The Rise of Arab Neo-feminism: Resistance, Representation and Empowerment among Women in North Africa

In 1923 Kemal Atatürk argued that for a country to progress, the full participation of women was required, since ‘the weakness of our society lies in our indifference to the status of women.’ While the states engaged in the Arab Revolution in North Africa contend that women are politically engaged, there remains a substantial gap between meeting the basic civic needs as a requisite to the appearance of gender equality, and the question of lasting, beneficial social and legal change addressing gender-based violence, sexual harassment, divorce, inheritance, personal status laws and honor killings. Equally, the feminist debate within the Arab world has been fraught with ambiguities concerning its dynamic with Western feminism, the country-specific features of each feminist movement and most crucially, the lens through which it is analysed by academics. In the context of this paper it is held that the Arab feminist movement to date has been home-grown; from the hadith to the political movements of 1930-1950s Egypt, empowerment has run as a current through the female consciousness, while to assume that Western feminist intervention is required to facilitate emancipation would belie a limited appreciation of the region. As Butler notes, as feminism has sought to become integrally related to struggles against racial and colonialist oppression, it has become increasingly important to resist the colonizing epistemological strategy that would subordinate different configurations of domination under the rubric of a transcultural notion of patriarchy.

It is worth observing that during the course of research, when quizzed on feminist icons the respondents replied ‘Camille Paglia,’ ‘Andrea Dworkin’ and ‘Eve Ensler,’ in addition to several Western feminist writers, bloggers and sex-workers. When asked if they could name feminists within the region, from any time period, the pause was followed by a negative.

Central to the feminist debate is the female body: as a site of sexual contestation, ownership, patriarchy and religious significance, it is becoming a defence in itself. To borrow the slogan of the Ukrainian feminist group FEMEN – now with chapters across North Africa – ‘Our mission is protest, our weapons are bare breasts,’ the female body has becomes a social shock tactic. Yet while the actions of Alia Majida Al-Mahdi have been lauded as a bold, unique step for feminism, Al-Mahdi has asserted in interviews that it was not intended as such; rather, as Moroccan journalist Nouhad Fathi recollects, ‘Alia was just a young woman with a beautiful body showing the world how sexy she is. She was surprised by the attention it got.’ Nevertheless, perusing Al-Mahdi’s website denotes that a wider struggle is unfolding as her blog links to a parallel site, Echoing Screams, which profiles young women from the wider MENA region who have renounced the hijab and discuss their experiences. From Echoing Screams one can then link to further pages on Facebook, including It’s a Human Right to Have Sex before Marriage and Her Right Only, which discusses the loss of virginity before marriage.

The emergence in the 1930s of an organized feminist network in Cairo could on first sight epitomise the feminist cause: gathered from the elite of Egyptian society and led by Huda Sha’rawi and the Bint al-Nil (Daughters of the Nile Union), their modus operandi comprised petitions, letter-writing, protests and on occasions, the storming of government buildings. One might perceive that contemporary neo-feminism, characterised by overt sexuality, is far removed. However, a brief foray
into nineteenth century Egyptian society through the accounts of chroniclers such as Abd al-Rahman Al-Jabarti (1745-1825) reveals the implications of diversions from the accepted notions of female appearance:

[W]hen the French army left this country they described [...] horrible deeds which occurred in the harems at the time. Up to several thousands of women were massacred, poisoned, or drowned in the Nile. [...] the daughter of one of the greatest religious notables, Shaykh al-Bakri, was killed after the French departed because she had mingled with them and dressed like a French woman.⁶

For the women of the nineteenth century who commenced petitions to their husbands to treat them ‘in the same [French] manner,’⁷ as well as those who donned European dress, the steps were – for the period – as boldly active as those today. Craving respect, if not also equality, they drew on their impression of the European woman, just as one might draw a parallel between the disrobing of Al-Mahdi and the actions of FEMEN: the naked body has the ability to capture attention, stimulate debate and challenge taboos. For the Moroccan feminist and author, Rima al-Khayat, Alia’s actions signalled a new era in Arab feminism: ‘It is the first time that a body is a weapon. Alia is a very important element of today’s society. Her act brought freedom, but not a freedom taken in blood.’⁸ It might be further ventured that the very absence of blood evokes a degree of subtlety, a softness that could be synonymous with the female form.

Likewise, albeit at the alternative end of the disrobing spectrum, the young women de-veiling are, in their own sphere, challenging the anticipated norms in a seemingly passive-aggressive manner. However, the images could be misleading: in the gender battle it is words that render the barbed sentiments visible. On sites such as Echoing Screams, the notion of choice features as prominently as oppression as women share accounts of feeling muted, and their expression diminished. Reem Abdel Razek writes,

When I was ten living in Saudi Arabia I went to the amusement park one day and ran around chasing my younger brother. A man walked up to my father and said something. I was not able to make out what he was saying but my father's facial expression changed drastically. He looked at me with disgust took me home and on the way he said the man told him your daughter is causing "fitna" he told me I must wear a veil or else people will consider me a "bad girl."

After critically reading about the veil I decided it was not for me. I was called a whore, lunatic, bitch, I was tortured, I was humiliated and I was kicked out of a family member’s house.⁹

In addition, contributors to the site are urged to submit ‘before-and-after’ shots: the ‘before’ often depicting a shyly smiling, make-up free hijabi, while the ‘after’ holds a heavily made-up woman, hair smoothed and a colourful t-shirt straining across a chest that is thrust towards the camera. The look is completed with an alternately stern/grinning expression as the subject stares into the camera, daring the viewer to challenge their life choice. For that is what it is: while the word ‘choice’ is not overtly mentioned, the women are enacting it – often to the detriment of family relationships.
Arab Neo-feminism

‘In Egyptian culture ‘feminism’ is a bad word.’

In 2003, Sayigh observed that multiple feminisms have emerged in the region: feminist movements, women’s movements and Islamic feminist movements; and to this we might add Arab neo-feminism. To conceive that it is predicated purely on the act of disrobing would be erroneous, however, for it is more nuanced. Just as revealing the body could be perceived as challenging, so too is confronting the accepted gender norms of dress. Arriving for our interview, I observed the unique style of Nouhad: the tailoring was feminine, but the dress was masculine: trousers, shirt, tie, blazer, flats and aviator glasses, completed by a lustrous application of vibrant pink lipstick. It was beguiling, sensual and in contrast with the skirts/skinny jeans/knee-high boots and abayas traversing the paths outside the Casablanca office. Part sartorial choice, part direct affront, Nouhad explained that after repeated sexual harassment on the streets she decided to ‘dress like a man and be a man. If I go outside after 8 p.m. to get cat-food, I will be followed by a gang of young men threatening me. But if I dress like a man, I can be a man and be treated as one. It’s a way of becoming equal.’

It is worth noting that while Nouhad currently pursues the tract of ‘becoming a man,’ she has equally engaged in the alternative dimension of neo-feminism. As a blogger, she hosted the first ‘sex-blog’ in North Africa, discussing female genital mutilation (FGM), rape and sexual problems, while on her Facebook page she has previously posted images of herself naked. Her experiences provide her with a vantage point from which to identify with Alia, as she observed, ‘which young woman who considers herself beautiful wouldn’t do it?’

When located within the broader womanist debate espoused by Butler, both Alia and Nouhad become united proponents against the sexist notion that ‘a woman only exhibits her womaness in the act of heterosexual coitus in which her subordination becomes her pleasure.’ Their nudity is not for the titillation of viewers: rather, it is to challenge preconceptions. Similarly, by dressing ‘as a man’ Nouhad conforms to the feminist view that:

[G]ender should be overthrown, eliminated, or rendered fatally ambiguous precisely because it is always a sign of subordination for women. The latter accepts the power of the former’s [the sexist] orthodox description, accepts that the former’s description already operates as powerful ideology, but seeks to oppose it.

Thus, neo-feminism redefines the accepted notion of femininity among select members of the new generation of women. For neo-feminists the objective is to change society; while the struggle for women’s rights on a political level continues, for neo-feminists a new law could affect certain, but not all challenges. As al-Khayat reasons, so long as society contests gender equality in all spheres, legal reform will have a limited impact.

Conclusion

Feminism is irreconcilably in conflict with all or nearly all currently entrenched ideologies. It is in conflict with the dominant ideologies in the West to more or less the same extent that it is with the Islamic.

Despite the longevity of the feminist movement in the region, contemporary feminists contend that a lack of unity is rendering the movement disparate and ineffectual. For Iman Bibars, author of
Victims and Heroines: Women, Welfare and the Egyptian State and founder of the Egyptian gender empowerment project, The Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women, feminism is rendered impotent through the selection of subjects discussed in the global media:

Arab feminists tend to focus on the trivial things, such as covering or not covering, which is not the issue. The issue is the Personal Status Law, equal rights, equal opportunities, equal political rights, equal leadership. If you want to cover, cover. It is not the issue: the issue is whether you have a voice and a position or not.\(^\text{19}\)

For Bibars, the choice of FGM and veiling as the global media foci of the Arab women’s struggle is disappointingly simplistic: ‘because it is scandalous and juicy.’\(^\text{20}\) In the process, the opportunity to train the world’s attention on the issues that could, if enacted, provide lasting positive change, is lost. However, how far the onus of directing international media attention towards these issues resides with the Arab feminist movement is debatable: confronted with the subject of *khula* (divorce rights) or unveiling, it is the choice of the media, ultimately.

But the fragmentation of the Arab feminist movement could be approached from an alternative, positive angle. As activists pursue it from a religious, political/ secular or neo-feminist/secular perspective, it can be perceived as a multi-pronged approach as Islamic feminists contend the sources from which the justification for the continued limited status of women is derived; political feminists uphold the objectives for change on a legislative level through campaigns for reform; and neo-feminists work at a grassroots level to challenge the stereotypes and expectations of women that prove conducive to obstacles. The Arab Revolution continues apace and presents not only new challenges for activists—male and female alike—but also new modes of expression and fresh ideologies. Should the feminist movement of the region reconcile its divergent objectives, it could prove conducive to a strengthened, complete women’s movement that addresses all dimensions of women’s rights. Egypt has been the cradle of Arab women’s feminism; to concede that it is no longer is to relinquish faith in the region’s women and the feminist cause. To ensure the movement is sustained beyond the conclusion of the Arab Spring, cohesion must be promoted through the acknowledgement of the virtues of each group’s objectives and an understanding nurtured of their perspectives. Patriarchy is ubiquitous; but disunity could prove the ultimate death knell for the women’s movement.

---


\(^2\) Through the course of this study the following countries will be focused upon: Morocco and Egypt. Of these, Morocco granted the vote to women in 1963 and Egypt in 1956.


\(^4\) Aged between 20 and 30.

\(^5\) Interview conducted by author with Nouhad Fathi, 10 February 2012. Casablanca, Morocco.


Interview conducted by author with Rima al-Khayat, 8 February 2012. Casablanca, Morocco.


10 Interview conducted by author with Iman Bibars, 11 January 2012, Cairo, Egypt.


12 Due to word count constraints within this paper, it has not been possible to explore the endeavours of Islamic feminists and the broader feminist dynamic within the region; nevertheless, it shall be discussed within the presentation.

13 Interview conducted by author with Nouhad Fathi, 10 February 2012. Casablanca, Morocco.

14 Ibid.


16 Ibid.

17 Interview conducted by author with Rima al-Khayat, 8 February 2012. Casablanca, Morocco.


19 Interview conducted by author with Iman Bibars, 11 January 2012, Cairo, Egypt.

20 Ibid.