

# Feminism in the Middle East: The Influence of Religion and Nationalism on Women's Narrative

Asma Jahamah<sup>1</sup>, Aseel Alshbeekat<sup>2</sup>, & Bara' Yousef Alrabee<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of English Language and Literature, Isra University, Amman, Jordan (the first and primary author)

<sup>2</sup> Department of Translation, Faculty of Arts, Isra University, Amman, Jordan

<sup>3</sup> Independent Researcher

Correspondence: Asma Jahamah, Department of English Language and Literature, Isra University, Amman, Jordan.

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## Abstract

The issue of women's rights in the Middle East remains a topic of high controversy between a western and Middle Eastern rhetoric. The influence of the colonial discourse during the 19<sup>th</sup> century created a space that reimagined Arab women as inferior sexual figures that need saving. Whereas, in a postcolonial era, women became symbols of resistance to the western culture and the colonial rhetoric, in which their Islamic identity is highlighted. Hence, the reformation of women's status was restricted and overpowered by the authoritative national political discourse and patriarchal religious culture. These factors have created various challenges to Arab feminists in their struggle to reclaim their voice and advocate their rights within patriarchal structures. Within this context, the aim of this research is to examine the impact of the socio-political rhetoric and Islamic culture on the development of women's narrative along with its intersection with feminist movements. To achieve this end, the development of Arab women's literature (19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century) will be scrutinised. Using feminist studies as an analytical lens and exploring Michel Foucault's theory re-power and knowledge, the main question this research tackles is how the concept of women's religious identity and its interference with the patriarchal national discourse have impacted women's writings. The contention of this research is that the impact of feminist movements in the Arab World – whether secular or Islamic– on women's narrative is reciprocal. The challenges and awareness gained by feminists are reflected in both women's writing and feminists' discourse, in which nationalism and religion are essential factors in impacting these narratives.

**Keywords:** feminism, Middle East, Arab women literature, power and knowledge

## 1. Introduction

The issue of women in Islam is one of the most controversial and discussed subjects within the Middle East, the Muslim world, and elsewhere. Narratives that debate the rights of women and their status in Islam are often represented through the frame of religion, in which it gives a significant credibility to the opinions embodied within these narratives. Consequently, the feminist waves that challenged the patriarchal schemes within the Arab World often evoke the topic of religion and refer to specific interpretations of the Islamic sacred texts to destabilize patriarchal notions within the Arab societies. The aim of this research is to examine the intersected relationship between religion and feminists' ideologies in the Arab world, and to scrutinize the impact of this relationship on women's literature. Using feminist studies as an analytical lens, the main question this research tackles is how the concept of women's religious identity and its interference with the patriarchal national discourse have impacted women's writings? To achieve this end, the feminist movements in the Arab world will be examined, focusing primarily on Egypt for its powerful impact and leading role within the Arab World. Further, and most importantly, because Egypt, as many scholars argue, is 'the first region in the Arab World to experiment with social change for women' (Leila Ahmed, 1992, p. 130). Michel Foucault's theoretical paradigm about the intersected relationship between power and knowledge will be visited in an attempt to scrutinize the significant impact of patriarchal religious discourse on Muslim women (2000).

The Islamic religion played a vital role in shaping the Middle East in terms of national and religious identity, men and women's relationships, and family laws – to name a few. At the same time, it can be argued that Arab societies are, in large, patriarchal ones (Kandyoti, 1988 and Caldwell, 1978), in which women face various challenges and obstacles to obtain their rights within both, the private and the public domains. Significantly, the patriarchal scheme is integrated within the religious culture of Arab societies, and is generally supported by male dominated interpretation of the two main sources of Islam, Quran; the Muslim's holy book, and the traditions of Prophet Mohammad. This reinforces the authority of the patriarchal discourse within the Middle East and impacts women's narrative (both implicitly and directly), as will be discussed in this paper. Foucault, in his theocratical work, examines the concept of truth in relation to power and knowledge: 'Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true' (Foucault, in Rabinow, 2000, p.131). Accordingly, truth is formed through authority; and at the same

time, it generates power and authority. The issue of women's rights in the Middle East is closely associated with power and knowledge, which ultimately impact women's literary production.

## 2. Imitative Literature

Looking back at the Middle East during the nineteenth century, European imperialism influenced in various degrees middle eastern countries, in which major changes and challenges occurred within the socio-political, economic, and cultural spheres. This had a negative impact on establishing constructive discussions around the rights granted to women, and also the formulation of women literature during these times. For these reasons, Sabry Hafez explains in his article *Women's Narrative in Modern Arabic Literature: A Typology* (1995) that the narrative of women was hard to emerge.

Hafez, in his work, attempts to apply Elaine Showalter's phases of the development of female literature in the English novel to that of Arab women's writing. In her study, *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Showalter divides the literary development of women's literature into three phases. The first phase is the 'Feminine' phase, in which women's literature is mostly an imitation of dominant tradition. The second phase, the 'Feminist', consists of a protest literature against those prevailing modes. The 'Female' phase is the final phase, in which women's literature evolves towards self-discovery and illumination. While Hafez aims to associate those phases to Arab women's narrative, he acknowledges that the divisions cannot be applied as coherently as they are in the West, because women's writing has developed at different stages within various Arab countries.

Hafez describes the 'Feminine' phase in the Middle East in the late nineteenth century as 'Literature of Imitation' (1995, p. 160). Women's narrative was voiceless because it has perfectly fitted in the patriarchal discourse of their societies. Hafez explains that this period of time holds 'a condition of minimum awareness of gender difference and an inarticulate demand for the bare essentials of feminine rights' (1995, p. 160). Women had limited access to education as they were more confined to their primarily role as housewives and mothers. Their rights were not a topic of a central importance because of the religious culture that governs these dialogues in which it is male dominated by religious clerks and preachers. Women were encouraged to remain within the household and obey the rules of religious culture and traditions. This had a direct effect on the opportunities given to women in terms of taking an active role within the intellectual and political discourse, which impacted the topics tackled in their writings.

## 3. Protest literature

Towards the beginning of the twentieth century, women became more active in regards to participating in public life and workforce because of social and economic factors. As writers, they had better chances to get published in newspapers and journals – in which more names of women writers got recognized. The encounter with the western culture created a space that allowed intellectuals to speak about reform in respect to women's status in the Arab world. Controversial issues about the inferior treatment of women in some areas within the religious culture were being raised and questioned. Leading figures in Egypt that belong to the upper and middle classes played a significant role in pushing the discussion of women's rights to the forefront. However, the impact of the colonial discourse regarding women's rights was problematic in relation to religious identity and traditions of Arab societies. For example, women were presented in colonial rhetoric as victims who require saving or as sensual concubine to men. They often appear as voiceless characters, covered in black attire from head to toes, or as exotic figures. Notably, as Guatri Spivake argues in her reputable essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (2010), the colonial project used this as one of the justifications for their military ambition and intervention during colonization.

Significantly, and because of the impact of western culture upon the Middle East, wearing western fashion became a sign of modernization and liberty to some Arab women. The most notable feminists during this period of time are Qasim Amin, who was one of the first Arab men to call for the liberation of women, and Huda Sharawi, who was the first Arab-Muslim woman to take off her veil in a public conference in 1923 as a symbol of women's liberation. Both Amin and Sharawi advocated the rights of women to participate in the political arena in regards to resisting colonization and becoming active members within the political discourse. In this context, the narrative of feminists at the beginning of the twentieth century was merely a national one because of its consistency with men's patriotic narrative (Hafez, 1995). However, Amin and Sharawi were not against everything western (Ahmed, 1992, p.178). Their feminist ideologies fit within the discourse of the colonizer as they called for the abolition of the veil – the headscarf that a large number of Muslim women wear – and they considered it as a sign of women's oppression. In this respect, the nexus between power and knowledge according to Foucault cannot be examined in isolation from one another (2000). On one hand, the powerful impact of the colonial culture and western feminism have changed the meaning behind the practise of veiling and the narrative associated with it. On the other hand, the Islamic veil became a constant and an essential representation of various authoritarian ideologies in which they either support or fight against the practice.

In the meantime, critical tension emerged within the first feminists' discourse in the Middle East. One was the dominant and the stronger voice in the region which can be called secular feminism that was led by Sharawi and her Egyptian Feminist Union. The second voice was the 'marginalized' and the weaker one which can be called Islamic feminism that was led by Malak Nassef (Ahmed, 1992, p.174, 175). Islamic feminism was opposed to the unveiling practice and to the secularisation of Arab societies. Women's true identity, to Islamic feminists, should be associated with religion and embracing the *hijab*. Despite their different views, both of these feminist groups, supported the right of women to seek education and 'pushed fundamental reforms in the laws governing marriage' (Ahmed, 1992, p.184). For early feminists, creating a substantial transformation in the society and the law to provide women with the space to grow and be independent was their primarily concern.

Arab women's narrative, between 1930 and 1970, was merely a protest literature in which reforming the status of women and opposing patriarchy were central themes. This is the 'Feminist' phase as Hafez describes it. This period of time was marked by the end of the colonial era and the struggle of Arab countries to deal with various impediments. The issue of women's rights became under the spotlight because of its significance and popularity within the colonial and postcolonial narratives. This has influenced the feminist movement in the Arab world in a positive manner. In Egypt for example, women were granted the right to vote and to run for political office. They had a better access to education and thus a good chance for employment. In the domain of literature, Nawal Sadawi was one of the most renowned feminist writers who were recognized nationally and internationally. Her controversial and rebellious literary works still trigger off many debates and questions about the status of women in the Arab culture. Sadawi's literature belongs to the protest narrative in which it often includes problematic generalization towards men and religion. Hafez persuasively argues that the problem with such a rhetoric is that this group of feminists wish to 'invert the patriarchal order without a clear understanding of the dangers involved' (1995, p. 166). The aim of these feminists, such as Sadawi, is equality and justice for women, but their approach is neither highly effective nor widely accepted in societies that are perceived as patriarchal and traditional.

The discussion around women's rights towards the mid of twentieth century remained a controversial space between secular and Islamic feminism. Within this field, 'two women who focused their energies on women's issues emerged as compelling figures (Ahmed, 1992, p.196): the secular feminist Doria Shafik, and the Islamic feminist Zeinab Al-Ghazali, who believed that Islam granted women their full rights but men censored them. The difference between those two figures and the ones before them, such as Sharawi and Nassef, is that the Islamic voice in general appeared to be stronger and more dominant. The influence of Islamic groups became more prevailing especially after the defeat of Egypt against Israel in 1967. People found solace in the Islamic movements' discourse, and they believed that the Arab nation must restore its true Islamic identity to reclaim back the dignity and power of the nation. Within this context, Islamic feminism gained a major momentum in a postcolonial rhetoric.

Women were a central part of the Islamic national discourse as it has affected the new generation. The practice of veiling started to spread among middle- and upper-class women, and for the first time in universities, young intellectual women could be seen wearing the Islamic dress as a declaration of their Islamic affiliation. However, Deniz Kandiyoti argues that women whether secularist or Islamic are hostages to men's national projects: 'women bear the burden of being 'mothers of the nation', as well as being those who produce the boundaries of ethnic/national groups, who transmit the cultural and who are the privileged signifiers of national difference' (1991, p.p.376, 377). She suggests that women are only brought to the front when men need them in the national struggle to return them to their homes when they are deemed no longer necessary. In other words, women can take part in the national struggle but must remain restrained within the patriarchal structure. This has restricted feminist ideologies because men sought to fit the feminist rhetoric within their national discourse. Nonetheless, as Mai Yamani argues that 'women gain in the long term an awareness and political consciousness which will not be easily lost' (1996, p.26). This political experience and socio-political awareness are powerful tools that helped women to move forward from the second into the third phase of feminism, which signalled a substantial progress in feminist ideas.

#### 4. Literature of Self-Discovery

Towards the end of the twentieth century, women were able to engage in self-discovery and to produce a 'mature narrative voice that is truly their own' (Hafez, 1995, p.170). This is the Female phase that is marked by 'the sophisticated discourse of self-realization' (1995, p.170). Women as activists and participants in political conflict and intellectual debates guaranteed that their voice is heard – they are speaking out 'against those who are trying to exalt them as symbols but to exclude them as persons' (Cooke, 2001, p.xxv). In this respect, they are no longer captives nor instruments to national projects in a postcolonial era. The feminists of this phase were able to resist the patriarchal impact on their narratives, while being aware of the importance of male's inclusion. They are careful not to alienate the other gender from their discussions because of the significance of addressing both genders in the context of achieving equality and justice (Hafez, 1995). Gender binary thinking within the feminist struggle will often delay the feminist progression towards achieving their goals. For this reason, and despite the challenges, feminists in the Arab world endeavour to work with their male counterparts, especially within the fields of politics and law, to attain equality.

With regards to Postcolonial violence and military conflicts, such as the gulf war (1990), the invasion of Iraq (2003), and the Palestine-Israeli conflict, war narratives formed a big part of the 'Female' phase (Cooke, 2001). Women took an active role in these conflicts as political activists, journalists, and writers. Those times of difficulties and struggle helped shape women's narrative and had a great impact on the construction of Arab women's identity, especially those who are caught in the cross-fire. Yamani explains that these times of conflict and chaos have created 'a certain degree of opportunity for women enabling them to take initiative' (1996, p. 25). For instance, during the Israeli attack on Lebanon in 2006, female journalists stepped into conflict zones, keeping pace with – and sometimes preceding – their male colleagues reporting the atrocities of the attack. Many women organized and participated in demonstrations and took part in public conferences making sure that their voices are being heard.

The late twentieth century and early twenty-first century have witnessed the start of an unprecedented development within Islamic feminism. There were several attempts to examine the patriarchal interpretations of the Islamic sacred texts, in which resulted with novel interpretations that seemed unbiased and fair to both genders. Such a powerful engagement with the sacred texts has affected the knowledge that surrounds women's subordinate role in the society and her *incapacity* to be a counterpart to men. In other words, "truth" about women's role within the Arab culture is no longer perceived as a solid "truth" – it is tested and could be disputed by feminists and activists. To give an example about Foucault's *knowledge/power* paradigm is the issue of domestic violence against women in a traditional

Islamic culture. If one searched the internet about the controversial topic re- Islam and its permission of the beating of wives by their husband, one will find a plethora of “Islamic” websites confirming that the Quran allows this practice in special cases and without causing physical harm. This problematic ideology – that is often exploited – is supported by male-dominated interpretation of the verse 4:34. Therefore, in this case, power and knowledge are intertwined and cannot be analyzed separately. At the same time, new interpretations or a re-interpretation of the same Quranic verse argue that beating women is against the undying values of Islam (such as mercy and justice) and it also contradicts with the teaching and the life of prophet Mohammad, which makes the traditional interpretation of verse 3:34 an invalid one.<sup>1</sup>

Fatima -Mernissi, a renowned Islamic feminist, argues that ‘if women’s rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite. The elite faction is trying to convince us that their egotistic, highly subjective, and mediocre view of culture and society has sacred basis’ (1991, p. ix). Associating religion with the practise of restricting women’s rights is highly critical because it often overpowers feminist ideologies especially in popular culture. On one hand, supporters of women’s rights have to raise awareness to tackle fallacies that associate religious texts with discriminatory treatment of women within the Arab society; on the other hand, feminists need to address sexist laws that give men privilege and authority over women.

## 5. Conclusion

Foucault traces power as it spreads through discourses and reveals how different discourses that come out of one’s knowledge generate power (2000). Patriarchal men use the Islamic discourse that was the result of their knowledge and interpretation of the Islamic sacred texts to dominate women. For a long time, those patriarchal interpretations of the authoritative sacred texts have been perceived as truths. They are taught at schools and mosques, and presented through TV programs and popular narratives as facts without much scrutiny. Within this context, and since the late twentieth century, Islamic feminists are applying the same systematic approach –as Yamani puts it: ‘they are using the legitimate language of the nation’ (1996, p.16); they seek to empower women through their new knowledge and interpretation of Quran and Hadith to achieve justice and equality. Their conviction is associated with the ideology that patriarchy, not Islam, is the source of oppression, thus they are able to support the feminist movement through their religious belief. Because the Islamic faith is a significant component of the Arab-Muslim identity, the Islamic feminist discourse is gaining more acceptance. Nonetheless, they still have a long way to go in reforming the status of women especially in the family law and civil rights. It is of importance to highlight that the Islamic feminist discourse has solved the dilemma of Arab feminists of the accusation that they are ‘westernised and imitative’ (Cooke, 2001, p.60), since “feminism”, as a term, is not highly popular in the Arab World because of its association with the West or the former colonizer. In this vein, being an Islamic feminist is a movement that opposes western ideas of secularization and endorses women’s rights within an Islamic context. The challenges faced by feminists as political activists, writers, intellectuals, teachers and mothers are immense but the nobility and fundamentality of their cause is the fuel for a greater reform in women’s rights and status.

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion about this issue, see Ghafournia, N. (2017). Towards a New Interpretation of Quran 4:34, *Hawwa*, 15(3), 279-292. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/15692086-12341309>

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