

## **Disempowering Feminism in the Middle East: how the polarization of Islam and Feminism perpetuates male dominance.**

*I raise up my voice-not so I can shout but so that those without a voice can be heard...we cannot succeed when half of us are held back.*

(Malala Yousafzai, cit. United Nations 2013)

Throughout feminist history, dominant voices and histories have drowned out those of the Other, the local, the silenced and oppressed. The debate on women's rights in the Middle East has been stifled and disempowered by the polarization of feminism, liberty and women's rights on one side, and Muslim values and religion on the other. I don't believe there to be a clear distinction between *East and West*, and I am aware of the intricacies and complexities of every region, state, and even province within states on both sides of the alleged East-West spectrum. However, for purposes of this essay I will refer to the *West* and the *Muslim World* as a vague generalisation that highlights the antagonism between colonisers and colonies of the imperialist world, and between the *free world* and the *Muslim World* of the War on Terror. There has been an extended debate about the best method to fight patriarchy within Muslim societies, ranging from fundamentalist views that believe that this hierarchy is a Western concept not applicable to Islam, through to secularist stand points that hold that Islam is intrinsically patriarchal. This essay draws on postcolonial feminism and its standpoint epistemology to argue that both secular and fundamentalist forces have silenced oppressed women by projecting their conflicts onto women's bodies, sexualities and attire for strategic purposes, thus perpetuating a male dominated hierarchy.

Feminist consciousness in the Arab world developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, simultaneous to a sense of nationalism. The idea of liberation from oppression bound the two concepts together and according to Frances Hasso, Women's Studies professor at Duke University, they thrived as a united mission. Nationalists fighting imperialism saw women as the biological reproducers of a nation, using the woman's body as a metaphor for their land (Hasso 1998:442). However, as *Western* imperialism lost its prominence, it quickly became evident that the "awareness of the role of women in the national struggle did not reflect a... parallel awareness of the necessity of liberating women from the captivity of the social concepts and traditions which hindered her active participation in different aspects of life" (Hasso 1998:450). The very return of women to their 'homes' epitomized peace and victory. The prescribed gender role was utilized to symbolize normality, thus hindering female emancipation. Patriarchy had exploited feminist rhetoric for strategic purposes, then cast it aside and spread the view of feminism as a foreign entity; an 'illegal immigrant and an alien import' (Golley 2004:521). It became viewed as a reaction to *Western* oppression, which would have no *raison d'être*, were it not for the exploitative nature of *Western* Imperialism. This, in effect, disempowers and discredits the voices of the real fight of Muslim feminists, who are opposing more than just *Western* patriarchy.

This is an example of the exploitation of feminist rhetoric to perpetuate a male dominated order in which the *West* is pitted against the *Muslim World*. Women, their sexualities, and their bodies become the focal symbol of the antagonism between *East* and *West*, between *barbaric* and *civilised* - a narrative central to today's foreign policy of states both in the *West* and in the *Muslim world*. The Qur'an is cited to highlight this inherent cultural difference:

*women should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their*

*beauty and ornaments except what [must ordinarily] appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' father, their sons (...)* (Ali 2004:15).

A woman's attire takes on a critical political role, with wars being fought over what she should wear. In the years of colonisation as much as during the War on Terror, Europe's and America's rhetoric of liberation focuses on the unveiling of Muslim women. Simultaneously, during nationalist revolutions, Muslim women were encouraged to 'uphold the honor of their families and the state by the purity of their behaviour and the modesty of their appearance' (Lorber 2002:388). Even slogans of the movements were aimed at women's bodies: 'My sister, your hijab is your martyrdom' (Lorber 2002:388). Western feminist ideas of liberation from the veil has thus been represented as incompatible with Muslim religion.

In a similar way, US foreign policy benefits from the idea that feminism is incompatible with Islam, by creating an image of the *evil Muslim* enemy. The representation of the veiled, oppressed and silenced Muslim woman was instrumentalised to justify military action in Afghanistan after the attacks of 9/11. The sense that while in *Western* societies '[w]e value education; the terrorists do not believe women should be educated or should have health care, or should leave their homes' (Bush, cit. Bhattacharyya 2008:7) has helped feed the division of *us* and *them*. As Moghissi argues, the Middle East once more came to be represented by its women's bodies and attire, 'somehow softening the shame of the West as a violent, clumsy bully' (cited in Ahmadi 2006:34). Thus the veil becomes central to the debate of the War on Terror; the burqua becomes an obsession; and unveiling becomes the symbol of liberation. The construction of the Afghan victim woman as a sister in need of rescuing is evident in political discourse.

It is important to note that the representation of Islam being incompatible with feminism is not only achieved by men: prominent *Western* women take on the struggle for apparently voiceless Muslim women. Figures such as Oprah Winfrey, Cherie Blair and First Lady Laura Bush advocate for women's rights in Afghanistan and expose the Taliban's infringements on these (Hussein 2005). It was Laura Bush who delivered an address 'to kick off a world-wide effort to focus on the brutality against women and children by the al-Qaida terrorist network and the regime it supports in Afghanistan, the Taliban' (Bush 2001). This 'rescue mission', however, has been disempowering for the very women it is aimed at. As part of this mission, one campaign disseminated postcards with swatches of burquas calling to 'Wear a symbol of remembrance for Afghan women'; a slogan that gives the impression that the Afghan woman is already dead (Hussein 2005:98). This phenomena is what Chandra Mohanty refers to as the discursive colonisation of the experiences of the constructed 'Third World Woman' (Mohanty 2003:333). It is a tool - conscious or subconscious - of perpetuating the existing hierarchy not only between the genders, but also among women. The discourse here fails to acknowledge the context, the histories of the women being rescued, an aspect highlighted particularly by Leila Ahmed (1992). The feminist discourse is placed in the hands of women, but only women who will not or cannot break through the power relations that are oppressive to Muslim women. The power hierarchy is maintained.

Furthermore, it is not merely a woman's attire that becomes a political tool in creating the enemy, but also her sexuality. 'Competing beliefs about sexual behaviour become pivotal in this depiction of the fracture lines between communities, nations and cultures,' claims Bhattacharyya (2008:16). In

US foreign policy, sex becomes an image of freedom; sexuality a symbol of the liberty America claims to be defending in the Middle East. In contrast, Muslim representation of a degenerate, morally bankrupt *Western* culture contrasts the good family values of Muslim culture. As Naber (2006) argues, this creates a polarization of the 'Arab virgin' on one end of the spectrum, and the 'American(ized) whore' on the other. 'Sex for them is as easy as drinking water' an interviewee claims about Americans (Naber 2006:87), whilst an Arab girl's virginity becomes key to upholding the Muslim culture. This resonates the feminist idea that a woman is 'stripped of the right to any property but above all she is stripped of ownership of her own body. All functions of the female body are harshly controlled and regulated by patriarchy' (Femen 2014). However, by polarizing the Islamic symbol of the veil against American liberties defined through unveiling, the Muslim woman is, in fact, stifled in her choice of attire. Male control over a woman's sexuality is thus justified and perpetuated through the antagonism of *Western* feminism and Muslim tradition.

Moreover, the feminist rhetoric used is shallow. When the history of the relationship of the US with certain forces and organisations within Pakistan and Afghanistan is considered, the war in the name of women's rights appears hypocritical. Hussein (2005:96) draws attention to the American funding of the Pakistani secret intelligence agency in the 1970's, which allied with the Afghan *Hezb-i-Islami*, headed by a warlord who was known to throw acid at the faces of unveiled students. The extraction of sexuality from the private into the public sphere has created an ambiguity that allowed the US to highlight the gender issue as a reason for intervention in Afghanistan, while dismissing it as a matter of domestic politics in Saudi Arabia, for instance, one of the US' main allies in the region (Hussein 2005:98). In 2005, 15 girls died in a fire because the religious police did not let them out for being indecently dressed for public (Hussein 2005:95). The event was neither as publicised as the women's rights abuses of the Taliban in Afghanistan, nor was it sufficient to justify intervention.

Similarly, Malala Yousafzai's encounter with the Taliban has been highly mediatised. She is a 16 year-old student from Swat, Pakistan, who was attacked by the Taliban on her way home from school on 8th October 2012, an event that made her the symbol of the Pakistani girl-victim. This fame lead not only to the publishing of her autobiography, but also to the winning of the biggest European human rights prize called "Sakharov" - a prize previously won by Nelson Mandela - and even a Nobel Peace Prize nomination. Whilst there is no doubt about her bravery and strength, the explosion of her case in the media has had a distinct role in *Western* propaganda. Her case was particularly useful in advancing American foreign policy goals, as she is a Pakistani girl with *Western* values, such as her love for education and her somewhat more lenient attitude towards her veil: 'I was the only girl with my face not covered' (Yousafzai 2013:6). All of this suggests that the feminist rhetoric and language is tactically exploited by the US government for strategic purposes. As long as feminism and Islam are seen as incompatible, the US - as the beacon of civilisation - has the power to pick and choose which women to liberate, and when to start wars; wars that in effect mean 'the re-masculization of the state apparatus, and of daily life' (Mohanty cited in Bhattacharyya 2008:5).

This attempt to liberate women in the Middle East without consideration for their cultural and historical roots, has, if anything, alienated the very women it has hoped to save. One of the most recent feminist movements is Femen, an activist group originating in the Ukraine, which uses a technique of 'sextremism', and methods such as topless protests. They, too, fight for the liberation of Muslim women, for example through slogans such as 'camel for men, cars for women!' painted across their naked breasts, calling for the right of Saudi Arabian women to drive (Femen 2013).

However, this method is likely to alienate Muslim women, as it does not take into consideration their histories, their culture, and their own bodies and voices. The voices of Femen and other *Western* feminists drown out those of Muslim feminists, thus preventing them from breaking through the existing patriarchy.

It alienates and silences a group that does, in fact have a voice of its own, an agency of its own. Islam and feminism have been shown to be compatible in a number of ways, which Karam (McDonald 2008:352) categorises into three strands: secular, Islamist, and the middle grounds denoted 'Muslim'. Secular thought holds that laws should be gender-equal and that whilst Islam should be respected, it should not be the basis of state laws. Haideh Moghissi (1999) is a particular advocate of this school of thought, as she feels that women bear the brunt of ideological wars. She rejects neo-Orientalist discourse, but abhors the idea of keeping silent about inhumane practices of fundamentalist regimes. She clearly identifies a sexual hierarchy in the Qur'an itself. This strand of Arab feminism is the closest to Western feminism, viewing rights as universal, not relativist.

Islamist feminism holds that Islamic culture can stand against Westernization, that the religion in itself is more egalitarian than Western frameworks, and it often advocates for a return to the values of pre-state Islam. Leila Ahmed (1992) is a particular advocate of this, focusing on comparing Islamic rules to pre-Islamic culture to expose how Islam has been liberating for women. Afshar, for instance, aims to work within the orthodoxy of Islam to change the position of women in society (McDonald 2008:351). Methodology thus includes the emphasis on the important roles played by women in Islamic history, for instance Umm Amarah, one of the first women to pledge to Mohammad, who fought with a sword in the Battle of Uhud, protecting the Prophet, and the Prophet's wives Khadija - a strong business woman and Aisha - a scholar and a political heavyweight. Following this perspective, the woman can benefit from separation through the harem and the veil, so long as this is a woman's choice and not one controlled by men. The veil frees them from the male gaze and allows them to engage in activities without the unwanted sexual attention from men. Such Islamist feminists argue that Western feminists attempt to apply a foreign framework that is incompatible with Muslim culture. These feminists are particularly alienated by attempts of *Western* feminists to liberate them, and find the patriarchy actually enforced by such efforts.

The third strand of Muslim feminism aims to create a discourse based on the inherent gender equality in Islam. Wadud is an advocate of this, believing that there is a plurality of meanings given to Islam and that self-proclaimed caretakers of the religion manipulate interpretations in a way that deprives women of their equality (McDonald 2008:350). She thus challenges the male dominated interpretations of the religion and the norms of Muslim practices (such as men leading Friday prayers), but not the religion in itself. It is feminists like this who are discredited in their mission by *Western* behaviour of pointing fingers, which, according to Moghissi (1999:4), 'assists the region's reactionary religious and political establishments in walling themselves off against internal challenges and popular demands'.

Muslim feminists have also had other, more tangible forms of resisting patriarchal domination. Formal groups, organisations, journals and activist movements are working towards the empowerment of women by encouraging self-reliance, independence, and leadership skills, for instance through literary projects, income-generating projects, preschools, training courses etc. (Hasso 1998:446). Informal methods have also worked towards rupturing their isolation. Cooke

(1994:23), for instance, explores how mothers work together to 'unmask a system'. Grassroots level everyday resistance include clandestine home schools, wearing forbidden nail varnish/makeup, or hiding cameras under burquas to expose Taliban beatings (Hussein 2005:99), or through art and creative production, which liberates women from the constraints of their bodies (Cooke 1994:23).

A recent example of how women mobilized to challenge the clergy's domination of interpretation took place in Saudi Arabia on October 26th, 2013, with a protest against the ban on women driving. Despite clerics' denunciation of women driving as being 'evil' and the apparent medical study, which states that 'driving a car harms a woman's ovaries', at least 60 women got into cars and drove on this day (The Guardian 2013). Three female members of the shura (advisory) council recommended this month that the ban be lifted, urging the council to "recognise the rights of women to drive a car in accordance with the principles of sharia and traffic laws" (The Telegraph 2013). Again, this movement was hardly mediatised compared to previously mentioned events, particularly in American media.

To conclude, thus, it appears that wars fought in the name of women's rights, *Western* ideals of liberation linked to unveiling and sexual openness, and *Western* campaigning for Muslim women have often proved to perpetuate the existing patriarchy. The antagonism between *East* and *West* are represented through women's bodies and sexualities, and perpetuated through the exploitation of feminist rhetoric. Local voices do not carry as far as those of prominent *Western* figures (Hussein 2005:99). A Muslim woman is forced to choose between passively and silently accepting the status quo or 'siding with the *Western* bully', says Moghissi (1999:6). As a result, the Muslim woman is caught in a crossfire between the two forces (Moghissi 1999:6). This essay by no means claims to give a solution, it merely hopes to encourage a more inclusive discourse about the pressing issue of women's rights in the Middle East and a more attentive attitude towards the voices of those affected. As long as we allow women's bodies to be the locus of male wars, and as long as the woman is represented solely through her sexuality, her body and her attire, instead of as a multidimensional persona with a voice and agency of her own, she will not be liberated.

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