



# ARAB FEMINIST POLITICAL THOUGHT

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# Arab Feminism

- Arab feminist political thought accounts for specific historical, national, local and personal circumstances that discriminate against women and call for resistance and strategic alliances
- Arab feminism is transnational
  - *The adjective Arab is inherently transnational: the label Arab implies a multiple identity that crosses national boundaries from Morocco in the far west to Iraq in the east from Syria in the north to Sudan in the south.*
- Arab feminism may be religious or secular or both at the same time
- Arab feminism is not western feminism

# Islamic Feminism

- Contest and resist attempts to deprive women of their Islamic rights from a faith committed perspective -- cite Q2:256 “there is no coercion in religion”
- Question and complicate notions of gender segregation

# Gender Segregation

- Only twice connected to women
  - *Prophet Muhammad's wives: privileged space of segregation for the most highly honored women, the wives of the Messenger of God.*
  - *"space of seclusion the Virgin Mary seeks when she learns of her virginal pregnancy" (Amer 2014)*
- May be oppressive as in Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan but also in mosques

*Mohja Kahf*

*In my little mosque  
there is no room for me  
to pray. I am  
turned away faithfully  
five  
times a day  
My little mosque:  
so meager  
in resources, yet  
so eager  
to turn away  
a woman*

# Orientalist Depictions of Harem as Prison

- Delacroix's "Women of Algiers" 1830s



# Harem vs. Homosociality

- Arab feminists contest notion that women-specific spaces are inherently oppressive, though they can be if not chosen
- If chosen, empowering, e.g., Moroccan Farida Benlyazid's 1989 film "*Door to the Sky*" transforms an oppressive patriarchal space into an Islamic shelter for abused women who find healing and companionship in its serenity

# Benlyazid's 1988 "Door to the Sky"



# *Hijab*

- 20<sup>th</sup> century Arab feminist focus on the *hijab* as patriarchal symbol of women's lack of choice to dress as they please AND to control their bodies
- Not Islamic—5000 years as marker of class
- 7 mentions in Qur'an: never in terms of dress code



# 4 Jihads against Hijab

- 3 Egyptians- 2 women and one man (1889-1923)
- 1 Lebanese teenager (1928)

# Jihad vs. Hijab 1

- Egyptian Aisha Taymuriya 1889 autobiography
  - *“Perhaps I am not qualified to speak in this sphere, and I admit to my limited powers of grasping the subject at hand—for I am secluded by the tent of an enveloping wrap. Yet across its borders, I perceive that programmes of education are treasure chests ... we the assemblage of females kept in seclusion, are more knowledgeable than you in the formation of the young...”*

# Jihad vs. Hijab 2

- Egyptian Qasim Amin *The Liberation of Women* 1899
  - *Hijab and harem deprive women of their rights to education and a choice in marriage*

# Jihad vs. Hijab 3

- 1923, Huda Shaarawi founded the Egyptian Feminist Union and took some members to an international conference in Rome. Upon her return to the Cairo railway station, she removed her *hijab* in front of crowd
- Unveiling spread



# Jihad vs. Hijab 4

- Backlash: 1927 *fatwa* from Damascus clerics condemning unveiling as a heresy
- Nazira Zeineddine Druze 19-year-old attacks the fatwa in 1928 in 400 pages
  - *“Unveiling and Veiling: Lectures and reflections aimed at the liberation of women and the renewal of society in the Muslim World”*
  - *Hijab is a choice—cannot be coerced to don or doff*
  - *Even if Traditions advocate veiling, they have less authority than Qur’an that does not call for women’s faces to be covered*
  - *Word of God must supersede the words of men, especially misogynist men*

# 1980s Writers against *Hijab* and Women's Voice as '*awra*

- Egyptian Miral al-Tahawy *Blue Aubergine* (1998)
- Lebanese Zeina Ghandour *The Honey* (1999)—women's voices not '*awra*

# Women's Rights in Islam

- Fatima Mernissi, 1987 *The Veil and the Male Elite*: Traditions must be contested when misogynistic
- Women must study Islam to know their rights—recalling Nazira Zeineddine



# Hijabi Activism

- 21<sup>st</sup> century movement art, poetry, sports and digital media--young women choosing to veil against wishes of mothers and grandmothers
- *hijab* empowers and demands respect– not false consciousness
- Mona Haydar video “Wrap my Hijab”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOX90\\_kVPeo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOX90_kVPeo)
- Emirati skater Zahara Lari persuaded sports administrators to allow hair to be covered



# Hijabi Punks

- Queerly observant Muslims
- Michael Muhammad Knight's niqabed Imam Rabeya in 2004

*Taqwacores*—men respect her khutbas: “She knew her stuff more than any of us... and gave everything she had, every stupid second of her life, to that Islam”



# muslimwoman

- My neologism to describe how feminists mobilized the reduction of Muslim women to stereotype after 9/11
- Since 21<sup>st</sup> century, Muslimwoman links gender and religion (2007)
  - *Sherman Jackson's Blackamerican connects race and citizenship (2005)*
  - *Womanist theologian Joan Martin's "blackwoman" links race and gender (2000)*
- Recognizing their centrality to their society's self-conception, Muslim women are performing a singular religious and gender identity despite lives as varied as the different cultures they inhabit.
- **Strategic essentialism** of the muslimwoman conforming to Islamic rules while working against them when they harm women

# Secular Feminism

- Criminalize violence against women
- Demand equal rights to citizenship

# Violence against Women

- 1920s Egyptian New School *مدرسة حديثة* short story writers condemn
  - *child brides*
  - *house of obedience*
  - *divorce that leaves women destitute and condemned to sell their bodies*
- FGM

# Nawal El Saadawi 1931-2021

- Egyptian activist, physician and writer
- Leading, but also controversial, fighter for women's rights
- Committed her 90 years to demanding gender justice



# El Saadawi's International Campaigns to Eliminate Violence against Women

- *Women and Sex* 1972—condemned FGM
  - *Had to deal with the damage done to girls while she was working as a rural physician.*
- *1977 Hidden Face of Eve* wrote about her own experience of FGM age 6—breaking taboo
  - *Anticipated 1990s international campaigns*
- *Woman at Point Zero* 1979—denounces a legal system that punishes women who kill the men who abuse them and lets men get away with murder

# Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA)

- El Saadawi founded AWSA 1982
- Women must unveil body AND mind
- Connect intersectional discriminations
- 1997 Conference: platform for Arab feminist political thought
  - *“build up solidarity between women **and men** in the Arab region and reinforce the links between the cause of women and the struggles waged by the Arab people for democracy, justice, human rights and peace. Transform the movement for women's rights into a national issue involving all sections and classes of the population.”*

# Anti-Colonial Struggles

- From Syria and Palestine in the 1940s to North Africa in the 1950s and early 1960s galvanized women's participation.
- To be seen as contributing to the fight for their nation should have promised women full citizenship rights.



# Algeria 1954-62

- Frantz Fanon extolled Algerian women's ways of fighting that he called "strategie femme."
- However, women fighters disappeared after FLN victory
- "Algerian Lesson"—write about women's contribution at the time and demand reward
- Do not wait to be recognized—demand acknowledgment and recognition men awarded for participation

# Palestinian Intifada 1967-87

- After the naksa of 1967 women's ways of fighting: stones and burning tires
- International media: armed Israelis vs unarmed Palestinian women--Israelis disempowered
- Women succeeded until men took over in 1987



# Lebanese Civil War 1975-91

- Women stayed while men left—mothers of the nation in pain
- Women writers transformed passive staying into active combat
- Demanded combat's reward: full recognition of their Lebanese citizenship

# Arab Spring 2010- Yemen

- Yemeni Tawakkol Karman in Sanaa: “Ali Abdullah Saleh’s days are numbered. Sisters, now is the time for women to stand up and become active without asking for permission. Women are no longer victims—they have become leaders. We want to retrieve our nation. We want to become citizens in a new world.”
- Nobel Peace Laureate 2011



# Egyptian Revolution 2011

- Asma Mahfouz (26) Facebook: if men did not participate, they were not men.
- Women central to Tahrir revolution that ousted Mubarak; El Saadawi elated
- Egyptian constitution of 2012 did not contain a single article discussing women's rights—recalls Algerian Lesson
- Post-revolutionary harassment led to organizing groups like Tahrir Bodyguards and Group B: “If the government can't protect us, we can protect ourselves”





# Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution 2011

- Women central and initially rewarded
- 2014 Constitution gave Tunisian women extraordinary rights, including a “parity clause” – all elected bodies should include at least 50 percent women; and a comprehensive law against all forms of gender-based violence
- 2014 transgender groups like Tunisian Mawjudin part of third wave sexual rights movement in MENA



# Intersectionality

- Arab feminists call for strategic but also contingent alliances that balance religious, national, local, class, ethnic, and any other allegiances
- Mutual respect and trust while alert to betrayal of trust
- Invent a revolutionary discourse within the global context that will not be easily coopted
  - *I coined term multiple critique “to describe Islamic feminists’ critical rhetorical strategies”*
  - *Sources:*
    - Abdelkabar Khatibi’s “double critique”: I add gender
    - Deborah King’s “multiple consciousness” adding gender to W.E.B. Du Bois’ “double consciousness”: I change to critique
  - *multiple critique allows engagement with and critique of the various individuals, institutions, and systems that limit and oppress them*

# Conclusion

- In this talk, I separated religious and secular feminist resistance, but their strategies overlap.
- Despite radical differences across 22 countries, Arab feminist political thought—like all feminist thought—is broadly concerned with injustice to women but also to men.
- Arab feminist political thought is made up of many strands that braid together resistance to local, national, religious, sexual discriminations.



# 7 Threads of Arab Feminist Political Thought

1. Understand how **mandatory** veiling and gender segregation jeopardize social wellbeing.
2. Study texts (e.g., scriptures and constitutions) to have the credentials to challenge misogynists' interpretations, citing relevant passages
3. Advertise the price society pays for physical and epistemic violence against women.
4. Establish organizations to coordinate strategies to combat intersectional discriminations and to criminalize so-called crimes of honor
5. Resist state condoned, structural inequalities that harm men and women alike.
6. Embrace and reward women's ways of fighting.
7. Demand respect for women's right to live as they wish including veiling.