Suicide%20Terrorism](http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2003/1/The%20Role%20of%20Palestinian%20Women%20in%20Suicide%20Terrorism)

<sup>10</sup> In fact, Phyllis Chesler, a Zionist radical feminist, declares that suicide bombing by women is "another form of Arab honor killing." *FrontPageMagazine.com*, January 22, 2004. <http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=11855> <http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=11855>

<sup>11</sup> Andrea Dworkin, "The Women Suicide Bombers." *Feminista!* 5. 1 (2002)

<sup>12</sup> Palestinian women's organizations have been largely silent on the issue of the women suicide bombers and have developed no feminist discourse to either support or oppose them. As for the women themselves, if one is to judge by the statements they left behind, nationalism is emphasized as their motive, not women's rights. In the Arab and Islamist context, which I analyze in detail elsewhere, the *esteshbadeyyat* are presented as models of Muslim womanhood to shame the secular feminists.

<sup>13</sup> Earlier Dworkin wrote: "As for the Palestinians, I can only imagine the humiliation of losing to, being conquered by, the weakest, most despised, most castrated people on the face of the earth. This is a feminist point about manhood." Andrea Dworkin --, "Israel: Whose Country Is It Anyway?" First published in *Ms. magazine*, (Volume I, Number 2, September/October 1990), <http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/Israel.html>. Accessed 11/20/2004 The problem with this description is that it excludes Palestinian women. Israeli conquest of the Palestinians is seen as an affair between men, as if women did not suffer loss, displacement, death and injury.

<sup>14</sup> During her encounters with Palestinian women in 1990, Dworkin was better able to hear their grievances against the Israeli occupation. She wrote: "Palestinian women came out of the audience to give first-person testimony about what the Occupation was doing to them. They especially spoke about the brutality of the Israeli soldiers. They talked about being humiliated, being forcibly detained, being trespassed on, being threatened. They spoke about themselves and about women. For Palestinian women, the Occupation is a police state and the Israeli secret police are a constant danger; there is no "safe space." Dworkin, *ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> Robin Morgan, "The Demon Lover Syndrom" in *Ms. Magazine* 12 (3), (2002)

<sup>16</sup> Miriam Cooke makes a similar argument, in miriam cooke, "Women's Jihad Before and After 9/11", in *Women and Gender in the Middle East and the Islamic World Today*, UCLAS Edited Volumes Vol. 4 (2003), Article 1063. <http://repositories.cdlib.org/uciaspubs/editedvolumes/4/1063> Moreover, in her discussion of Wafa Idris Cooke refers to her as a Muslim woman participating in Jihad, even though Idris was dispatched and claimed by a secular group. Without any justification, she places her in the history of Muslim women fighters, not Palestinian women nationalists, thus undermining the latter and privileging a distant history over the more immediate lived one.

<sup>17</sup> Morgan, "The Demon Lover Syndrom," p.17

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Victor, *Army of Roses*, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 10. This is inaccurate: women's dress code changed during the first Intifada into a more conservative one and not the other way around, when women's bodies were targeted by Islamic political groups as a way to exert political control. See Rema Hammami, "Women, the Hijab and the Intifada" in *Middle East Report*, 20:3&4 (1990), p. 24-28; Amal Amireh "Between Complicity and Subversion: Body Politics in Palestinian National Narrative" in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102:4 (2003), p. 747-772.

<sup>25</sup> Victor, p. 23, 34, 46.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 265.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 247.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 265.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.17.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>39</sup> Karen Valby, who calls Victor "mean spirited", writes: "The journalist has great affection for unnamed sources. Much of the dredged-up dirt here has already been revealed in gossip columns, so don't expect much in the way of revelation." See Karen Valby, Book Review of "Goddess: Inside Madonna by Barbara Victor" in *Entertainment Weekly*, Issue 627, (November 23, 2001), p. 74. <http://mutex.gmu.edu:2079/pqdweb?index=1&did=000000092322114&SrchMode=1&sid=2&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1101145767&clientId=31810>

<sup>40</sup> Jacqueline Rose, writing for the *London Review of Books*, is the only exception; she questions Victor's unnamed sources, her fictional narratives, and her prejudice. Jacqueline Rose, "Deadly Embrace," *The London Review of Books* (Vol. 26, Number 21, 4 November, 2004)

<[http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n21/rose01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n21/rose01_.html)>[http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n21/rose01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n21/rose01_.html);

Baruch Kimmerling, on the other hand, in his review of the book for *The Nation*, fails to question Victor's discourse. Baruch Kimmerling, "Sacred Rage" in *The Nation*. November 26, 2003, <http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20031215&c=1&s=kimmerling>

<sup>41</sup> Victor, *Army of Roses*, p. 4-5.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Victor seems particularly sensitive to Palestinian women nationalists' charms. She describes Leila Khaled as "a stunning young woman in her twenties." Victor, *ibid*, p. 62

<sup>44</sup> Sarah Pollack, "Lipstick Martyrs: A New Breed of Palestinian Terrorist", *CBN*, May 28, 2003. <http://www.cbn.com/CBNNews/News/030523d.asp>

<sup>45</sup> Kevin Toolis, "Walls of Death" in *The Observer* November 23, 2003, <http://www.aljazeera.com/Opinion%20editorials/2003%20Opinion%20Editorials/November/24%20o/Walls%20of%20death%20Kevin%20Toolis.htm>

<sup>46</sup> Kevin Toolis, "Why Women Turn to Suicide Bombing" in *The Observer* October 12, 2003, <http://www.countercurrents.org/pa-toolis121003.htm>

<sup>47</sup> Victor, *Army of Roses*, p.2.

## BOOK REVIEWS

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### STATE CONSTRUCTION AND NATION BUILDING How to Understand the Experiences of French and British Mandates in Syria and Iraq during the 1920s

Jean-David Mizrahi

*Genèse de l'Etat mandataire, Service  
des Renseignements et bandes  
armées en Syrie et au Liban dans les  
années 1920*

Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2003  
462 p., including 12 maps, 15 charts and  
11 pictures, annexes, bibliography and  
index

Toby Dodge

*Inventing Iraq. The failure of  
Nation-building and a History Denied*  
New York, Columbia University Press,  
2003,

xix + 260 p., including 1 map,  
bibliography and index

Reviewed by Edouard Méténier\*

The history of Middle-Eastern Arab countries which were placed under French and British mandates in the aftermath of the First World War has enjoyed profound revisions from the end of the 1980s. For twenty years now a growing body of publications and unpublished academic studies has been devoted to the specific questions raised by the genesis of the Middle-Eastern Arab states under European Mandate regimes. Those works explored the

many facets of the peculiar historical developments experienced by the local societies and states which were placed under mandate administrations. They have also highlighted how the different mandate systems themselves worked. It is now no longer possible - if it ever was - to speak of a single model of mandate administration for Middle-East states, nor even of a simple differentiation between French and British practices in this respect. Indeed each one of the five cases of new Arab states born after 1919 under European tutelage appears to represent a singular experience, especially with regard to the modalities characterising this tutelage and the relationship between local society and mandatory power. Yet, to take up an idea already expressed by Rashid Khalidi who discussed the advances in the studies and research devoted to Arab states under Mandates, it seems possible to speak of the emergence of a specific, if not autonomous, field of "Mandate Studies." It is pertinent to point here to the efforts accomplished in recent years by Nadine Méouchy who organised conferences and published subsequently two collective works that are highly representative of the coherence, depth and diversity of these trends.<sup>1</sup>

The two books which are under review here, however, distinguish themselves from this overall production in that their authors have expertise in the study of international relations rather than in area studies. Making no or very little use of local sources, both authors claim they would not focus on local societies, be they Syrian or Iraqi, but would study primarily how British or French imperialisms were forced to compromise by very specific conditions (ideological, financial and military) once they had been entrusted by the League of Nations' mandates after the end of the First World War - that is, building modern, "liberal" and self-sustainable independent states from the previous Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Both authors describe their books as

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analyses from inside Mandate institutions - the British in Iraq, the French in Syria and Lebanon - to evaluate what impact those institutions had on reshaping local societies as well as on the creation of the states they were entrusted with developing. Thus, while the two studies consider a limited period of time in British and French colonial history in the Middle-East - centred around the 1920s<sup>2</sup> - both derive far-reaching conclusions from their respective inquiries. They add to our understanding of the weak basis upon which the new Middle-East states were founded. Particularly, the state-society relationship which lasted through the decades following the end of mandate rule and which persists till today requires analyses of the balance between the two components that are relevant to discussions in the whole Middle East.

Jean-David Mizrahi's book *Genèse de l'Etat mandataire. Service des Renseignements et bandes armées en Syrie et au Liban dans les années 1920* [*Genesis of the Mandate State. French Military Intelligence and Armed Bands in Syria and Lebanon during the 1920s*] explores the peculiar moment constituted by the imposition of the French mandate's order over the societies of the Levantine states. While the author's initial purpose was to write the "total history" of a specific military administration, here the Military Intelligence Service in the Levant (from here on SR, for *Service des Renseignements*),<sup>3</sup> his final objective was "to observe and to explain how an administration of a colonial type on one hand, and a phenomenon such as the armed bands on the other hand, actually start[ed] resonating, to the point that [the dialectic of their relation] constituted a noticeable outline of the mandate history in its first phase" (p. 9). In the meantime, the author explains how substantial the SR was, till the second half of the 1920s, to the very apparatus of the mandatory state. The analysis of how this service functioned thus is in a sense a metaphor for the

evolutions which the mandate institution itself underwent: "Since it [was] the only service of the mandate to exercise its competences on the whole of the Syrian states, horizontally (all the territories [were] concerned) as well as vertically (from the political cabinet of the High Commissioner to the *Caza* officer), the SR of the Levant seems to be the perfect point from which to observe the mandate's potential internal cracks" (p. 88).

Actually, while it had been functioning since its creation as the most "important leverage of the Mandate's power", the SR eventually transformed itself in a true autonomous "counter-power" when its chiefs managed, in 1926, to ruin the policy of agreement with the urban Syrian nationalists which de Jouvenel, the first civil High-Commissioner, had then launched in the aftermath of the Druze revolt. At this time, however, the critical turn initiated by the French Mandate toward the states of the Levant marked by their effective recognition - and subsequent empowerment - could not be reversed. In the following years this act of insubordination by the military vis-à-vis political power resulted in the progressive containment of the former to purely intelligence tasks. This inflection, accompanied by the departure of the officers most compromised by the early Mandate regime, eventually led in 1931 to the suppression of the SR and to the reappointment of the remaining personnel to the *Services Spéciaux du Levant*. Members of this service provided into necessary technical expertise, were from then on carefully kept away from the political authority of the Mandate.

Mizrahi's book is organised along two interlinked parallel axes: first, the question of "insecurity" produced by insurgent armed bands in the mountains and the countryside of the Syrian periphery, an essentially rural phenomenon which was defined and

measured by the officers of the SR themselves through their actions on the ground and the reports they produced for the administration's sake; second, the formative process by which the northern and southern borders of Syria came to be progressively defined and settled through the convergence of interests uniting all the new political entities created upon the ruins of the Ottoman empire. After years of turmoil caused by the Ottoman collapse, and for the sake of their own stability, these political entities were faced with the coercive order of the modern state.

In this context, Mizrahi's approach excels in analysing the subtleties of everyday events:

"In the first half of the 1920s, the SR of the Levant on the one hand, the armed bands' phenomena on the other, clearly maintain[ed] a relation of a dialectical type. The existence, in the border's areas, of refraction zones where the armed groups were form[ed] and from where they launch[ed] their actions, weigh[ed] and work[ed] on the organisation and the functioning of the SR, at the very moment when the latter strongly contribute[d] to the emergence of dissidence and to the production of *banditisme* because it introduce[d] the state power at the heart of the local societies" (p. 415).<sup>4</sup>

The question is not then "to confront head-on the question of nationalist resistance to the Mandate", which found its culmination in the two moments of more or less generalised revolt defined by the events of the years 1920-21 and 1925-1926 but, on the contrary, to focus "on the chronicle of an 'ordinary *banditisme*' [in order to] reveal the strength lines most often concealed by the density of events characterising the insurrectionary moments." From this point of view, the armed bands "represent[ed] the vector of insecurity

which interact[ed] in the clearest way with the twofold structuring process of the mandatory power on the one hand, and of the states under Mandate on the other, through the question of the borders' stabilisation especially" (p. 10). It is then only once the latter were definitively settled and their control strongly secured by the powerful action of the SR, helped in this task by the interested cooperation of the neighbouring states (Kemalist Turkey and the Transjordanian Emirate under British mandate), that the French mandate found it possible to enter in a less military and more diplomatic phase of its history. In the meantime, the Syrian nationalist camp had, for its part, initiated a 'grieving process' of the Ottoman and greater Syria's spatial imagination. This internal work leading to the acceptance of the new political realities gave the Syrian nationalists the chance to realign themselves over new forms of mobilisations, and to elaborate new modes of action, of a less military and more urban nature than what had been the case in the first phase of the anti-colonial struggle against the imposition of the mandate regime. Yet, the necessity of enforcing the mandate's order in the border areas had led to the organisation by the SR of the gendarmes' auxiliary units, recruited mainly among the Syrian ethnic or religious minorities, and it was those units which were to contribute later, together with the Levies troops of the *Armée du Levant* whose profile of recruitment was similar, to the formation of Syria's new national army: a situation which was bound to be "of course, the premise of further dramatic developments" (p. 401).

Mizrahi's book has numerous qualities all of which indicate that it will become one of the major references on the history of Syria and of the French policies in the Levant during the period under study. Other than an extraordinary command of existing academic literature on the subject, the

fluidity of the author's writing is exemplary. It not only allows him to develop the most complex analyses in an easy-to-read style but also, thanks to its literary qualities, to accurately account for the actors' logic, even the most intimate ones. If one of the most striking features of this remarkable work of history is the empathy deployed by the author in order to penetrate deeply into the consciousnesses of all colonial parties involved, no less remarkable is his exceptional ability to reveal the humane beings behind the dryness of administrative reports and papers: here the craft of the historian shows itself at its best. Against the background of a linear temporality, the book excels in highlighting the ambiguities and contradictions in which its main actors are caught, and how they progressively come to be out of sync with the realities of the evolution of the mandate itself.

Based on the extremely careful analysis of an impressive range of documentation, Mizrahi's groundbreaking study then succeeds brilliantly in offering a very sensible yet critical understanding of the dynamics of all the actors it embraces. Although it is centred on the officers of the SR, it mirrors the existence of the latter's counterparts; the Syrian rural insurgents. Eventually, in the analysis of the mandate's logics revealed by the history of the SR, neither the superior levels of the mandate's administration nor the world of the Syrian urban notables totally escape from the scope of this analysis.

A last point worth mentioning among the qualities of this book is the regular and masterly use of comparisons with other historical contexts that the author makes. In this he succeeds in universalizing the humane dynamics of the actors and reintroducing the peculiar details of his study into a wider vision of the profound unity of world history. That said, the break in the rhythm of the narrative caused by the third part of the book which is devoted to an extensive

and comprehensive prosopographic analysis of the group of officers who constituted the SR is somewhat disturbing. One wonders if it could not have been published apart as a study in its own, and only synthesized and referred to in the book. It is however clear that, while constituting the most original and technical part of Mizrahi's work, it lies at the core of the whole book. As such readers should instead be pleased that the conditions of French academic publishing allowed the author to maintain the initial work intact. Yet, if remarks had to be made on the final aspect of the book, it would concern its edition including a fair amount of typographic errors and other editing mistakes in the text itself. The printing of the book on glossy paper also rendered the process of reading quite uncomfortable, be it under natural or electric light.<sup>5</sup>

Toby Dodge's book bears a far more provocative title, *Inventing Iraq: the Failure of Nation-Building and a History Denied*,<sup>6</sup> which promises a no less ambitious reflection about the foundation of the modern Iraqi nation-state. Given the fact that the creation of a new Iraq is again, at the top of global diplomacy's agenda, Dodge's announced program can be classified among the hot issues of the moment. The book's objective is to emphasize

the critical impact upon events exercised by how key colonial civil servants, caught up in a rapidly changing international system, understood the society they were interacting with. How the British understood Iraq made it impossible for them to accomplish what they had initially set out to do: build a liberal, modern, sustainable state capable of reshaping the lives of the Iraqi people. The British did not mean to undermine the nascent Iraqi state. But, hobbled by an ideologically distorted view of

Iraqi society and facing financial and political limits, they did. The United States in Iraq today must understand that it is both living with the consequences of that failure and is in danger of repeating it (p. xii).

Although the basis of that work has been originally a Ph.D. presented at the School for Oriental and Arabic Studies (SOAS - London), it is far from being a pure academic dissertation. The book is made up of seven chapters of very unequal length, flanked by a preface and a conclusion, both hardly linked in style and content to the core of the study. The core is purely historical, brilliantly crisscrossing the history of international relations and intellectual history to demonstrate how and why British officials failed to build in Iraq the kind of state they were required to create by fulfilling the requirements of the League of Nations (see p. 31). The preface, entitled "Iraq and the Ordering of the Postcolonial World. From Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush" is mainly devoted to drawing parallels and highlighting the "similarity between the British occupation of the 1920s and the role of the United State's Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in 2003" (p. x). At that it makes remarkably explicit the evolution of the notion of state sovereignty in international relations. The conclusion - "Iraq's past and Possible Iraqi Futures" - combines an analysis of the present state of Iraqi civil society with a highly pertinent criticism of the current US authorities' views of Iraq's realities as well as of the CPA's interactions with Iraqi society, from the time the invasion was planned to the date of the handover of sovereignty from the CPA to the interim government led by Iyyad Allawi.

The first chapter is a four page introduction to the book, in which the author states the two main hypotheses on which the rest of the book is built:

on the one hand, there existed among the British officials in charge of the Iraq mandate a "conflict between two competing conceptions of social order" - a conflict determined by the "dichotomy between the explanatory weight to assign to individuals as independent agents and that to assign to social structure and 'traditional' institutions and practices" (p. 2). This eventually led to the failure of the British attempts at reshaping Iraqi society. On the other hand, British policy toward Iraq after World War I was determined by great "structural and material changes, on both the domestic and international levels." As a consequence of these shifting political realities, the people in charge lacked a clear idea of "the meaning of the larger process in which they were caught up" (p. 4).

The following chapter, the longest one of the book, is a very sound and thorough analysis of the developments of the mandate Britain exercised in Iraq, viewed from the perspective of British Foreign policy. It constitutes moreover a linearly presented factual background against which the thematic analyses constituting the rest of the book are developed. In those thematic chapters Dodge builds on the well developed arguments of other scholarly works; particularly to Samira Haj's groundbreaking study<sup>7</sup>, in which all of the issues named by Dodge had already been singled out: the orientalist vision of the British officials serving in Iraq (chap. 3), the latter's social imagination leading them to artificially but radically oppose the Iraqi rural and urban populations (chap. 4), the romantic construction of the tribal shaykh so as to make him a pivotal character of the British policies in Iraq (chap. 5), the land property issue (chap. 6), or the despotic use of airpower to impose state order and what it meant in terms of state-society relationship (chap. 7). If it falls to Haj to have already pointed to the fact that every last one of



these issues had constituted an original sin in the attempts made by the British to build a viable Iraqi state, Toby Dodge here brilliantly extends the analysis of their impact over the definition and application of British policies in Iraq. Making use of an extremely wide range of British political and diplomatic archival sources as well as of a no less impressive set of theoretical references, he systematically and radically explores how each one of these issues has concurred to the dramatic failure of the original project of the League of Nations' mandate.

Toby Dodge's book is undoubtedly a very stimulating one which, through a thorough analysis of the *mentalités* of the British Mandate's officials, offers a new understanding of the conditions in which the Iraqi nation-state has been created in the aftermath of the World War I. The most striking elements of the analysis are certainly why and how Great Britain proved unable to give birth to anything else than a "quasi-state" when Iraq was given independence in 1932, as well as the process by which the state thus created was doomed to rule over its society through the use of despotic power and "shadow state" networks.<sup>8</sup> Here Dodge is at his best, and it is also on those points that his own contribution is the most original in comparison to previous historical works done on Britain's experience at nation-building in Iraq<sup>9</sup>. These and many other aspects make this book a very interesting read: well written and dynamic. It is undoubtedly a seminal work. Of particular importance are the links the author established in his preface and conclusion between a *past present* and a *present future*. Even if it gives a strange aspect to the book's composition and structure, I think that, in our challenging times, this opens a compelling perspective that could provide a useful alternative to scholar's facing the dilemma of transforming into action the expertise-capacity they have

based on the academic knowledge they possess.

In spite of all its overall qualities, Dodge's book kept me slightly dissatisfied and it is indeed Mizrahi's work which helped me understand more clearly why I felt uncomfortable with it. Both studies have a lot in common in their general aims. Mizrahi's book is certainly less ambitious and, in some parts, more tedious and fastidious than Dodge's. Both books are very well written, and Mizrahi's constitutes a warm and empathic, yet critical and highly analytic narrative which, by expressing the superior qualities of a real historian's work, provides an extensive understanding of the period which saw the creation of modern Syria. Conversely, all along Dodge's analyses remain extremely cold and distant, entrenched in a purely intellectual approach: while studying the development of the British officials' views of the Iraqi society, the prejudices which inform them, and the political decisions they take, he never delves deeper into their more humane history. That would have meant going beyond the mere exposition of the contradictions in the actors' intellectual and political views, so as to *explain* how they eventually resolved issues the way they did. For example, by focusing on British officials' perceptions of Iraqi society and the bases on which they designed the structures of the state they were in charge of building, Dodge disengages the title of his book; *Inventing Iraq*, from the debate over the existence or not of an Iraqi nation.<sup>10</sup> Rather, the book is more about how the British constructed a vision of Iraq which led them to assume their 'civilizational burden' in that country in a way which eventually ended in a complete and long lasting failure. Of course, it would be worth debating such a highly determinist view of Iraqi history but I would rather focus on different issues.<sup>11</sup>

Dodge makes it very clear in his introduction that the British officials

were far from sharing the same assumptions and the same views concerning Iraqi society and how it should be dealt with in order to build a stable and self-sustaining state. On several occasions, such as over question of land property or the social efficiency of the tribal shaykh's agency, he presents the sometimes violent debates which occurred between a number of key British officials serving in Iraq, thus exposing the contradictions and plurality of views which existed at the core of the British mandate apparatus in Iraq. Yet, in the end it appears that almost exclusively the solutions pushed forward by Sir Henry Dobbs, the longest serving and then most influential British High-Commissioner in Iraq and one of the most recurrent contributors to those debates, seem to have prevailed; and this in spite of the fact that, as Dodge makes it quite obvious, he like other India Office officials in Iraq were the most out of touch with and the most unsuited to understanding the social realities on the ground. One would like to know more about the decision-making processes between, on the one hand, professional experts with sound field experience intervening on topics directly relevant to their area of competence, and a highly ideological High-Commissioner on the other hand.<sup>12</sup> The only explanation given, that "the power of the British romantic vision meant that the version of Iraq's social realities championed by Sir Henry Dobbs [...] won out" (p. 80) falls short of being convincing enough. One can not but ask oneself the question: how and why, while on every subject his views met with so much and such strong opposition from the most competent of his subordinates, Dobbs managed to remain in charge of British policies in Iraq for so long? It would probably have been useful to analyse the small group of the officials in charge of making British policy in Iraq similar to the thorough and extensive prosopographical study Mizrahi

conducted on the French officers of the SR in Mandate Syria. We certainly would have gained a better and more concrete understanding of the processes by which the contradictions so sharply expressed within the small team of British officials who served in Iraq between 1919 and 1932 were resolved, and then of the ways by which Britain empirically "invented" Iraq.

Another point that merits scrutiny is Dodge's assumption that he can examine "British colonialism's dying days" and emphasize, from the case of Iraq, "the critical impact upon events exercised by how key colonial civil servants, caught in a rapidly changing international system, understood the society they were interacting with" (p. xii), *without* properly studying those very interactions. In other words he neglected the possible influence that Iraqi interlocutors could have had on how the British officials perceived the people they were dealing with. Here also the comparison with Mizrahi's work should be highlighted: not only did those interactions deeply affect the mutual perceptions of the actors but, moreover, they constantly modified the balance of power and redefined the realm of possibilities opened for political action.<sup>13</sup> It is also in this framework that the failure of nation-building must be studied and understood. But Dodge's study is more oriented toward demonstrating the impact of the British imagination and policy on reshaping of Iraqi society and the construction of power in the newly created state that it acts as if local inhabitants had been deprived of any possibility of weighing in on the developments described -whether in an active or even in a reactive way.

Though it is acknowledged that what the Iraqi state looked like at the time it was granted independence, in 1932, was the result of - at least - a three players' game (the king, the High Commissioner and the nationalists - see p. 21), we are never given to understand

exactly the kind of links which connected the British to the urban politicians, the later being regularly evoked as a group without concrete details.<sup>14</sup> In the 1920s and 30s, these representatives were powerful actors in creating the Iraqi state: not only were they influenced by Western ideas, to which they had been exposed as students in the military, law and medical schools of the late Ottoman Empire, but they were also quite impressed by the modernisation experiences of Kemalist Turkey and Pahlavi Iran.<sup>15</sup>

This omission of the historical role of the local and regional elites in the Iraqi state's formation is mirrored, if not made worse, by the neglect of their own historical identity as actors. It is perhaps telling of these limitations that the name of such a pivotal figure in the relations between the British mandate officials and the Iraqi nationalist elite in the 1920s as 'Abd al-Muhsin Al-Sa'adun is spelt in three different ways, at times beyond recognition<sup>16</sup>, and that Saudi Arabia is referred to at a time when it did not yet exist.<sup>17</sup> What appears as only a minor imprecision can in fact reflect a serious ignorance of what those facts meant in the minds of their contemporaries. For example, the attacks led by the Najdi Ikhwan against the southern frontier of Iraq and the way to the Shi'i holy city of Kerbela in the beginning of the 1920's was a foundational episode in the construction process of the Iraqi state.<sup>18</sup>

The same problem of imperial myopia in Dodge's study *vis-à-vis* the political dynamics of Iraqi society also apply to the origins of the 1920's great revolt (p. 135). Contrary to what Dodge records, neither the Hashemite officers (Ja'afar al-Askari, Nuri al-Said, etc.) nor Faysal (who was still in June 1920 on the throne of the Arab kingdom in Damascus!) played the least role in those events. But what Dodge ignores is the fundamental role played by the Shi'i leadership in giving to the insurgents, mainly tribal people, a modern political

consciousness which was directly opposed to the plans that the British were forming for Iraq's future, be it under direct administration or indirect League of Nation's mandate rule<sup>19</sup>. Although the revolt was eventually crushed and the Shi'i leadership was forced to bow and keep silent or to go into exile and lose its ties with Iraqi politics, those events continue to exercise today a strong influence over the political imagination of the Iraqis; a fact which can explain not only some of the forms taken by the nationalist resistance to the current Anglo-American occupation of Iraq, but also the political attitude adopted by the present Shi'i leadership in Iraq, personified by Sistani. Even if one keeps in mind the author's initial warning that his "book does not focus on Iraqis in Iraq" (p. xii), this level of disinterest eventually leads one to suspect a more serious denial of Iraqi history than Dodge announced.

One of the strongest points of Dodge's work is its theoretical framework. Whilst adhering to arguments already made by Samira Haj (critical and Gramscian Marxist references, or Said's paradigm of Orientalism), he adds to this core the contribution made by a vast range of interpretative essays in the study of international relations and political sciences, as well as works illustrating Foucauldian approaches in social studies. This however can sometimes lead to forms of rhetorical pedantry, as it is undoubtedly the case with the use of the notion of "heroic simplification" which, towards the end of the book, becomes the recurrent key concept of Dodge's study.<sup>20</sup> This cold, distant and highly theoretical, approach characterising Dodge's book eventually makes it look like a prosecutor's arraignment, or a powerful indictment of British mandatory policies in Iraq. Yet, if we follow the idea contained in Scott's quotation used by Dodge to make his point, that "no administrative

system is capable of representing any existing social community except through a heroic and greatly schematized process of abstraction and simplification”, we can not but wonder what the finality of such a charge is, since it is then obvious that no other system of state administration (be it Ottoman, colonial, local, etc.) could have escaped the effect of such an intrinsic problem; that is its need to organize social realities through difference-erasing, constructed classificatory perceptions. Such as a process of state-construction could not but have been painful to and destructive of the highly heterogeneous and widely diversified fabric that constituted the Iraqi society at the time.

If the goal pursued by the author is to convince us of how negative the impact of British rule on the development of the modern Iraqi state, he should have gone further in his criticism of British policies: it is not *only* because their vision was biased nor because they lacked the time and money necessary to create a “liberal, modern, sustainable” state that the British had limited success in building more than a quasi-state doomed by the ambiguous tools of the colonial shadow state. To quote the last sentence of Peter Sluglett’s *Britain in Iraq, 1914-1932*: “Oh, come now, Sir. Isn’t that rather an academic line?”<sup>21</sup> The failure of the Iraqi state’s historical experience, which reveals itself in its entirety with such dramatic results today, surely owes at least as much to the impact of socio-economic issues on the political developments which Iraq underwent during the last century<sup>22</sup>, as well as to the impact of the constant interferences of imperialist states trying, for many reasons, to assert their control over this country, than to the results of mere bias in the perceptions of otherwise well-intended British officers committed to the task of building a new state at minimal financial and political cost to their own country. Here it would

certainly have been useful to delve into the human complexity of those colonial agents: People as Longrigg, Bell, Dowson, etc., were strongly and sincerely committed to their task of building a new, modern, developed and sustainable state in Iraq; but in the meantime they were acting as Britain’s colonial agents, in charge of looking most of all after the preservation of their homeland’s interests. It is this deep contradiction that lay at the crux of their work in Iraq, which would have been worth exploring.<sup>23</sup> It is probably more because of this contradiction than because of a problem of vision and perception of Iraqi societal realities resulting from the biases introduced by their social imagination that the British colonial agents are responsible for failing to build the Iraqi state following the ideal standards set by the League of Nation’s mandate. In insisting too much on the discursive effects of the mandate, it seems that Dodge loses sight of what was driving the discourses, i.e. the determinant play of those complex human realities.

There is also much to discuss in the use of the Orientalist paradigm by Dodge in his discourse analyses. To demonstrate through an assemblage of decontextualized quotations that the actors of British imperialism at the beginning of the twentieth century were biased by an Orientalist vision is in some way labouring the point, and to hold it against them is certainly anachronistic. Once the statement about their intrinsic Orientalism has been made, it does not help us much to understand, and *a fortiori* to explain their own proper dynamics, which they developed in a given historical context.<sup>24</sup> For instance, the strong anti-Ottoman biases expressed by the British, in Iraq especially, had its roots in the determination of the latter to erase all positive traces of Ottoman rule in an area where this rule had challenged the extension of British imperialist interests for so long.<sup>25</sup> The risk of accusing all of

the British colonial agents of Orientalism is that such a charge becomes a way of *a posteriori* and indiscriminately disqualifying the whole group of the British officials who served in Iraq during the mandate's period. At the same time, no real attempt is made to make sense of the wide plurality of visions that characterised the individual commitments of those officials to their field of action and expertise.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, for a book so strongly marked by a critic of the British colonial agents' ontological Orientalism, the use of an Orientalist cliché for the front cover is quite ironic. The front cover illustration - a picture of Emir Faysal in Bedouin dress amid his entourage, taken during the conference of Versailles in 1919 - has nothing to do with Iraq, and *a fortiori* with the topic of the book. I can not but think that the group picture of the British Middle-East colonial technicians who took part to the Cairo conference, in March 1921, would have been more appropriate. Indeed it was there and then that the major decisions were made regarding the way Britain assumed its mandatory role in Iraq in the following years. It may be that this choice resulted not from the author's own decision, but from a suggestion made by the publisher.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Nadine Méouchy (ed.), *France, Syrie et Liban, 1918-1946. Les ambiguïtés et les dynamiques de la relation mandataire*, (Damas: Institut Français d'Etudes Arabes (IFEAD), 2002), as well as Nadine Méouchy & Peter Sluglett, with Gérard Khoury & Geoffrey Schad (eds.), *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives*, (Leiden: Brill, 2004). A critical review of this book by Leïla Dakhli can be found in [MIT-EJMES, vol. 4, \(Fall 2004\)](#), p. 108-111. Khalidi's statement is made on p. 695. Though it expresses an intellectual project of a different genesis and adopts a slightly different perspective, mention should be also be made of a collective book emerging in the same way out of an international conference, Thomas Philipp & Christoph Schumann (eds.), *From the Syrian Land to the States of Syria and Lebanon*, (Beiruter Text und Studien, Beirut & Würzburg, Orient-Institut der DMG & Ergon Verlag, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> For Iraq, the period of the British mandate *stricto sensu* (1919-1932), and for Syria, the period corresponding to the legal existence of the Service des Renseignements, i.e. 1921-1931.

<sup>3</sup> "This work's first objective is then to offer a 'total history' of that service, which would be at a time a history of its institutional and informal functioning, a social history of the officers who make it, and eventually a political history, that is, sizing its relative importance in the whole of the mandate machinery, thus estimating its importance on the course of events" (p. 10).

<sup>4</sup> There's no English equivalent to the term "*banditisme*" as it is used by the author, with the neutral meaning of the process of bands' formation: see n. 6 p. 116. The use of the English term gangsterism would probably be too pejorative in this context.

<sup>5</sup> A more extensive review of Mizrahi's book can be found at [REMMM, n° 103-104 \(2004\)](#).

<sup>6</sup> It seems that the paradigm of "inventing" is currently *de rigueur*. See Kais Firro, *Inventing Lebanon, Nationalism and the State under the Mandate*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003). For a review of Firro's book, see Paul Kingston, *MIT-EJMES* vol. 4 (Fall 2004), p. 111-116.

<sup>7</sup> Samira Haj, *The Making of Iraq, 1900-1963: Capital, Power and Ideology*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> The notion of "quasi state" is taken up from Robert Jackson, *Quasi States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). For how the term suits the Iraqi case, see Dodge, p. 31, as well as p. 37 ff. A definition of the concept of "shadow state" is given p. 159.

<sup>9</sup> One thinks especially of Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq, 1914-1932*, (London: Ithaca Press, The Middle Eastern Center, St Anthony's College Oxford, 1976).

<sup>10</sup> One of the most recent developments of this debate was the organisation of the workshop "[The Debate on the Iraqi Nation: Artificial Construct or Work in Progress](#)", *6th Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting*, EUI, Florence, March 2005.

<sup>11</sup> This is inherent flaw in the inventing-paradigm as Paul Kingston argues in his review of Firro's *Inventing Lebanon*. in [MIT-EJMES](#) *ibid*, p. 116.

<sup>12</sup> See for instance the debates on the electoral law, p. 89 ff., the Tribal Criminal and Civil Disputes Regulations, p. 92 ff., the land property issue, p. 102 ff. and 120 ff, etc.

<sup>13</sup> Hence the profound contempt of the British towards the Iraqi "urban elites", which appears to have been a character-shaping aspect of their policy in Iraq: Dodge explains it mainly by the social imagination characterising the British turn of the century's *mentalité*, and only hints superficially at the concrete and political reasons which, on the ground, could have explained it at least in an equal manner, see chap. 4 and

especially p. 69 ff. Mizrahi's study provides a brilliant demonstration of the effect of this kind of historical dialectic, and Dodge's book itself is not devoid of more or less direct hints to it: See for instance p. 9: "Growing nationalism amongst the urban populations of Iraq became the major influence driving British policy after 1920", as well as p. 23 when he refers to "the tensions between control and devolution at the core of the British approach to Iraq."

<sup>14</sup> "The political elite" of Baghdad, which is a recurrent expression in Dodge's book, ought to be better defined through a careful analysis of the actors who played the roles of interlocutors of or opponents to the British rule.

<sup>15</sup> See Semih Vaner (ed.), *Modernisation autoritaire en Turquie et en Iran*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992). Hence the importance of the debate over the Iraqi army, and the fact that the Hashemite ideal for the Iraqi army mirrored their vision of what the Iraqi state and nation should look like (p. 142). The works of Peter Wien on the 1930s have well highlighted some aspects of the Iraqi elite's modernist thought.

<sup>16</sup> See p. 49, 98 and 115, and the fact that there exist two entries for the same person in the index: the misidentification by the author leads to confusion by the unprepared reader.

<sup>17</sup> See p. 139. Najd would be a more appropriate term.

<sup>18</sup> For the incidence of the 1920s' events over Iraqi public opinion, see Pierre-Jean Luizard, *La formation de l'Irak contemporain: le rôle politique des ulémas chiïtes à la fin de la domination ottomane et au moment de la création de l'Etat irakien*, (Paris: CNRS, 1991) p. 441ff. The creation's process of the Saudi state under Abdul-Aziz's leadership - with British strong political support - was, on the contrary, to put order in such a matter, following a mechanism which has been rightly described by Jean-David Mizrahi in his analysis of the dynamics of borders' settlement in northern and southern Syria. The tensions over the Saudi-Iraqi borders, fostered by the self activism of the radical *ikhwans*, lasted till the late 1920s. It is only in the early 1930 that it definitively came to an end with the creation of the Saudi state in 1932, the same year Iraq was given full independence. The creation of the kingdom centred around 'Abd ul-'Aziz's household then sanctioned the imposition of the modern state order against and among the unruly tribes of northern Najd: see Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and Joseph Kostiner, "Britain and the Northern Frontier of the Saudi State, 1922-1925" in Uriel Dann (ed.), *The Great Powers in the Middle-East, 1919-1939*, (New-York & London: Holmes & Meier, 1988).

<sup>19</sup> For an analytical narrative of the political role played by the Shi'i *ulama* in early twentieth century Iraq, see Pierre-Jean Luizard, *La formation*

*de l'Irak contemporain*. See also Yitzhaq Nakkash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994). As a counterpoint Luizard has written an interesting article about the ways the events of this period have been dealt with by contemporary Iraqi historiography. Pierre-Jean Luizard, "La construction de l'Etat et la défaite des ulémas chiïtes en Irak: mythe national et vérités historiques" in *Etudes politiques du monde arabe*, Le Caire, Dossier du CEDEJ, 1991.

<sup>20</sup> This expression, which could easily have been termed something like "analytical oversimplification" is taken from a quotation of James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Humane condition Have Failed*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1986).

<sup>21</sup> Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, makes this point clearer elsewhere in the book: "British attempts to deal with these problems, though often pursued by individuals with integrity and devotion, were largely failures because the solutions were not ends in themselves. When it was clear that British interests would no longer be at risk, and when the necessary mechanism to protect them had been perfected, it was time to withdraw, and the *mission civilisatrice* which was the Mandatory's intended role was quietly abandoned. In the course of the 1920s, Britain came to realise that less expensive and less overt means of control could be devised to serve the same ends" (p. 298).

<sup>22</sup> Here, the works of Samira Haj and of Isam Khafaji have been important contributions to showing how in Iraq the construction of the state, and of the state-society relationship, has been deeply and seriously undermined since the beginning; first by the contested issue of land property, then by the advent of oil wealth which gave the state the means of ruling over the society through a huge system of redistributive/shadow-state's networks, of which the most obvious result was the fading of the political dimension in the state-society relationship.

<sup>23</sup> See Philip W. Ireland, *Iraq, A Study in Political Development*, (New York: MacMillan, 1938), p. 35: "It cannot be denied that individual officials and even the mother country itself are often genuinely concerned for the well being of the peoples they have taken in charge. [...] In a conflict of interests, and these must inevitably occur, it is only natural that those of the mother-country should come first, and that the good of the people themselves must, in reality, be subordinated to the material or political returns".

<sup>24</sup> One is reminded here of the distinction between two kinds of critical approaches of Orientalism: the theoretical one illustrated by Edward Said's work, which constitutes a brilliant and stimulating intellectual essay, and more pragmatic/empirical ones dealing

epistemologically with western perceptions of the Arab and Islamic worlds. These approaches are represented by works such as Jacques Waardenburg's older book, *L'Islam dans le miroir de l'Occident*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Paris & La Haye, Mouton, 1963, which constitutes a critical evaluation of Western Orientalist scholarship and is grounded in a careful analysis of five case studies of classical Orientalism, or by Maxime Rodinson's masterly *La fascination de l'Islam*, (Paris: Maspéro, 1980), transl. into English: *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002).

**Jens Hanssen, Thomas Philipp and Stefan Weber, (Eds)**  
*The Empire in the City: Arab Provincial Capitals in the Late Ottoman Empire*

Beirut: Ergon Verlag, 2002

**Reviewed by Hala Fattah\***

This book, the collective effort of seventeen scholars of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, is a pioneering study in urban history. Well-organized, clearly written and thematically coherent, it presents an admirable case for the reformulation of Ottoman relations both with Europe as well as with the Ottoman/Arab "interior". In a tightly written preface to the book, Jens Hanssen argues that the usual binaries of "localization" and "Ottomanization" often employed on an either/or basis by traditional histories of the Ottoman realm, in fact were often different sides of the same coin, and arose out the larger Imperial objective of modernizing the periphery while keeping Europe at bay. In the process of reclaiming the Arab provinces for the Imperial treasury and "civilizing" the provincials on the one hand, as well as in trying to mount a

<sup>25</sup> Certainly one could thus understand the meaning to ascribe to Longrigg's book on Ottoman Iraq.

<sup>26</sup> If the usual criticism of Orientalism lies in the denunciation of a double process of decontextualizing and essentializing human facts, one must admit that Dodge is right on the verge of being guilty of some default of this kind when, on more than one occasion, he speaks of the British as a all homogeneous whole.

challenge to Europe's multifaceted advance on the Empire on the other, Hanssen suggests that the city quite naturally became the intersection of local, Ottoman and European strategies. Of course, the city that Hanssen and his colleagues redefine from their own different geographical perspectives is not just confined to an urban conglomeration; it stretches to include a periphery of its own that is seen as an equally important component of the whole notion of urban culture.

The two introductory essays in the book handle both aspects of the metropolitan/local divide. In the first, Ussama Makdisi considers the relations between Lebanon and the Ottoman central authority an in an "imperialist" framework. He defines Ottoman imperialism as "the need to induct forcibly supposedly recalcitrant peripheries into an age of modernity" (p.30). By reforming and yet also representing unredeemable peripheries (at least in Ottoman eyes) to the West, the Empire's men could counter European modernity with a rational and progressive agenda that was firmly Ottoman in purpose. For instance, Ottoman reformers reclaimed the heritage of Lebanon because it was now deemed to be part and parcel of Ottoman culture in general, and, in a sign of modernizing enthusiasm reminiscent of European classification traditions, catalogued this cultural treasure in one of the first museums in

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the region. However, while Makdisi's use of the term 'imperialism' is particular, and although his article is persuasively written, it stands on its own as an intriguing cultural paradigm with few followers, even among the other contributors in the volume. With the exception of Christoph Herzog and Thomas Kuhn's articles on Baghdad and Yemen respectively, no other author in the book raises the question of "Imperialism" as being a studied facet of Ottoman relations with the West in the nineteenth century (and both Herzog and Kuhn prefer to label it as "colonialism").

In the second article, Hanssen deftly interweaves his reading of older historical sources with newer scholarly treatments of the towns and cities of geographical Syria (Beirut, Damascus and Nablus), to focus on three interrelated reforms. These are the emergence of channels of administrative response linking the provinces to the Imperial center through the sending of petitions to Istanbul; the creation of a cadre of provincial inspectors sent out from the Porte to assess cities in crisis, and the establishment of provincial advisory councils made up of local elites joining together native interests with metropolitan agendas. Quite often as well, this consisted in the manipulation of the "ignorant" periphery to do Istanbul's bidding. As Hanssen points out, as befitting the ideology of modernization so central to Ottoman reform in this period, at times the inspectors buffered the "rude" reality of the periphery by relaying to Istanbul a somewhat partial and incomplete (mis)representation of the provinces. Occasionally, however, the "locals" were able to come into their own, and force through important changes, as when the Porte, egged on by petitions from Beirut's notability, finally agreed to make Beirut the capital of the province by Imperial *irade* in 1888. Eventually, the inclusion of Arab advisers at court became so important in Abdul-Hamid

II's time that they were lampooned in popular street verse.

The second section begins with Thomas Philipp's premise that, contrary to the bulk of contributions in the book, not all center-periphery relations underwent transformation in the mid- to latter part of the nineteenth century. For Philipp, Acre was a "precursor" of such changes. He notes that already by the late 1770's, Acre's rulers had redefined the roles both of the Ottoman center and the Europeans. Although independent of the Porte in all but name, Acre's strongmen still clung to the idea of Ottoman suzerainty; but as the century wore on, European architectural form gradually encroached on Ottoman influence in the construction of defensive sea walls and houses with open fronts, and the elite began to sport Western fashion as well as to visit European physicians. In the nineteenth century, a counter-reaction in the form of stricter Islamic morality and more rigid anti-*dhimmi* regulations arising both out Wahhabi influence as well as Greek nationalist appeals ushered in sharper distinctions between members of Acre's society at the same time as it redefined the relations between periphery and center. However, while this essay is an interesting portrayal of the politics of culture in the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, I think the reader would have benefited from a small paragraph defining what it meant to be an "Ottoman" in earlier eras; while it is quite possible that there were no such influences on the Syro-Lebanese-Palestinian coast in the seventeenth century, the idea that all-but-independent provincial leaders continued to hold on to a veneer of Ottoman culture in the latter period is perhaps testimony to residual loyalties of an earlier epoch.

Leila Fawaz's article on Beirut returns to the nineteenth century as the era of the "struggle for influence between European and Ottoman



officials...” (p.93). For Fawaz, it is “[t]he duality of the Ottoman and European presence in Beirut between 1840 and 1860 [that] set the tone for the rest of the century” (Ibid). Both economic and political, the rivalry between the Ottomans and the British and French frequently took the form of intervention in local Beirut society, with the Europeans complaining of Ottoman “corruption”, unwarranted “brutality” against local prisoners and lack of reliable statistics on trade, while the Ottoman authorities tried to limit European incursions in the Empire through the imposition of permits of passage. Only occasionally in the early part of the nineteenth century, but steadily increasing as time went on, this rivalry began to create friction between local communities themselves, as foreign patronage played itself out among Beirut’s religious and confessional groups.

One of the more original articles in the book is Ralph Bodenstein’s examination of a single nineteenth century mansion in Beirut (Qasr Hunayna), an early representation of Beirut’s new architecture. Proceeding from the simple assumption that “houses are people” (p.111), Bodenstein traces the spatial and design features of this particular mansion directly to its first proprietors. For instance, we are told that, contrary to the more opulent houses of Beirut’s rich families in that same period, Qasr Hunayna was unostentatious although equally large, indicating that its original owner may have been influenced by Western bourgeois urban architecture. On the other hand, European paradigms or no, the author notes that the house possesses a certain hybridity that suits its specific cultural and regional Syro-Lebanese context, even though that hybridity also includes an Orientalist veneer (in its Moorish exotica) that is fundamentally European. In so doing, Bodenstein believes that the original proprietors of the mansion “re-imported

the Orient to Beirut”(p.125). He concludes with the hope that Qasr Hunayna should be seen as a “complex expression...in which different groups of the local population tried to face in different ways the challenges of a rapidly changing world and of dominant European cultures to their culture and identity, by partly adopting, partly transforming and partly rejecting what the increased flow of goods and ideas offered them” (p.127). A salutary thought indeed.

Another article that stresses the pre-nineteenth century development of urban culture and politics is that of Christoph K. Neumann. Seeking to understand why reformist impulses in the Ottoman provinces (south-east Europe, Anatolia and the Arab lands) are considered to have different origins in the historiography of the Empire, he studies key records to determine how local officials in the central Empire organized themselves in the face of demands made upon them by the Porte’s bureaucracy, what taxes supported them and how they appropriated “Ottoman” status through the authentication of their family *waqfs* or endowments as Imperial assets. In the process, he suggests that the current picture of the core Empire as lagging behind the Arab provinces with regard to the solidarity of local officeholders, and their wide-ranging autonomy vis-a-vis the central administration, is incorrect. Neumann believes that even before the Tanzimat reforms were applied by Imperial fiat throughout the realm, notables of every stripe and color cooperated for local gain, maximized their power when they could, and entered into arrangements with the representatives of the Empire only when they could draw advantage from the relationship.

Stefan Weber’s article on wall-paintings in late Ottoman Damascus is an inspired piece of prose. As with Bodenstein, Weber believes that “[h]ouses are mirrors of the owners’

worlds” (p.146). Describing these murals in Damascene grandees’ homes at a time of unparalleled urban expansion in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the author finds that they corresponded to two house forms: local/traditional as well as modern Ottoman. The latter style, which Weber calls “Ottoman modern” became a prized import of Damascene society. Out of 600 surveyed buildings, the author believes that fifty-eight had wall paintings of one form or another. Eventually these imported features took on a life of their own, and spurred a whole tradition of journeymen wall painters who plied their craft throughout the early 1900’s and beyond. Because in the early period these wall paintings were quite often of the Bosphorus and other Ottoman motifs, they represented “a strong artistic identification with the Ottoman political center” (p.161). But, as more and more cultural and political landscapes were inserted in the mansions of Damascene notables (the events of the Paris Commune, eruptions of island volcanoes in Martinique), these decorations also began to serve as a form of visual transformation of the elite’s changing perceptions of the world. From wall paintings of Istanbul in the latter part of the nineteenth century, which the author sees as expressions of “world views” tying the provinces to the center, to representations of European technology (paintings of airplanes, for instance) in 1912, architectural motifs can be studied as a perpetual search for cultural identity. In the author’s view, this culmination of cultural and political processes led to a visible transformation wherein Damascenes projected themselves from a “modernity strongly identified with Ottomanism” (p.170) to being citizens of the world. While this article is excellent, it does stimulate further questions. For instance, in a partially literate society, could these wall paintings have functioned as an early

system of reporting ONLY the news fit to know? Certainly insofar as the landscapes of Istanbul are concerned, they telegraphed an ideological commitment to “Ottomanism” but as more and murals were painted capturing defining moments in current history, could not these (admittedly eclectic) visual representations of the world have also been an early attempt at monopolizing the news and its delivery?

John Chalcraft’s study of Cairo cab drivers in the early twentieth century is a ripping good read. Beginning with an excellent introduction which places horse-drawn carriages for hire within the context of the transformation of vehicular traffic in early twentieth century Cairo, as well as draws a comparative assessment of horse cabs with other trades in the city, he states that “in the 1900’s, cabbies were kings of the road in Cairo” (p.180). As a result of the British-run Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals’ regulation of horse cabbies in the early 1900’s, however, trouble began to brew. Although petitions were sent to the government complaining of the harshness of the SPCA actions, these continued, as a result of which the first cabbie strike in Cairo’s history took place in 1907. Up to 5,000 cab drivers participated and as the strike degenerated into violence, other sectors of Egyptian society took up the cabbies’ call. Precisely because this was a demonstration against a British organization, important papers in Egypt tied it to the growing anti-colonialist movement in the country, and portrayed the strikers’ demands in a sympathetic light. Chalcraft comments that “...the seriousness with which the major Arabic dailies took the demands of the strikers was a warning to the occupiers that alliances might be quick in the making [and] that links between nationalists and popular forces—in particular the unpredictable urban “rabble”—were better avoided” (p.196). In the end, Chalcraft’s essay squarely ties the

development of what has been considered a “small” trade to the modernization of Egypt, showing that even as ignored an occupation as that of the driver of a horse-drawn cab poses important implications to the autonomy and agency of “peripheral” labor in capitalist-era Egypt. In sum, this article is a thoroughly researched, well written narrative of change from the bottom up, and largely functions as a corrective to the somewhat more elitist analyses in the book (particularly the studies of architectural history; for some reason, most of them treat the houses of notables as if they were exemplars of the culture as a whole).

In a highly nuanced article on *waqf* reforms in Damascus, Astrid Meier points to the attempts of the Ottoman state to define the nature of property in the post-Tanzimat era. *Waqfs*, or endowments, skirted the line between public and private property, and were seen as the test case of state control both of alienated revenue-producing property, and the interaction between reformist groups in the capital and provincial bodies set up to administer these reforms in the periphery. From 1840 onwards, the new office of *nazir al-awqaf*, or supervisor of endowments was imposed on the province of Damascus, replacing that of the *qadi* or judge. Alongside the novel provincial councils, the holder of this new post had to pay heed to the new regulations set out by Istanbul to reform provincial *waqfs*; no longer the preserve of the class of religious scholars who managed *waqf* revenue and profited indirectly from the income generated by this property, “public” endowments were brought under the rubric of Imperial control but ONLY after provincial officials had negotiated the terms of how much control to cede to the state.

Immediately following Meier’s article is Randi Deguilhem’s accompanying analysis of the realities of “local decisional power” in the administration of *waqfs* in late Ottoman Damascus.

Complementing Meier’s study of the modalities involved in *waqf* management, Deguilhem observes that even after the Porte moved to centralize its control almost over all endowments in the Empire, up to 1910, “virtually all administrative decisions were initially taken by the local *nazir* or *mutwalli* of a *waqf*” (p.223). However, as the author points out throughout her article, the central administration was far from passive; by means of the *barat*, the document sent by Istanbul to regulate once and for all the final administrative decisions concerning the *waqf* in question, Istanbul was able to exert important influence on the decisions themselves. Finally, both Deguilhem and Meier’s articles reinforce each others’ points very well, especially in their careful examinations of where, and how the province and the center intersected on a vital issue concerning both.

In the final article in this section, Wolf-Dieter Lemke shifts into another medium, namely photography, in order to ask questions of the Arab provincial subject of the Ottoman Empire. Starting in 1839, when photography made its debut in the central lands, Lemke charts the rise of a newly ascendant group of mostly European commercial photographers that saw the whole Empire as its canvas. He notes three areas in which the new medium made an impact: in architecture, official life and among the family. Even so, photography was not viewed as a commoner’s art. For the most part, elite subjects were made to pose either in rigid lines or in a semicircle; no one smiled, and everyone looked severely constrained by hidden forces. Still, the power of photography was such that it developed rapidly among the professional classes so that by the early twentieth century, it had become the occupation of Westerners and Ottomans alike.

The link between spatial considerations and political centralization

are commented upon at length in the next two chapters. The first, an article on Mersin in southern Turkey, is written by Filiz Yenisehirlioglu. His three-fold purpose is to show how Turkish regulations “created” urban form; how the socioeconomic background of property owners had a hand in organizing a house’s spatial considerations, and how Mersin’s hybridity arose out of the adoption of several “heterogeneous” urban styles emanating from within and without the city. As a new Mediterranean port-town that only came into its own after 1840, Mersin had no traditional architecture or symbolic structural design to fall back on. Mostly settled by Beirut and Alexandrine merchant families and entrepreneurs, Mersin’s houses were not traditional Ottoman dwellings in which each family lived on one floor, and quarters were segregated. Even though the author lays stress on the fact that Mersin was, first and foremost, a city built by merchants, urban form and design were influenced as much by the cultural diversity of the city’s population as the imposition of Tanzimat-era laws, such as those regulating building codes.

Anne Mollenhauer’s article on comparisons between Beirut and Salti houses is just as fascinating, although the question she poses at the beginning of her essay (“Did [the resemblance in houses all across the Levant] develop out of local, vernacular, architectural traditions or did regional changes influence correspondences?”, p.275) is somewhat circular in nature. Of course, local vernacular architectural traditions were influenced by regional changes; they didn’t arise on their own (this is not quite a chicken-and-egg example, I don’t think). Moreover, the author makes another distinction that, insofar as I understand it, questions the wisdom of using such “European” terms such as “bourgeois” and “aristocratic” in Bilad al-Sham (p.278). This is a very literalist comment, and betrays an ahistorical notion of the socioeconomic formation

of Middle Eastern communities, in which merchants are forever seen as petty traders and emanating from less developed urban/mercantile traditions than Europe. Still, this is one of the best articles in the book; for sheer scope and detail, it stands as an exemplary contribution to the comparative urban history of two Ottoman Arab cities.

The only article to dwell on the potent influence of one key Aleppine/Ottoman individual in the book, Julia Gonnella’s essay uses oral as well as written sources to rediscover Abu Al-Huda al-Sayyadī’s early career in Aleppo. This is an entertaining exercise in which Al-Sayyadī’s roots, and his early ascendancy in religious/literary circles, are put through a withering examination, helped in part by the still persuasive memories of Aleppine locals. Through a brilliant analysis of Al-Sayyadī’s house as well as the *ḥawīya* (Sufi lodge) attached to it, the author dismisses the notion that it is European in design and construction. For Gonnella, Al-Sayyadī’s house is at once that of an Ottoman grandee and an upstart, a man who tried, but failed to insinuate himself both in Aleppo and Istanbul, and raised the hackles of people in both locales.

The last section of the book relates to the “peripheral” districts of the Empire, to wit, Iraq and Yemen. Christoph Herzog’s article on Baghdad as viewed in the literary sources of the Empire discusses the usual disregard exhibited for Baghdad’s inhabitants by the Ottoman bureaucrats of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Herzog believes that this was the result of a “metropolitan arrogance” (p.328) that took its cue from the very Orientalism inherent in late nineteenth century European thought. As such, European-influenced Ottoman officials are seen to have spearheaded a “colonialist attitude” (ibid) towards Ottoman Iraq that paid no heed to the centuries old relationship between Baghdad and Istanbul. Of course, any

reading of Herzog's article cannot but question the prevalence of this view; as, in fact, the author himself does. A few literary memoirs written in Turkish but also in French by Ottoman civil servants conditioned by the exoticism and distance of Baghdad cannot by themselves express the totality of a hegemonic world view as reflected in the Empire, nor indeed can their paucity or endemic lack of method be characterized as emerging out of a "colonialist attitude" common among the reigning Ottoman elite in Istanbul.

In the next to last article in the book, Thomas Kuhn writes about the political dimension of spatial change in nineteenth and twentieth century Yemen. Or, as the author succinctly puts it, "...construction projects and public ceremonies are seen as spatial practices that were aspects of inscribing Ottoman rule in urban space" (p.331). Kuhn believes that whereas in the 1870's, there was a strong desire to Ottomanize the Yemeni population, in the end, falling under the influence of Europe allowed a more inegalitarian system to emerge where Yemenis were considered unfit material as citizens. They were now subjects, and a whole paraphernalia of "empire" was erected around their subjection.

Last but not least, Isa Blumi's study of Ta'izz in Yemen aims to deconstruct the "generalizing" and totalizing clichés of urban existence in order to render the "complexity of daily life in Ottoman Yemen" (p.350) more historically contextualized. He does this by means of a theoretically sophisticated framework which looks at the conventional ways Yemen is studied – among them, tribal and urban dichotomies and the pull of sectarian categories—and proposes entirely different, but perhaps more plausible ways of conceptualizing Yemeni society under Ottoman rule.

*The Empire in the City* is an extraordinarily good book, and one that

I would recommend to any student of Middle Eastern history in the Ottoman period. While focusing more on the Levant than any other region of the Arab/Ottoman provinces, its judgments and conclusions can be equally distilled for all of the Porte's domains. The interaction between the center and periphery has rarely been seen in such a comprehensive and nuanced way, and for this, the organizers of the conference that produced this publication, no less than its three editors and seventeen contributors, deserve every accolade.

This said, I wish the editors had seen fit to organize the articles in a perhaps more traditionally thematic way. For instance, I found it slightly disorientating to have Bodenstein's study of Qasr Hunayna appear in another section than Weber's, Mollenhauer's and Gonnella's. Surely there is a straightforward comparative utility to reading all those articles that touch on aspects of a central theme one after another, which is not only logical but synthetic all at the same time. The same happens with the articles of Philipp and Neumann; both touch on the eighteenth, more than the nineteenth century and could have produced useful mirror arguments of one another. I realize that it is all about how you define your objective, and obviously the editors of this volume defined it differently than I would have. And of course, mine is only a stylistic, not a substantive critique. As it is, a book such as this one, with its multifaceted perspectives on Ottoman/Arab interaction in the crucial last decades of an Empire in continuing transformation, is a worthy reminder of how specialists in different genres of the field can come together to ask different questions of the same material and create in the process the foundations of a novel, and more progressive scholarship.

**Asma Moalla**  
*The Regency of Tunis and the Ottoman Porte, 1777-1814: Army and government of a North-Africa Ottoman eyalet at the end of the eighteenth century*

London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004

**Reviewed by Nora Lafi\***

With “*The Regency of Tunis and the Ottoman Porte*” Asma Moalla has written a detailed and thoroughly convincing study of the army and government in this Ottoman province at the turn of the eighteenth- and nineteenth centuries. This is the Husaynid period, and the time of pasha-bey Hammûda (1777-1814) which is marked by a peculiar evolution of the relation between Western province and its central administration in Istanbul. But this book is also an occasion to contribute to new interpretative frameworks about the Ottoman Empire and its provinces, Tunisia in particular.

While the existing historiography has tended to insist on what the author calls the “autonomy thesis”, present research has to re-examine interpretative schemes on the relation of provinces with Empire, even in the case of provinces ruled by a local dynasty. The over-estimation of political autonomy had different reasons and ideological backgrounds, ranging from a justification of colonial rule to a necessity to strengthen nationalism after independence. It also had a methodological reason: the separation between Ottoman studies and Maghreb studies and the lack of a combined use of local and imperial archives for the writing of the history of this region. Asma Moalla clearly intends to insert

her work in the current methodological renewal in Maghreb studies and largely succeeds in doing so with this book.

One of the author’s most important contributions in enlarging the historical panorama of Tunisia is the use of local chronicles. Plenty of studies have already been written from the perspective of the chronicles of foreign travellers. While the author acknowledges this literature, she has chosen to broaden the view by the use of Arabic chronicles, such as Muhammad Abî Dînâr (XVIIth c.), Muhammad al-Wazîr al-Sarrâj al-Andalusî, Muhammad al-Saghîr, Hammûda ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azîz, Ahmad ibn Abî’l-Diyâf (XVIIIth. C.) and Muhammad Bayram al-Khâmîs (XIXth. c.). Asma Moalla stresses the fact that these sources, when used, have been read in a way which favoured the autonomy thesis, as the writers of the chronicles were often directly working for the local dynasty. Her intention to re-examine this interpretation generates broader questioning on the spirit of administration. One has to stress the accuracy and pertinence of the intent.

But one could have also expected another step in this process of re-examination: the use of more local administrative archives and, most of all, the use of central Ottoman archives, which surely constitutes the next horizon for this kind of work. Asma Moalla’s book is nevertheless an important contribution to the historiographical opening of Tunisia to the Ottoman studies. Her book is composed of two main parts, and seven chapters. The first part, composed of two chapters, is conceived as a “prologue”, and is a presentation of the general history of the province of Tunisia between its integration into the Ottoman Empire (1574) and 1777, date of the beginning of the reign of Hammûda Pasha. Here the author recalls the main phases of this history, and proposes some new interpretations, based upon an analysis of the meaning

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of the notion of *eyâlet* and the reading of the relationship between the Tunisian army (*jund*) and Istanbul at the occasion of the 1591 uprising. Asma Moalla shows how this event was auspicious for the Ottoman government to set up a new policy in the Maghreb: “it is, therefore, more plausible to assume that the post-1591 administrative order was essentially devised and edicted by the Porte itself, though it took into consideration the claims of the rebel *jund*” (p. 12). She insists that what has been translated as *Regency* in the European sources of the time, and has been accepted unquestioningly by the historiography ever since, was called in Ottoman words *eyâlet mümtâze*, or privileged province.

Asma Moalla then proceeds to describe in a convincing way how this new order existed not in separation from the Empire. Although granted the right to an autonomous army and the exemption from directly contributing to the central fiscal system, the province was still considered as Ottoman and had a series of duties, including participation in Ottoman military campaigns and the fight against “Christian fleets”. This interpretation, which complies with present trends in the historiography of the Maghreb, is very important. But even if this period is not the main focus of the author, it could have benefited from a reading of both local and central administrative archives.

One could try to go further with the reinterpretation of the post-1591 administrative scheme using the concept of *Ancien régime* governance<sup>1</sup>: the fact that the imperial government granted special privileges to a province or a town still makes them fully part of the system, and in no way negates the system. It was in fact common practice to devolve power in the two main domains of the central government competence – fiscal matters and army regulation. A defining feature of Ottoman policy, other provinces of the Empire were also granted such

privileges. When Greek inhabitants of Rhodes for example were granted fiscal privileges, and the right not to participate in the Ottoman warfare, the logic was the same: the construction of a viable Ottoman system, whose very substance was to take into account local situations. The interpretations of the meaning of this system for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries do not necessarily have to be compatible with the dismantling of the system during the next two centuries under the pressure of both nationalisms and European imperialism. Asma Moalla’s book has to be praised for permitting an insertion of Tunisia in such an interpretative scheme.

The second part of her book, and object of her main research, focuses on the reign of Hammûda Pasha. Asma Moalla has chosen the army, the general administration and fiscal policy to examine the relation between Tunis and Istanbul. Her description of the “estrangement and reconciliation” process during the last decades of the eighteenth century is very convincing: she shows how military matters were objects of a precise rhetoric playing on belonging vs. autonomy, and that local rulers were aware of how far they could go in pushing this rhetoric. Participation in imperial warfare, the use of symbols and parallel diplomacy were avenues in which Hammûda Pasha negotiated his own situation *vis à vis* the empire. What Asma Moalla successfully shows is that the whole game is Ottoman in substance. The author also shows how provincial armies were used against one another in order to restore imperial order, as in the case of the Tunisian-Algerian war of 1807, and how this Ottoman way of governing the empire was both successful and dangerous for the cohesion of the whole system. Asma Moalla’s interpretation of the 1811 janissary rebellion in Tunis as a local expression of the weakness of the central power following the death of Selim III is also well argued, as is her reading of the way in which European

powers (France and England first) take profit of the defects of Ottoman imperial governance in a time of doubts to pervert the system.

Chapter 4 is about the Pasha, under a dynastical and symbolical perspective. Asma Moalla's analysis of the *application* procedure and of *investiture* ceremonies is important: the author succeeds in replacing it in an Ottoman interpretative scheme, and tries to read every element found in chronicles under the perspective of the rhetoric of autonomy/belonging. Signs of sovereignty and signs of submission are accurately combined. The use of court *étiquette* as an indicator of general trends in the provincial governance is very convincing, and reveals the meticulousness of the Ottoman government in what it allowed and not, and how local rulers were aware of this rule. Iconographic documentation would have been useful to highlight this process, but her method is innovative. The author does the same demonstration with a reading of the role of the *mamlúk* which succeeds in going further than traditional *pittoresque* interpretations: beyond a presentation of their various geographical origins, their role in the administration is stressed in a precise way. Asma Moalla aims at understanding the whole system, and is aware of the risk of giving too much importance to the *pittoresque*. The enormous respect of the Pasha Bey for the symbol of the imperial bread (he eats the daily ration his sultan gives to its soldiers) is seen by the author as representative of the importance in local rule of imperial "belonging." Her interpretation of this fact (p. 85) – echoes of which she found in chronicles – constitutes one of the most beautiful moments of the book.

The description of the organisation of the army of the province of Tunisia (chapter 5) is more classical, but also allows further interpretative steps. The main achievement of the research is the fact that "the structure of the Tunisian *jund* was, to a remarkable extent, a

reproduction of its Istanbul model" (p. 90). Asma Moalla successfully illustrates the convergence between Tunis and Istanbul through her analysis of both the military vocabulary and the very organization of the army. Her attention to linguistic details – based on profound knowledge of Arabic – and the effort of juxtaposing *osmanli* equivalents is to be praised. Even if more attention could have been paid to recruitment, the various components of the army (Janissaries, *zuváva*, "tribal cavalry") are described precisely in their organization and their relation to the power. Most interesting is the attention to the privileges conferred by belonging to one corps or another. This introduces an element of interpretation for the whole administrative system, the description of which is the object of chapter 6.

The administration was divided into two sections: the *díván al-hisbân*, which Asma Moalla interestingly translates as "accountancy", and the *díván al-insbá*, "the chancery" (p. 108). She describes the role and provinces of the main figures in the administration. The *sabib al-tábi*, guardian of the seal, was in charge of the relation with the Porte, of military actions, and the supervision of functionaries and officials. This position granted comfortable revenues. The *bash kátib* acted as a general secretary, and the Malekite *kátib* were generally members of notable families serving in the beylical administration. The aim of Asma Moalla's description of this administrative order is not to just repeat what had already been described, and instead try to link what she finds for Tunis to an Ottoman parallel. This is part of her method, aiming at a discussion of the autonomy thesis, and the result is very convincing: the described system is a local derivative of the Ottoman order.

As for the provincial administration, Asma Moalla's explanation of the role of tribal instances and local shaykhs shows well the insertion of traditional forms of governance into the description of the



whole evolving administrative system. But this part is not the object of an archival focus, and relies on the reading of existing documentation. It does not always succeed in going further than what has already been written, especially for urban governance, for which the description of the shaykhs as representing the tribal order can not fully apply. The very analysis of urban government in its relation to provincial and central powers could have been an occasion to find an organizational link between the tribal dimension and state building. In cities, especially Tunis, urban governance has known an evolution during this period which reflects the setting of another aspect of the Ottoman rule: the relation with local *élites*, notables and guilds. This is not the object of Asma Moalla's book, but one could have hoped that having successfully updated interpretations related to the army and the central administration, she would have applied the same method to lower ranges of the administrative and social ladder.

The seventh chapter on the revenues of the beylical treasury is an innovative presentation of this aspect of governance for the province, and the base for rewarding comparisons. The presentation is clear and relies on a systematic list of traces of specific taxes into archives and chronicles. As for the army, this is an occasion to compare with the Ottoman system. Asma Moalla successfully demonstrates that the fiscal system which was applied in Tunis fitted the Ottoman frame. Very interesting is the description of taxes on rural land and agricultural production, and the effort to link these taxes to the social order. The description of taxes applied to production and sales is also accurately identified as the ones setting the relations with Christian traders. The only lacuna in Moalla's interpretation of

this system is, once again, related to the urban condition.

Generally speaking, this book is a very important contribution to Tunisian historiography. It exemplifies the opening to new trends in the analysis of the Ottoman period, marking a break with colonial and nationalistic literatures (the second having often been very closely aligned with the first). The Regency of Tunis is presented by Asma Moalla in an innovative way: her use of new sources and new readings of already known documents related to the case of Tunis raise some new questions regarding new trends in the Ottoman historiography more generally. Asma Moalla has shown that Tunis could be read as part of the Ottoman Empire. New developments in her work and in the new Tunisian historiography in general could benefit from collaboration with Ottoman historiography, both in method and content: the use of central ottoman archival documents, the practice of comparison, at both an imperial and local to local scale, and a discussion of broader concepts on governance, administrative history, reform, old *régime* and modernity.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> On the elaboration of the concept in an European context, see: Berengo (Marino), *L'Europa delle città. Il volto della società urbana europea tra Medioevo e Età moderna*, Turin, Einaudi, 1999; and Bély (Lucien), *Dictionnaire de l'Ancien Régime*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1996. A discussion on the pertinence of the concept (and its limits) in an Islamic context is part of present trends in the interpretation of Ottoman governance and in methodological debates in this field.

**Ludmila Hanisch**  
*Die Nachfolger der Exegeten. Deutschsprachige Erforschung des Vorderen Orients in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts*  
(Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003), 235 pp.

**Reviewed by Sukanya Kulkarni\***

Ludmila Hanisch's *Die Nachfolger der Exegeten* is an excellent historical survey about the status and role of Near Eastern Studies in Germany in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The scope of the various languages under the rubric of Near Eastern Studies is challenging, though Hanisch mainly concentrates on Jewish Studies and Arabic/Islam Studies, while at times digressing towards the importance of Indology during this period. Taking into account the contemporary political relationship between Germany and the Near East from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until after the Second World War, Hanisch integrates questions of colonialism, imperialism in addition to the "Jewish question," and goes on to dispute existing research that depends on Germany's position as a non-colonizing country interested in the Orient only academically.

The main aim of this study is to highlight the contemporary historical and political events in Germany and the Near East and discuss the influence of these developments for Oriental scholarship from a *German* perspective. Unlike English or French scholarship, German scholarship has not yet adequately investigated this relationship, and Hanisch seeks to rectify this

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deficiency by presenting the dovetail connection between politics and academic research in Germany during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Stating that Germany's Oriental scholarship to date has depended on purely linguistic and philological studies, Hanisch argues for a more interdisciplinary study to understand the status of this field, by showing how at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Near Eastern Studies succeeded in freeing itself from strict linguistic and philological study by offering seminars in culture and civilization of the Orient and various other service-related subjects (Dienstleistungen). Thus, Hanisch's book is one of the first German attempts that goes beyond a biographical-bibliographical study and offers an interdisciplinary overview of the discipline by piecing together the history of the Oriental Studies with German history, and studying how this influenced the way the discipline changed its day-to-day functioning from decade to decade. The dearth of literature encompassing such a broad historical survey makes the book under review unique.

*Die Nachfolger der Exegeten* is divided into seven chapters. The first two chapters provide background knowledge on German universities and the subjects that were taught at the turn on the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the first chapter of the book, the author begins her exploration of German universities by assessing their restructuring at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After Germany's unification under Bismarck in 1871, academia gave boosted nationalism by identifying with the goals of the new nation. However, Hanisch points out the latent danger arising from such nationalist ideologies that led to certain anti-Semitic sentiments in academic circles. The second chapter briefly surveys related disciplines such as history, philosophy, theology, geography and anthropology that influenced Oriental Studies at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century. During the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the separation of philology from theology took place, and furthermore, Jewish Studies and Arabic/Islam Studies developed in context with related fields such as history and anthropology. This chapter thus gives a fascinating account of how these subjects were influential in letting Near Eastern Studies develop from a purely linguistic standpoint to more specialized sub-fields.

The third chapter deals with Oriental Studies in German universities through out the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hanisch invokes Edward Said's stance on German Orientalism when she states that the German interest in the Orient in the early and mid 19<sup>th</sup> century was mainly linguistic and philological, as opposed to England and France (21). After discussing how Hebrew, Arabic, Armenian and Sanskrit were all studied under the umbrella of Oriental languages without any classifications, Hanisch goes on to demonstrate how Oriental research in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was influenced by actual encounters with the Near East. Trade, commerce, missionary activities, colonialism and Bismarck's foreign policy – all of these factors changed the nature of Oriental Studies departments in Germany. The Orient as a field of study was popular in the consciousness of the educated German population – one needs to only remember the Emperor's visit to Istanbul in 1889 or the interest in the Berlin-Baghdad train line. In the concluding part of the chapter, the author highlights the lack of interest in the Orient in popular culture, "Verglichen mit der Attraktivität archäologischer Forschungen hatte weder die Reisebeschreibung noch die Thematisierung des Orients in der schönen Literatur große Bedeutung" (34), and further on, "Es gab am Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts keine Notwendigkeit, das literarische Publikum auf diese fremde Welt einzustimmen. Für die Öffentlichkeit

gehörte sie nicht zur eigenen Vergangenheit und bildete keinen Gegenstand von nostalgischen Reminiszenen, Eroberungsphantasien oder Zukunftsträumen" (35).

I need to take issue with Hanisch's concluding remarks to this chapter, as she fails to acknowledge German Studies scholarship that has shown precisely the opposite. To name just one study by a scholar, Susanne Zantop's book entitled *Colonial Fantasies*, shows how gendered/familial fantasies of colonial relations had populated the German imaginary even in precolonial times, how these 'colonial' fantasies had participated in the German nation-building process, becoming a driving force for colonizing action.<sup>1</sup>

The fourth and central chapter deals with the "Blütezeit" ("Golden Age") of Oriental studies at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, Near Eastern Studies legitimized itself as relevant to the German nation where as Classical Studies took a backseat. The author's comprehensive archival research is presented in tabular form by accounting the number of Jewish language professorships at various German universities (39), or by providing the reader with the founding years of various Oriental Studies departments in Germany (58). One of the interesting sections of the chapter is when the author reasons for the long establishment of this discipline in comparison to Classical Studies, history or German literature departments. Moving from the first towards the second decade, Hanisch reveals a unique trend in Oriental Studies, which, for the first time, concentrated on contemporary requirements arising from the First World War by teaching geography, religion, customs and traditions of the Near Orient. The goals of departments in Heidelberg, Straßburg, Göttingen, Leipzig, Munich, Freiburg, Breslau, Bonn, Erlangen, Marburg, Kiel, Giessen, Frankfurt,

Münster, Halle, Hamburg, Tübingen and Würzburg during this period are also outlined.

In the next chapter entitled “Einbrüche” (“Collapses”) the author highlights the importance of the First World War for Near Eastern Studies in Germany. It was a time when Oriental scholars considered the war as their call to be useful to the State. It was also a period when contact between the German Reich and the Ottoman Empire increased not only on a political, but on a cultural level because of numerous cross-cultural encounters. On the one hand, young researchers saw the war as a golden opportunity to be stationed overseas (Turkey, Palestine) where they could pursue their research. On the other hand, professional jobs and exciting career possibilities increased the attraction and reputation of Oriental departments in Germany.

Germany’s defeat in the First World War also had tremendous repercussions for Oriental Studies departments, research and scholarship in Germany. The sixth chapter describes precisely this negative influence the end of the war had, as academic departments in the Weimar Republic had to be reorganized urgently to teach students with no chances of professional careers outside the university, libraries or museums. Once again, similar to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, textual scholarship remained the central preoccupation, as not only dissertation students, but also professors were prohibited to travel to the Orient until Germany’s entry into the League of Nations in 1926. Some cooperation with disciplines such as archaeology and art history helped overcome and complement the strict philological research. However, the role and scope of travel to the Orient is not made entirely clear by the author. If hundreds of people could travel to the Middle East, Asia and Africa during the Weimar Republic to produce films,<sup>2</sup> why did academic research suffer such a big setback?

After a thorough discussion of the status of Near Eastern Studies in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hanisch turns her attention to the period after 1933, that is, during the Hitler regime. The seventh and final chapter begins with a discussion about the role of National Socialist policies on Oriental Studies, specially Jewish Studies, and three major waves that led to the repression and expulsion of Jews in 1933, 1935 and 1937. Hanisch demonstrates how the expulsion of the Jewish intelligentsia from Germany affected Oriental Studies departments in Germany but profited research in neighboring countries and also helped spur competition from America. In an interesting excursus, Hanisch points out how the German army exploited their connections with the Near East and coerced Arabs and Tunisians to fight against England and Russia. Even though this chapter is an informative account of the problems Oriental researchers faced in Germany, it focuses too narrowly on the role of Jewish Studies, neglecting to discuss how influential that other branch of Oriental Studies, Indology, was in this period. Considering the deep-seated Aryan roots of the Hitler ideology, Hanisch neglects to dig deeper into the close connection of politics and Oriental Studies that existed during the Third Reich. Problems facing the universities in the after-war decolonization period are also investigated in this chapter.

The appendix contains biographical information to more than four hundred German Oriental scholars and is a treasure trove for students and scholars alike. However, I found any reference of Max Mueller, one of the most important German Indologists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, missing in this bibliography!

In sum, the reviewer would say that this is a compelling interdisciplinary study for anyone interested in knowing more about the status of Near Eastern Studies in German universities from the

19<sup>th</sup> century until after the Second World War. Moreover, at a time when Turkey's entry into the European Union is hotly debated in Europe, and where hundreds of millions of Euros would be needed to completely revamp Oriental Studies departments across the board if Turkey indeed joins the EU, Hanisch's attempt to survey the status of research of Near Eastern Studies from Prussia (after 1806) to the Second World War (after 1945) certainly attempts to

contribute to the current political scenario.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Susanne Zantop. *Colonial Fantasies. Conquest, Family and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770-1870* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 1997)

<sup>2</sup> Jörg Schöning, (ed.) *Triviale Tropen. Exotische Reise- und Abenteuerfilme aus Deutschland 1919-1939*. (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1997)

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**Nelly Hanna**

*In Praise of Books: A Cultural History of Cairo's Middle Class, Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003). ix, 219 p.

**Reviewed by Leila Hudson\***

Nelly Hanna's *In Praise of Books: A Cultural History of Cairo's Middle Class, Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* is an ambitious quest for Middle Eastern modernity in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This quirky book is a rich journey into the past with the best possible guide. Nobody knows the texture and landscape of early modern Egypt better than Professor Nelly Hanna. It is a real pleasure to read a work which dares to be broad, readable and unconventional that is written by a connoisseur of the region hunting for the dynamic and progressive in unexpected corners. In many ways, this book is a good introduction to the early modern Middle East for undergraduates and general readers whose only vision of the region is as static and monolithic.

Scholarly readers, however, will find that ultimately this book is structured around an illusion – that of a

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modern and dynamic middle class – that recedes even as Hanna erects her arguments from the scrap metal of structural Marxism. Boldly going in search of an early culture of modernity, she ends up forcing her broad-based material – Islamic *shari'a* court records, colloquial writings, comparative material from Syria, Anatolia and European cultural history – into a frame that just does not fit, one that looks suspiciously like that of the nineteenth century, book-loving central European bourgeoisie. In trying to move beyond the modernism of the *Annales* tradition and by searching for non-European, pre-modern modernities, she ignores rich ethnographic and theoretical material produced by anthropologists and ends up in uncomfortable schizophrenia – a diehard structuralist doing an awkward impression of poststructural bricolage.

The heart of the book and its strongest part is its fourth chapter "Books and the Middle Class." Insofar as it addresses the book culture of the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries (I wondered why the book's subtitle includes the sixteenth century), it shows Hanna at her best, bringing in comparisons and contrasts with early modern Europe and Syria, investigating the material conditions around book production and distribution, reading into inheritance documents from the *shari'a* courts as well as work on non-Islamic communities the contours of a culture

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of literacy and prosperity. In this chapter she comes as close to uniting material and intellectual history in a fully convincing manner. The book as commodity indicates a culture of material surplus and complexity; the book as a medium represents a shared culture of literacy, education, observation and analysis of reality; ergo a modern middle class must have existed, she argues.

Hanna's starting point for this exploration of the possibility of an early modern middle class is the work of a previously unknown writer, Muhammad Ibn Hasan Abu Dhakir (b. 1694) whose provocative observation that he belonged neither to the *khassa* (elite) nor to the *amma* (commoners) but was lost in between searching for his identity encapsulated the essence of an unusual manuscript. This producer of text and searching middlebrow subjectivity sets Hanna's standard for modernity. In discussing Abu Dhakir's subjectivity, she brushes off criteria of modernity such as technology, centralized state structures, or capitalism as irrelevant. Instead "modernity was manifested by [Abu Dhakir's] interest in the ordinary person and expressed in his everyday concerns, by an interest in real situations that were observed and analyzed with a realistic and empirical approach – people in other words who were outside the ruling establishment and the power structure who were real rather than the exceptional or idealized man who stood out because of his deeds, his moral character of his scholarly achievements." Especially considering his manuscript's absence in the chapter on book culture, the reader is left wondering whether Abu Dhakir was the representative of a class or, more likely, a unique individual voice.

Cairo in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had what seems like a high level of book ownership. Unfortunately Hanna does not provide critical information about the sample size and instead of exploring a book

culture that her records show cut *across* wealth and status groups, she insists on harnessing it to a theoretical vehicle that weighs it down – the middle class. Hanna does not address the suggestive material which does not support her thesis of a middle class, namely a wide distribution of books through different professions and wealth strata with no clear association around the middle. While she deploys book ownership among tradesmen as evidence of her theory of a middle class, she does not provide any context or answer the reasonable question of how many non-book owning tradesmen the inheritance registers documented. The predominant book-owning social group – which consistently beat the *ulema* in the 18<sup>th</sup> century according to Hanna's records – was the military. However she is silent on the implications of this fact. As with late 19<sup>th</sup> century Damascus, the best selling book, and most popular class of books, is Sufi literature. She fails to explain how the best selling Sufi prayer book in the collections is indicative of a class which she is at pains to present as secular in other parts of the book. Also, oddly there is no mention in this chapter of the distribution of the works of the writer Abu Dhakir whose modern manuscript launched the project, and we are left to wonder to what extent he was read or appreciated by the consumers of Sufi prayer books.

Thus it is all the more disorienting when Hanna begins her analysis of middle class culture by reverting to old fashioned Marxist orthodoxy, opening Chapter 2 "Society, Economy and Culture" with the sentence "At the base of a middle-class culture were material conditions that allowed it to develop." She summarizes the development of commercial capitalism around the Mediterranean and the ebb and flow of centralized power in Ottoman-Mamluk Egypt to argue that the middle class culture in question flourished with prosperity and weak taxation regimes until increasingly

centralized power put the brakes on in the later part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Her discussion of the regional and local implications of patterns in Mediterranean mercantilism is, like that on the contours of book culture, a masterful little essay in itself. But then she introduces the jargon of high world systems theory – not to analyze the regional trade or to bring her understanding of that trade to bear on the classic theory, but rather to describe the composition of the Cairene middle class. She distinguishes a ‘core’ of tradesmen from a ‘periphery’ of indirectly or occasionally related professions.

Having established a plausible economic niche for the Egyptian middle class stemming from the rich Mediterranean trade prior to its strangulation by Mamluk intermediary tax farmers in the eighteenth century and represented by books, Hanna goes on to describe a culture for it – one based on education. Chapter three “Education and Culture” and Chapter five “The Shaping of Middle Class Culture” are simultaneously the most interesting and weakest chapters in the book. In Chapter three Hanna traces several histories of middle class education – leading the reader on a tour of a variety of formal and informal educational institutions. But her portrayal, while useful for the general reader, lists different venues but completely bypasses the ethnographic and historical work that analyzes them as sites of power and reproduction of authority. Here the work of Brinkley Messick, Timothy Mitchell, Lila Abu-Lughod, Jonathan Berkey and Michael Chamberlain on knowledge production, transmission and power, and even Charles Ferguson, Walter Armbrust and Nilofer Haeri’s on diglossia and code switching would have informed the argument.

Avoiding the labels of “religious” or “traditional” for the middle-class education constellation,

Hanna draws together the *kuttab* (rather disingenuously presented as elementary rather than Quranic education), with the record keeping culture of tradesmen, and the culture of orality (ignoring a considerable amount of anthropological literature on the written vs. the oral in the Middle East) to make an eclectic collage of multiple histories of education. This drawing together of scriptural primary education, commercial record keeping, and dynamic orality could apply to just about any period of Middle Eastern history (indeed it is a standard material for the culture of the rise of Islam) and is not specific to the period or place in question.

In Chapter five, Hanna takes up again the question of the effect of a powerful oral tradition on written literature. The observation of the translation of oral genres into writing, writing about work by workers, references to the world of women, and the use of colloquial dialects is an interesting compilation. But the discussion is weakened by the complete absence of reference to the anthropological, linguistic and historical literatures which describe language shifting between written and oral discourse, classical and colloquial language as strategies and emergent practice, as a dance of hegemony and resistance - not simply as Hanna wishes to use them as indicators of a particular state of development. The very differences and modulations in language use noted by Hanna in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can be interpreted in light of the work of the historians and ethnographers mentioned above as ambivalent tactical responses of individual writers to the hegemonic discourse of religious sciences, or the patterned responses of members of a book culture that has little to do with wealth or class.

In the last chapter of the book, Hanna is determined to portray Abu Dhakir as a radical intellectual (again

conjuring up ghosts from European history). Is he the vanguard as well as the everyman of the Egyptian middle class, or just a descriptive, articulate and literate voice? Frankly, Hanna does not provide enough of Abu Dhakir's text for the skeptical reader to judge. His writing about ordinary people, his critiques of religious elites, complaints about his lack of money, and venturing into the world of women and sexuality do not convincingly add up to resistance against the *ancien regime* of religious elites and the courtly rulers. Time and time again I found myself wishing that Hanna had let Abu Dhakir's voice be heard through the translation of extended passages. Particularly tantalizing was an excursus into Abu Dhakir's views on sexuality and childbirth which Hanna describes in a most reserved manner and then abruptly drops.

Hanna's choice not to pursue these real questions about Abu Dhakir's world and book consuming culture or to even bring them into the same context is the result of her commitment to proving the existence of a modern middle class. Professor Hanna started her career as the star student of the great social historian Andre Raymond. Working under his tutelage, she produced her first remarkable contribution *Habiter a Caire* – an exploration of domestic architecture which pointed the way to a rich cultural history. Later in *Making Big Money in 1600*, she did what most Ottoman social historians can only dream of, writing a vivid near-biography from the archival sources, and thus embodying the culture of the past through a powerful, active figure. But in this latest project which tackles culture head on, the reader is plagued by the sense of ungroundedness in the social theory deployed. Transcending Marxist theory altogether would have been fine, but it clunks about throughout the book, asserting itself in spite of Hanna's postmodernist gestures.

*In Praise of Books* avoids the pressing idea of popular or public culture as a possible topic of interest, except when it serves as evidence for the literate, educated middle class. Hanna's main guide to the world of early modern cultural theory is, of course, Bakhtin, and she devotes a few dutiful paragraphs to summarizing his work. But she seems so alarmed by the possibility of a Bakhtinian illiterate carnivalesque dynamic to Egyptian early modernity that she does not take the time to disprove the utility of this European model. Instead she risks undermining the "everyman" legitimacy of her definition of the modern by drawing a series of distinctions separating this modernity from popular or mass culture as a distinctly middle class phenomenon. She asserts that "the culture in question was sophisticated; the people who wrote the texts were, for the most part, educated and well-read. There was no likelihood that they were living at subsistence level." At times, Hanna implies an unbridgeable void between her middle class and the poor which seems to depend on an ingrained bourgeois sense of respectability.

She creates a similar gap between her middle class and the ruling classes and *ulema* which seem to be defined by secularism and unhappiness with the accepted courtly order of things. The distinctive marks of this class are not just secular book culture, but a certain anachronistic primness and reserve. She insists on the bourgeois virtues of the middle claiming that there is nothing carnivalesque about their culture, but what she claims as resistance to or questioning of the ruling elite's status quo sounds an awful lot like resignation. In her last chapter "Radical Intellectuals" she presents Abu Dhakir's musings on language and religious knowledge, money and the lack of it, women and sexuality as somehow related to a larger political crisis or societal transformation. This is quite a stretch.



Hanna's discussion of book culture remains suggestive, ultimately about private ownership and intimate, private experiences of reading and writing, rather than ideas of a public sphere which would have been the most important component of the complex social evolution she postulates. The reader, willing to follow Hanna through her mix-and-match assemblage of cultural passages, is disoriented by the lack of a firm theoretical footing. And

of course, the slippery and second-hand nature of the theory forestalls any serious attempt at critique. The promise of Hanna's generation of *Annalistes* was that the local material in the hands of local scholars would challenge and refine the eurocentricity of social history. *In Praise of Books* will be remembered as an important attempt in that project but ultimately does not live up to its high standards.

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**Janine A. Clark**

*Islam, Charity, and Activism.  
Middle-Class Networks and Social  
Welfare in Egypt, Jordan, and  
Yemen*

Indiana University Press, Bloomington,  
2004

**Reviewed by Albrecht Abdullah Ali  
Metzger\***

Anyone who deals with Islamism, be it scholar or journalist, has to decide at one point or another how to evaluate this phenomenon on a personal level: Is it an extremist religious movement that follows a timeless agenda, its core idea being to wipe out secularism in the Middle East and fight the West until it drops dead? Or are Islamists "political animals" like you and me that evolve over time and space and are capable of adapting to different circumstances? Obviously, Islamism can be both. For the former variant look at al-Qaida and its ilk, who only barely refrained from crushing civilian airplanes into nuclear power stations in the US and then went for the WTC and the Pentagon as targets instead, for the latter a brief glance at Turkish mainstream Islamism suffices to see that

Islamist parties can turn – under specific circumstances at least – into EU-loving democrats. The question then is: which of the many Islamisms one decides to cover and how to evaluate it in the context of the other Islamisms? If one chooses mainstream Islamists such as the Muslim Brothers in Egypt or their compatriots in Yemen who have forsaken violence quite some time ago, there still remains the question of honesty: Do they really mean what they say? Have the Muslim Brothers adopted democratic values, as they now constantly claim, or are they only the sheep in a lambs-wool waiting for the right moment to strike at their enemies? Or worse, are they still clandestine supporters of a worldwide jihad against the infidels who prepare the ideological ground for people like Osama bin Laden? After all Mohammed Atta, a central figure in the terrorist attacks of 9/11 apparently was a sympathizer of the Muslim Brothers before he turned extremist.

The decision of which way to look at mainstream Islamism has not least to do with personal inclinations. The optimists will believe in the power of the actual fact. Islamists may dream of turning the whole world into one big Islamic Caliphate, be it through bullets or ballots, whereas it is difficult enough for them to get just one state in the Middle East. For the time being, many of them seem to be content to participate in the public sphere even if

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that means they have to make compromises to the “infidels.” As time goes by, so hope the optimists, they will accept pluralism not only out of necessity but out of conviction. The pessimists, on the other hand, would rather cite the example of Mohammed Atta and insist on the violent past of the “Muslim Brothers.” Islamists will never change, the pessimists will say, and thus they should be fought tooth and nail.

Janine A. Clark has, without explicitly saying so, chosen the first path. At least she pursues a non-alarmist approach towards Islamism. Her book is a clear cut analysis of mainstream Islamic activism in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen. The strength of her work is the vast field research she conducted between 1991 and 2002 in which she interviewed several hundred activists. The choice of her methodology, namely to look beyond what Islamists say and to focus instead on what they do, precludes any Orientalist conclusions. She comes up with some surprising results that run counter to hitherto accepted wisdoms. This does not mean that her conclusions will please Islamists themselves, however. On the contrary, at one point she almost apologizes to her interviewees and wonders whether they would agree with her analyses.

What are her arguments then? Clark is assessing the work of Islamic social institutions (ISIs) such as hospitals and clinics in Egypt and Jordan and Koranic study groups for women in Yemen. Most scholars who have dealt with ISIs see them as an important tool for Islamist movements to enlarge their clientele, especially from the lower classes. Charity, being one of the main tenets of Islam, Islamic activists, who mainly come from the middle classes, manage to convince religiously minded people to move over to their side. In the end, so the argument goes, ISIs are a soft way to power for mainstream Islamists, since they challenge the authority of the state and lure away potential voters once

genuinely free elections are held. According to Sami Zubaida, Islamic associations treat the masses as “simple objects of religious reform and control.”

Clark challenges this view. In her field research she hardly found any proof for this kind of cross-class-mobilization. Islamic activists, be they doctors, nurses or managers of the ISIs, may claim to serve the needy. In the end though, their clientele are other members of the middle or even upper middle classes, according to Clark. This confirms the social movement theory which states that networks are woven by activists from the same social background and not across different classes. The strengthening of horizontal ties between people from the same socio-economic background is thus more important than the vertical recruitment of followers from lower classes. Therefore, even though the “gradual accumulation of social capital” is the basis of a social movement, Clark denies that this is a “social revolution” (p. 3). Rather, middle-class networks seek “to coexist and compete with the dominant institutions...than to alter them.” (p.33). But she goes even further. Since the work of the ISIs often contradict their supposed intentions – namely, to serve the poor – in the long run they will even harm the Islamic movements themselves. Many Islamists, especially in Jordan, voiced concern over the betrayal of Islamic values by the managers of the ISIs.

The evidence Clarks produces to make her point is compelling. She started her field research with a simple question: Do the ISIs really have an Islamic agenda? From the very beginning of her research, though, she was puzzled by the seeming lack of ideological commitment in the ISIs she visited in Cairo. For one, none of her research assistants, three of them Copts, was ever asked about their religious inclinations. Second, when she asked physicians and nurses why they worked in an Islamic hospital many of them

simply replied because they wanted to make a living. Hardly anyone cited religious reasons.

Besides these anecdotal evidences Clark found constant patterns in the work of the ISIs that confirmed her reservations. For example, most of the Islamic clinics and certainly the best ones are not located in poor neighbourhoods where they would be needed most. Instead, the majority of them are found in middle-class areas where also most of their clients come from. Regarding the question of religious indoctrination of the masses – or “religious control” to use Sami Zubaida’s words – Clark also made some interesting observations. One was that poor patients are not especially impressed by Islamic hospitals because they are “Islamic”, but simply because they are there. Or, as Clark puts it succinctly, “the poor reach out for any help they can receive.” (p.39). She cites the example of poor patients who went see all sorts of doctors and even sorcerers to find a cure to their illness. The Islamic hospitals just seemed to be one of many options available to them.

The difference between what Islamists proclaim to want and what they in the end do is even more stark in Jordan. As mentioned above the most prestigious ISI of the Muslim Brothers is the Islamic Hospital in Amman. An institution that offers state of the art treatment for many illnesses which under normal circumstances would cost a lot of money is quite impressive. And indeed the Hospital is proud to have a Fund for the Sick and Poor which covers 20 percent of the expenses. However, the rates of the Islamic Hospital are so high in the first place that many poor families still would have to spend a full years’ income for a simple child delivery. In the end, the Islamic Hospital in Amman turns out to be a commercial enterprise like any other in the secular world. This would

not be a problem were it not for Islamists’ claim to the contrary. The primary brochure of the Islamic Hospital for example is proudly called: “The Islamic Hospital. A Philanthropic Model of Health Promotion in Jordan.” Among the people it is called “Commercial Hospital” or even “Criminal Hospital” because of its high rates. If Jordanian Islamists wanted to prove that they are able to create an alternative society which is based on social justice they certainly failed with this one.

As a secular person, such as the writer of these lines, Islamism is certainly not an appealing ideology. It strives to tear down the barrier between the public and the private in religious matters and it certainly helped create an atmosphere in the Middle East where secular critics feel too intimidated to speak up. However, Islamism has for several reasons (one of them being the failure of the secular state) taken root in many Islamic societies and thus cannot be discarded outright. One way or another one has to deal with it. As an optimist, though, one can only hope that Islamism will engage in civic and civilian means as it meanders along. The main reason for this optimism is that most Islamists are “political animals” or simply human beings who make blunders and who often cannot live up to the high expectations they generate among their potential or actual followers. Once Islamists enter the stage of politics or public social work as in this case, they are bound to make compromises or even mistakes. Janine Clarks’ book shows that Islamism does have a strong appeal among the middle class. However, the fear that Islamists are creating a “social revolution” that transcends class-boundaries seems to be overblown, at least in the three countries under study.

**Samir Khalaf**  
*Civil and Uncivil Violence in  
 Lebanon: A History of the  
 Internationalization of Communal  
 Conflict*

Colombia University Press, New York,  
 2002 (paperback, 2004)

**Reviewed By Sean Monaghan\***

The image of Lebanon in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is hardly an enviable one: violence, mayhem, urban warfare and invasion have seemingly irrevocably linked it to tragedy and sectarianism. As the author of this book notes, “Libanisation” has formally entered the *Larousse* dictionary as part of the social science vocabulary meaning, not surprisingly, “process of fragmentation of a state, as a result of confrontation between diverse communities.” Little wonder then that one can read frequently casual contemporary invocations of the bloody turmoil in Iraq as in the early stages of a process of “Lebanonization” in spite of the fact, as some have pointed out, that Iraq has no history of civil war. Countering such facile comparisons is one of several motivating factors behind Samir Khalaf’s fine book on the history and nature of communal conflict in his native Lebanon. The purpose of his foray into the troubled history of Lebanon is not then to write “another blow by blow account...[they] do not help us in understanding how seemingly ordinary and pacific groups became entrapped in relentless cycles of chronic hostility and how they came to cope with its gruesome realities” (xv). He notes further that “this obdurate obsession with the origins of violence is of little relevance in elucidating the impact of war on collective memory, on

changes in group loyalties, collective psychology, perceptions, and changing attitudes towards the ‘other’” (xvi). Rather, the sociologist’s viewpoint is focused less on the events of the wars in Lebanon, and more on how communities arrive at the breaking point, and what happens to them when they do.

Khalaf bemoans much recent writing on Lebanon’s history and its insistence on seeing in it an “ugly metaphor” for all tragedy or violence that might befall a country, or, as he notes ironically, the travails of a fireman fighting a blaze. Further he rightly condemns those who see violence in Lebanon as an inevitable result of its inherent flaws, both as a country (“improbable,” “doomed”) and as a people (“dysfunctional,” “tribal”) and whose pluralism, wealth and genius as being the result of fortuitous external circumstances, events like the influx of Arab oil money, or the intellectual benefits resulting from the Palestinian diaspora, among others (16, 17).

Khalaf states his purpose in writing this book from the outset: to probe into three seemingly intractable aberrations: “protracted and displaced hostility, reawakened communal solidarities and obsessive dependence on, often subservience to, external patronage or foreign intervention” (i). The first three chapters present a conceptual framework and explore the nature of communal strife. How, asks the author, are communities, initially motivated by legitimate protest, “transformed (or deformed) into sectarianism” (24). Khalaf provides a compelling portrait of how identity and communal solidarity, while perhaps laudable in certain circumstances, create most efficaciously the “other,” and how the dehumanization and depersonalization inherent in such a process leads “[a]ssailants [to] commit their cruelties with abandon and without guilt or shame” (31). The author uses the work of Theodor Hanf to show how

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the process of the sectarianization of conflict is one where social strife passes from being a conflict over “divisible goods” to one that is over “indivisible principles.” The “drift into incivility,” is one where “the more merciless the scope and intensity of vengeful violence, the more remote the likelihood of reconciliation” (45). Moreover, the stronger the ties of fealty, the greater the sense of outrage and the greater the retributive cycle of violence. This last point is at the heart of one of Khalaf’s main tenets: that violence, once instigated, takes on a life of its own and becomes unhinged from its original grievance, only to be maintained by its own inherent logic of threat and undifferentiated legitimacy.

After having established an agenda, Khalaf then dedicates the next chapters to applying his framework to historical examples of communal strife in Lebanon. Relying on a wide variety of scholarship, he surveys historical precedents (peasant uprisings, factional feuds) to investigate the intimate relationship between “foreign intervention, the reawakening of primordial identities, and the escalation into protracted violence” (23). As he notes of the civil strife of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, what may have been initially class or ideological clashes, began to take on more sectarian, and thus more intractable, qualities once outside intervention was provoked or invoked, and the level of violence augmented beyond local capacities. “As long as the conflict remained a ‘class’ rivalry, exacerbated by fiscal pressures, socioeconomic disparities political coercion and the like, it was comparatively bloodless. If and when, however, it was transformed or deflected into confessional or communal hostility, the magnitude and intensity of the violence became much more menacing”(102). This theme of the descent into “uncivil” violence weaves its way throughout the examples the Khalaf uses.

Thus the brief encounter with civil/political violence in 1958 shares some of the characteristics of earlier episodes and forebode a darker period on the horizon: political protestation spirals out of control to confrontation when external factors are wedded to internal dislocation. And with external intervention comes an exasperation of conflict as well as the increase in the means to do so: rifles and hatchets are supplanted by artillery and armies on the march, social grievance by sectarianism. Furthermore, the proxy wars that Lebanon has been a victim of merely mirror how in turn the Lebanese were turned into surrogate victims themselves with communal solidarity disintegrating into fratricide.

Khalaf can rightly be praised for offering an excellent critique of the sociological forces and processes that lead from political contention to political violence, and finally to bloody sectarianism and the suicide of the social contract, or National Covenant in the case of Lebanon – which he strives to remind the reader did succeed in offering the country a measured if flawed social stability for several decades. He does not however address the question of how the 1975-90 (un)civil war might have been otherwise. But this is not his purpose, after all. While popular participation in the political and public spheres, through voluntary associations, and cross-community activism, would greatly retard the advance of the ghettoisation of communities, both psychologically and spatially, it cannot fundamentally change the structural deficiencies of the Lebanese political system. Indeed Khalaf notes that “the forces that motivate and sustain harmony, balance, and prosperity are also the very forces that on occasion pull the society apart and contribute to conflict, tension, and civil disorder” (27).

Nor can it necessarily impede two of the cornerstones of his argument. First, that one of the seeds of

disaccord is the gaping class divide brought about by the huge wealth disparity. The drive to turn Lebanon into a playground for an international jet set hardly augurs well. Second, what can prevent the political and military interventions on Lebanese sovereignty? Little, to judge by recent events. Yet in approaching his subject from a sociologist's point of view, Khalaf skirts deftly the contentions that still, in his view, persist in the country. In doing so, he can probe into the modalities of communal conflict without necessarily providing a platform for these very same contentions. It is to Khalaf's credit that he attempts to furnish a critique in spite of the inherent dangers of wading into the unstill waters of present-day Lebanon. He also constructively uses the country's storied history as an implicit laboratory in sociological investigation that both acknowledges Lebanon's uniqueness and provides some useful insights into the nature of communal conflict. Yet what stands out in his work is its willful optimism and courage, courage to put forth strategies to shake the numbness and indifference which he sees as having enveloped the country in the wake of the 1975-90 implosion, and to bridge the communal divides in the wake of the Ta'if Accords which, he laments, have only institutionalized sectarian separation. Lebanese syncretic tradition and its nationhood are inextricably intertwined; indeed, as Khalaf suggests, syncretic tradition is Lebanon. It is from this diversity, the cause of so much strife in the past, that Khalaf ultimately sees the creation of a new civic and civil society. One final and unfortunate note. The presentation of Khalaf's arguments cannot go without comment: O editor where art thou? Countless are the redundancies, numerous the typographical errors; incorrect dates, lack of consistency in capitalization, paragraphs that are repeated *ad verbatim* in different chapters, even a cursory reading of the text could easily shorten such a list.

Most disturbingly, this paperback edition came out two years after the original hardcover and it should have provided a publishing house with some scholarly acumen ample time to correct these errors. It dismays a reader – and at times defies belief – to see such avoidable shoddiness in some recent publications on Lebanon, shoddiness that mars and detracts from otherwise important contributions such as this one.

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