

Introduction to The Modern Day Arab Feminist

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A couple of weeks ago, I was meeting with a mentor at my university where I was discussing my website that focuses solely on the modern day Arab Feminist. “Let me ask you something, Wafa,” she said, in an inquisitive but confident tone, “do women over there *even know, or see, that they are being oppressed?*” Her question, a fair and curious one, reiterated to me that Arab women, even with the Arab uprisings’ makeover of the Middle East, are still burdened with the most pervasive stereotypes in American popular culture, which, in part, has damaged the Arab feminist movement’s penetration into the Western world.

Arab women are in a ‘double bind’ - first, by the true limitations of being an Arab female, and second, by the misconceptions in American culture about the Middle Eastern and Muslim women that have been forced into a hiding and silencing behind the veil<sup>i</sup>. Because Arab women are subjected to the ‘silencing image of the veil’, or kept busy correcting the misconceptions of Arab womanhood in American popular culture<sup>ii</sup>, the movement’s mission and message is idled within Arab feminist circles and is bounded by the few academic sources that have analyzed traces of the movement in the United States.

Modern day struggles of the movement are illustrated by the politics of invisibility that is “the complicated process by which Arab and Arab American women are doubly silenced by the very categories that claim to give them voice”<sup>iii</sup>. Invisibility, in this case, is not necessarily a total lack of visibility, because the unfortunate reality is that the Arab woman is prolifically known within the constraints of her cultural stereotypes - the veiled woman, the harem slave or, the belly dancer. These stereotypes are the way that the West continues to understand and connect with the Arab woman, and “the image of the oppressed, silenced Arab woman is

frequently used by some as *proof* of the barbarity of Arab culture. ” Invisibility, in this case, is the devaluation of the Arab woman’s realities into mere shorthand of stereotypes and cultural mythologies.<sup>iv</sup> The stereotype of the silenced and oppressed Arab woman has, as a result, created an image to Western society that has ultimately circumscribed her to a perpetual dialogue debunking the magnification of the myth itself.

While kernels of truth can be found in these stereotypes, the modern day Arab American woman struggles with a slightly different challenge than the Western feminist, in that she battles the personal *and* the political. She must grapple with the anti-matriarchal tendencies and limitations imposed within Arab society as a female, (the centuries-old crux of the movement), and with the cultural mythologies, so pervasive in the United States, that she is relegated into a continuous cycle of clarifying discourse.

The Arab feminist movement has therefore stifled into an era where the Arab women must always attempt to debunk its prescribed cultural mythologies. But, how do Arab women defend their community from common stereotypes, while simultaneously continuing a dialogue on gender equality issues within them? The victimization of Arab and Muslim women in American popular culture has caused limitations for Arab feminists to create an inclusive forum to openly question gender issues in Arab and Muslim communities, yet stay loyal to their cultural and religious identity within the movement. This ‘double bind’ of the personal and the political wherein lies the current era of the Arab feminist movement.

Even though the term for Arab feminism did not arise until the 1900’s, feminist action and thought began much earlier. If one was to isolate the manifestation of Arab feminism through the written word, evidence appeared through the publishing of Arab women poets

around the 1860's. Due to widespread illiteracy of women and evidence of modern school systems becoming available to Arab females in 1829 (Egypt), 1835 (Lebanon) and 1898 (Iraq),<sup>v</sup> feminism through action or art was the primary form of communication between themselves and to the outside world. Meanings of feminism are not the same everywhere, and a broadening of the meaning, for inclusion of differing activisms, has become the boilerplate for understanding the wave of third-world feminism.

*When one woman writes to another praising her poetic expression, one might ask, 'How can this be feminist?' It seems to be no more than an exchange of poems between women. However, when we recall the circumstances in which these women lived, when visiting was at best confined to female family members, when most women did not write because the act of writing was considered inflammatory and a moral threat, such a communication takes on special meaning. An analysis of Arab women's discourse allows us to see feminism where we had not previously thought to look".<sup>vi</sup>*

As far back as ancient Egypt, we find feminisms through unwritten forms of communication by Arab women who embroidered silk threads onto cloth to show the stories of their lives. Fabric art, such as embroidery on the *thoub*, or traditional Arab full-length dress, tells the stories of family, tribe, war and history in pictures, design and color.<sup>vii</sup> Embroidery was one way that illiterate women communicated with each other and passed stories of their circumstances from one generation to another. Awareness, activism and rejection of circumstance were demonstrated by the pictorial message on her clothes- like a protesters sign. The stories portrayed through embroidery and folk art was *and is* a form of autobiography and personal memoir for many generations of Arab women, breaching the walls of silencing through affixing their identities and signatures, and therefore "eradicating namelessness."<sup>viii</sup>

The Arab feminist's unique obstacles are in her fight for distinction and place in society – through dictator rule and revolution overseas, and through the cultural mythologies and stereotypes that damage her work in the United States. These discussions must remain in public feminist discourse – to “destroy patriarchally produced female archetypes and replace them with [Arab women's] own prototypes: women who have their own aspirations, desires and needs”<sup>ix</sup>. Forms of activism are swelling within Arab female circles and gradually staking its claim in society– through the demonstrations in Tahrir Square and Homs, embroidery embellishing Arab women's dress, and through the collaborative writings found over the past two centuries. Arab women have brought to the table the prospect that there can be moral congruency between gender interests, religious obligations and expanding ones personal freedoms and political participation – that there is such thing as being an Arab feminist.

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<sup>i</sup> Amira Jarmakani, *Mobilizing the Politics of Invisibility in Arab American Feminist Discourse*, *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 5, (Spring 2005):130-139.

<sup>ii</sup> Amira Jarmakani, *Mobilizing the Politics of Invisibility in Arab American Feminist Discourse*, *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 5, (Spring 2005):130-139.

<sup>iii</sup> Amira Jarmakani, *Mobilizing the Politics of Invisibility in Arab American Feminist Discourse*, *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 5, (Spring 2005):130-139.

<sup>iv</sup> Susan Muaddi Darraj, *Personal and Political: The Dynamics of Arab American Feminism*, *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 5, (Spring 2005): 159-168.

<sup>v</sup> Fawwaz Traboulsi, *An Intelligent Man's Guide to Modern Arab Feminism*, *Al Raida Magazine*, Volume XX, No. 100, (Winter 2003): 15-19.

<sup>vi</sup> Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, *Opening the Gates A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (London: Virago Press, 1990).

<sup>vii</sup> Feryal Abbasi-Ghnam, interview, June 2012.

<sup>viii</sup> Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, *Opening the Gates A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (London: Virago Press, 1990).

<sup>ix</sup> Amira Jarmakani, *Imagining Arab Womanhood: The Cultural Mythology of Veils, Harems and Belly Dancers in the U.S.* (New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).