

This article was downloaded by: [115.85.25.194]

On: 01 April 2015, At: 00:04

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Contemporary Arab Affairs

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcaa20>

### What do women want? A critical mapping of future directions for Arab Feminisms

Mervat Hatem<sup>a b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Political Science , Howard University , Washington, DC , USA

<sup>b</sup> Middle East Studies Association; and Women and Memory Forum , Cairo , Egypt

Published online: 28 Jan 2013.

To cite this article: Mervat Hatem (2013) What do women want? A critical mapping of future directions for Arab Feminisms, Contemporary Arab Affairs, 6:1, 91-101, DOI: [10.1080/17550912.2012.756631](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17550912.2012.756631)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17550912.2012.756631>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

## What do women want? A critical mapping of future directions for Arab Feminisms

Mervat Hatem\*

*Department of Political Science, Howard University, Washington, DC, USA; Middle East Studies Association; and Women and Memory Forum, Cairo, Egypt*

This paper was the Keynote Address to the conference organized by the Lebanese Women Researchers in October 2009 whose theme was ‘Arab Feminism: A Critical Perspective’. The conference held in Beirut, Lebanon, was attended by many scholars and activists interested in Arab feminism. It offered a critical overview of the literature, discourses and the agendas used to explore and analyse the history of Arab feminism available in Arabic and in English, the two languages with which the author is familiar. A conscious effort was made to be inclusive by making reference to as many of the works and authors available in this field as possible to shed light on the lessons to be learned from the gender struggles in different Arab states. Intellectually, the paper critically examined the founding myths of the modern history of Arab women, especially the role that men played in it, as well as the contributions that modernization and nationalism made to their roles and rights. It also addressed how the state emerged as an important agent in the definition of, response to and the appropriation of the agendas of women following decolonization. Finally, it assessed the rise of political Islam and how it contributed to new discursive and political divisions among middle-class women whose activism was historically identified with the development of Arab feminism.

**Keywords:** patriarchy; modernization; nationalism; state feminism; secularism; Islamism; Islamic Feminism

Sigmund Freud posed the question that is part of the title of my paper, making it popular in the 1930s and beyond. He said this to Marie Bonaparte, one of his disciples: ‘The great question that has never been answered and that I have not yet been able to answer despite my 30 years of research into the feminine soul, is: What does a woman want?’ (Bergner 2009). Some suggest that Freud was referring to the topic of female desire when he posed that question, but others consider it a rhetorical question that reflected the spirit of the time. Like all rhetorical questions, it assumed that it had no answer, reinforcing the mystery with which the discussion of women has been associated. Some feminists have added the important objection that it used the problematic category of ‘woman’ in a sweeping way that simplified the complex needs of women and their differences.<sup>1</sup> No such question is ever asked of men who can be assumed to have innumerable wants and needs, thus making such a question about them nonsensical.

Freud’s question became part of the intellectual and political histories of women’s struggles to realize important political and social goals inside and outside the Arab world. Women’s serious attempts to address the question in public exchanges with men, the state and/or their societies have not yielded the desired effects. The historical record shows that patriarchal societies and their important institutions ignored,

---

\*Email: [mhatem@howard.edu](mailto:mhatem@howard.edu)

devalued or selectively used their responses, distorting their agendas. This leads me to conclude that it is time that we rephrase Freud's question, asking instead: What do women want of feminism and of each other? I am defining feminism here as a set of analytical and critical tools that can be used to enhance women's understanding/consciousness of themselves and their relations with other important national, regional and international groups of men and women. Seen in this light, feminism can improve women's agency and inform the definition of their strategies for change.

The new questions and/or the definition of feminism reflect the gains made by some women in the last century in education, public works and political rights, which have led them to appreciate the complex differences that exist among different classes and nationalities of women and the importance of building bridges and/or forming alliances in national, regional/Arab and international contexts. I hope that future debates will provide intellectual and political steps in these important directions.

I choose as my specific focus here the discussion of some critical tasks that I consider important in the representation of the Arab feminist agendas. It includes the following: first and foremost, there is a need for a critical retrospective assessment of the history of the feminist projects in the region that reflects and privileges the voices of women instead of the dominant views of men, especially 'the grand old men of Arab modernity', who were the privileged representatives of the nation and/or members of modern fraternities. Next, we need to address the broader task of continuing the critique of the Arab modernist projects, which developed in a colonial context and produced new forms of governmentalities that emphasized domesticity and mothering as the critical roles of women, thus putting them in the service of the nation. As part of this project, one needs to cast a critical eye on the nationalist discourses, whose history was tied to the goal of the modernization of Arab societies. Not only have these discourses lost their intellectual critical edge, but also they continue to cling to old, romantic views of modernity, ignoring the many criticisms that have been levelled against this initially European project, and especially against its production of mechanisms of gender, racial and class inequalities in Arab societies. Finally, I shall discuss how some of the failures of Arab nationalist and modernist discourses explained the recent national and regional rise of political Islam and the present polarization between the dominant secular and the Islamist discourses that have divided middle-class women. This polarization has further weakened women, and has ignored the convergence of these apparently opposing discourses in their emphasis on the domestic/family roles consigned to women, postponing their pressing needs for employment and increased political participation.

### **Deconstructing the founding myths of Arab feminism**

There are two founding myths that are very popular in the construction of the modern history of Arab women, and that need deconstruction.

#### ***Men's role in the liberation of Arab women***

The first and most damaging myth is the narrative that men were the earliest advocates of the rights of women. What needs to be challenged in this narrative is not the fact that some men supported the rights of women, which is part of our history, but the partial and patriarchal nature of this historical construction and its valuation of the voices of men at the expense of the voices of women during the early period. A less romantic view of these men and their discussions of women's roles is needed so that women can begin to appreciate their agency and the role they played in history, which is what feminism is about.

The most powerful two-pronged criticism made of the founding myths of the modern history of women in the region has been comprehensively done in the study of Egypt. The narrative moves from the study of Shaykh Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi's *al-murshid al-amin lil-banat wa al-baneen* (The Faithful Guide for the Education of Girls and Boys), commissioned by Khedive Ismail and published in 1873, to Qasim Amin's *tahrir al-mar'at* (The Liberation of the Woman) (1899), to provide founding texts of Egyptian feminism. For al-Tahtawi, women needed education to purge them of 'foolishness, thoughtlessness and frivolity that result from their living with other ignorant women'. Education would help them overcome the fact that they were inactive with nothing to do with their time, explaining 'their tendency to malicious gossip and fabrication'! I do not think I can remember the use of such harsh words to describe the lives of ignorant men, who have been exempt from such assumptions. Al-Tahtawi's views represent a clear devaluation of women's work (raising children and keeping house, which includes cooking, cleaning and taking care of their husbands) (al-Rafi' 1951, 522; also cited in Hatem 1999, 104).

Amin is not much less hostile in his representations of women. He singles out Egyptian middle- and upper-class women as ignorant parasites living off the work of others. While he exempts peasant women from these charges, he still regards them as ignorant and needing to be rescued from poverty by others. To Amin (1984, 27), women were the pets and toys of men, which explained how they lost their brains allowing men to dominate them as masters and guardians. As a result, they possess overdeveloped cunning and acting skills.<sup>2</sup> I am not persuaded by the views presented by some historians that Amin's words were part of the rhetorical strategy of overstatement to exhort men to action regarding the reform of the conditions under which women lived (Badran 1999, 93). Like other Egyptian modernist reformers, including al-Tahtawi, he believed these representations to be true of women, explaining the backwardness of their societies. They were part of a powerful discourse popular at the time that showed very little appreciation of the more clear-sighted local Islamic belief that 'secluded women were responsible for the flourishing status of their households'.

The works of Beth Baron, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt* (1994), and Marilyn Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt* (2001), began an important and systematic sideways critique of this dominant narrative by suggesting that a vibrant women's press existed since 1892 which documented the existence of the independent voices of women, beginning with Hind Noufal's (1892) *al-fatat* (The Young Woman) and followed by many others. I think this particular approach provided a sideways attack on the dominant narrative because it was not a frontal attack on the views of al-Tahtawi and Amin, but sought to argue that the early voices of women should be included in the discussion of this early history. In the case of Egypt, the women's press, which began in 1892 and continued into the twentieth century and was sometimes founded by men, provided a hospitable space for women to express their views of their changing conditions and roles. In Egypt, the women's press represented the pioneering roles of Levantine (Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian women who settled in Egypt, who were Christian, Jewish, Sunnite and Shiite) writers whose perspectives offered diverse voices for women. These women emerged as the most ardent supporters of the new modernist definitions of femininity, which put women's education in the service of modern mothering and domesticity reflecting the history of that discourse in the West and its attempt to gain social and political legitimacy.

A frontal attack on the grand old men of Egyptian modernity, al-Tahtawi and Amin, came in the study of the works of 'A'isha Taymur, whose published works represented an

alternative perspective that integrated the study of gender in that of problems facing Egyptian society. In my work on Taymur, I have tried to show how her fictional work *nata'ij al-ahwal fi al-'aqwal wa al-'af'al* (the Consequences of Changing Speech and Actions), published in 1887, blamed the backwardness of Egyptian society on the corrupting practices of some forms of dynastic government that were in need of reform. In her social commentary, entitled *mir'at al-ta'mul fi al-'umur* (A Reflecting Mirror on Some Matters) which appeared in 1892, she presented her *ijtihad* (religious interpretation) of how the concept of *quwwama* (male leadership in the family) was not absolute, but contingent on men performing their familial obligations, which included supporting women and being role models in the family. This alternative set of representations of the Islamic ideals for the family and the irresponsible practices of some men that led to the ruin of their families offered a voice for women in diagnosing some of the social ills that accompanied colonial materialism. Taymur's views provoked debate among public figures, leading them to recruit the Azharite Shaykh Abdallah al-Fayumi to refute her claims. In contrast, Abdallah al-Nadim, the popular nationalist figure who played an important role in the Urabi revolution, fleeing from the police for eight years through refuge offered by ordinary Egyptians, praised her book, trumping the attack by al-Fayumi. While al-Nadim agreed with Taymur's diagnosis of the problems facing Egyptian families, his solutions were different from hers, and reflected male interests.

Hoda Elsadda's study of the work of Malak Hifni Nassif moved one step further in challenging the founding myths by arguing that the work of this other pioneering woman, who was a contemporary of Amin, established Nassif as the earliest critic of the modernist project (Elsadda 1998). Nassif was clear that the views of modernist men about unveiling and women's education that emphasized the domestic roles of women were not liberating. It represented a new form of dictating to women a male agenda for change. Worse, they attempted to stifle the critical voices of women, like hers, which advocated the gradual abolition of the veil to protect women from the predatory behaviour of men towards unveiled women in the streets. She argued that the public debate at the time ignored the need for the education of men about how to relate to unveiled women in new ways. The modernist men and women at the time, including the literary critic Mayy Ziyada, who was of Palestinian-Lebanese parentage but became a naturalized Egyptian, did not agree with Nassif's critique, and accused her of being more conservative than Amin and Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayyid, who were seen as progressive advocates of the expanded rights of women. This provided another example of how some women inadvertently participated in the devaluation of the dissenting views of women and privileged the views of men as part of a new modernist patriarchy.

The sideways challenge of the dominant male narrative that argues that men were not alone in discussing the change of gender roles of women is presently going on in the study of the history of North African women. In two research papers that were presented in the conference organized in Beirut in 2000 by *tajammu' al-bahithat al-lubnaniyat* (the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers) on Arab women in the 1920s,<sup>3</sup> Dalenda Al-Arqash (2002) provided many examples of Tunisian women coupling their attack on seclusion, represented by the veil, with an interest in education and the support of modern society; and Fatma al-Zahr'a Qashi (2002) traced the same phenomenon as it took place in Algeria, though at a slower pace.

While this is a step forward, the frontal critique that is needed of the work of Taher al-Haddad, whose works are considered the equivalent of those of Amin in the Tunisian context, coupled with a parallel critique of the political agenda of al-Habib Bourguiba, first President of Tunisia after independence, have not developed. They are necessary

and important steps that can yield insights as to how their agendas for women privileged male views and the demands of the state, granted women some new rights, but developed a new form of patriarchy.

In Lebanon, Nazeera Zayn al-Din, a Muslim woman writer who emerged in the 1920s, made a frontal attack on the views of Muslim and Christian religious men opposed to the unveiling of women. It is quite interesting that Zayn al-Din was able to represent the interests of all veiled women irrespective of religion in her *ijtihad* regarding veiling and unveiling. Her rationalist reading of Islam made it clear that veiling was not the only condition of being a Muslim woman and that the veiling prevalent at the time covering women from head to foot was alien to *al-hijab al-shar'i*, the legal/religious veiling required of Muslim women, which allowed that the face and hands need not be covered. It is important to note here that Zayn al-Din was attacked by Muslim and Christian men who equated her call for change as a call for moral disintegration (Yared 2002, 243, n. 2).

Students of Gulf women are contributing new insights to our understanding of their distinct experiences and the role they played in the founding myths of their young modern nation states. Madawi al-Rasheed, the Saudi historian, offered an interesting take on the circumstances that surrounded the creation of the modern nation-state in her country.

In the discussion of the early history of the state, it is often noted that Abdel Aziz Ibn Saud's consolidation of the Arabian Peninsula under his rule in 1926 was the product of his marriages to more than 134 women, thus producing offspring and blood ties that united its many tribes (al-Rasheed 2002). The literature on this period emphasizes how these unions created important political alliances echoing the original polygamous unions of the Prophet Mohammed as he tried to consolidate the strength of the early Islamic community.

Al-Rasheed disputes this benign and straightforward political argument, complicating our understanding of marriage as a venue for sexual politics in the early twentieth century. While political marriages gave women political power and visibility, she shows how these marriages usually followed the defeat of a tribal group, thus formalizing Saudi domination. In these unions, the women chosen to marry Ibn Saud clearly had to bear the burden of the humiliation of the tribe by becoming the wives of the victor. With 134 wives, Ibn Saud married four at a time, divorcing some and sometimes remarrying them. The personal and the social pain these unions caused the women, who served the interests of their tribes and Ibn Saud, emphatically challenged the romantic and idealized representation of political marriage as a form of sexual politics and a venue for political participation.

Jill Crystal presents a somewhat interesting twist on this narrative in her discussion of the role that women played in the creation of the Kuwaiti state (Crystal 1990). She suggests that the history of the 'Utub tribe was associated with that of the Sabah family which gave an important role to Maryam, the daughter of the Sheikh who eventually gave the tribe its name and national credentials. Among the members of the *bani utub* were those who supported Maryam's refusal to marry the powerful Sheikh of the *bani ka'b* tribe at the threshold (*al-'ataba*) of her residence, explaining the name *bani utub*. Branches of the tribe, afraid of the consequences of this daring decision by Maryam and her supporters, split off and migrated to Qatar. That the honour of the al-Sabah family, the *bani utub*, and later on, the Kuwaiti nation-state, were thus associated with the defence of the Islamic right of Maryam to choose her marriage partner, by refusing this political marriage, is a central component of this founding myth (Hatem 2009).

Andrea Rugh traces the same trajectory – that is, using political marriage to cement the cohesion and the alliances among the ruling tribal families – in the history of the

principalities that constitute the present day United Arab Emirates (Rugh 2007). Through marriage, women of the princely families emerged as strong political actors advising husbands and sons on important political matters including succession. Outside of the ruling families, ordinary women played an equally important role in Gulf economies, whose dominant activities up until the 1920s was pearl diving, which took men away from their families for long periods of times, leaving women in charge.

When oil production replaced pearling as a dominant economic activity, the rentier state continued to rely on political marriages. With more state revenue, women of the princely families took on new activities. The advent of women's education, usually attributed to the enlightened role of kings and princes, was actually due to the pressure and influence of some of their women. A good example is that of Queen Effat, wife of King Faisal, who was behind the establishment of the first school for girls in the 1960s. This influence was not public and occurred behind the scenes. Therefore, the invisibility of Gulf women in the political, economic and social histories of their societies has now finally been challenged.

Paradoxically, these national narratives stress the important right of Muslim women to choose freely whom they marry, as was underlined by the Kuwaiti case and the use of marriage to serve state interests in the cases of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Al-Rasheed's historical work should be seen as developing a critique of tribal politics through the questioning of political marriages as a satisfactory channel for women's political participation, and the burdens that it imposed on some women.

### ***Modernity and discipline***

The second founding myth of Arab feminism that needs to be deconstructed is that which credits the West and modernity with expanding women's rights. It overlooks the fact that the modern definition of women's education, motherhood, and domesticity occurred in a colonial context and was part of the goal of controlling the subject populations through their acceptance of the universality of the modernizing project and its definitions of gender roles. This way colonial policy was to 'penetrate that inaccessible space [...] and thus commence [...] to work from the inside out' (Shakry 1998, 128). What sealed the success of this colonial modernist project was the fact that most nationalists, secular or Islamist, men and women, bought into it. This powerful assumption is being seriously challenged in the Egyptian literature through the work of young scholars, such as Omnia Shakry, among others, who have looked at the disciplinary aspects of modernity and its use of gender roles in the service of new forms of governmentalities. This work has demonstrated the fact that women's education was put in the service of men and the family, and that it created a new form of domestic and domesticated femininity.

What I like most about Shakry's work is that she is able to connect the modern definitions of femininity in Great Britain and the United States with those that were developed in the Middle East in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. All relied on scientific European pedagogy to support a key argument about the role that proper mothering plays in the building of the nation. She suggested, however, that while this discourse served the imperial concerns in the metropole, it was primarily preoccupied with nationalist resistance to the colonizers outside of Europe producing different responses in the South Asian and Middle Eastern anti-colonial settings.

The women's press in Egypt in the 1890s was a powerful vehicle for the advocacy of these new forms of the discipline of/control of women. The critical assessment of this

literature is yet to begin, with the dominant reading emphasizing its positive importance in the modernization of society and gender roles. The problematic aspect of this colonizing modernization process, with its emphasis on the control of women's bodies and minds through the new obligations expected of women without giving them an equal position at the discussion table, has not been sufficiently discussed.

### **Arab nationalism and the problematic emergence of state feminism**

The literature on the modernization of Arab societies privileged the role of the state in the equalization of the relations between men and women. It is the institution that can extend new rights to women and take on the reform of the personal status laws where gender inequality for Muslim and Christian men and women remain clear.

Soon after political independence was achieved, some authoritarian Arab states nationalized the gender agendas of upper- and middle-class women, and provided them with more expanded rights to education and public work with political rights as a crowning achievement. In exchange, many Arab feminists supported these states, which resulted in a national takeover of gender agendas to serve their political legitimacy. This was true of Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Algeria, Libya and eventually Jordan. These states presented themselves to their citizens and the world as socially progressive states that embraced gender equality, even though their political authoritarianism could not be doubted.

The attempt by the Gulf States to copy some aspects of this model have been largely unsuccessful because of the exclusion of many groups in these societies, including the male nationals and non-nationals – as, for example, adherents of Shia Islam in Bahrain and the *bedoun* (so-called 'stateless') in Kuwait. While the period from the 1970s to the present has witnessed the expansion of women's rights to education and public work, the extension of political rights to women remained part of the larger problem of absent political participation. Bahrain and then Kuwait have been exceptional in extending political rights to women, but in Kuwait the *bedoun* remain without rights. In Bahrain the fair representation of the majority Shiite population remains a major problem. The rest of the Gulf States, such as Qatar and Oman, are cautiously experimenting with some form of municipal/local representation for men and women.

The examination of the impact that these diverse state policies have had on Arab women in general revealed that their major beneficiaries have been middle- and upper-class women. In exchange, the latter have for the most part remained silent regarding the many unfulfilled basic needs of working-class women, thus undermining the ability of these different groups to form successful social and political alliances with each other. The result of this silent bargain has weakened the power of women to negotiate with the state. In addition, the state neutralized the active segment of middle-class women by recruiting them to play the role of 'femocrats' (feminist bureaucrats), who occupy visible government positions and switch their allegiances from women's cause to the state. The states' control of the gender agendas and the appointment of some women in visible positions allowed them to improve their national and international reputations. These were the key historical features of Arab state feminism.

This paradoxical role of the Arab state, which partially supported women's formal rights of citizenship (for education, public work and political participation narrowly defined as the right to vote and run for public office) in exchange for controlling and dividing them, poses a number of difficult questions for feminist groups working on gender issues in the region. What political strategies should women's groups use to make

demands on the state without giving up their independence? Do women need the state, now that they have gained most of their formal rights: to education, work and political participation? The answer to the last question is that women continue to need the state to reconfirm these rights and spread them to working-class women. State repression in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia against protest movements was very vicious in its targeting of women who joined broad coalitions for the spread of democratization. For example, the Egyptian state has increasingly employed thugs to target women who participated in protest activities against state authoritarianism. Similarly, state and Islamist violence in Algeria targeted women to settle scores against each other. Finally, Islamist groups have copied the state strategy of supporting women political candidates to show their women-friendly character and to put forward more conservative gender agendas.

All of this has shown how the nationalization of the gender agendas of women by dominant political forces and groups has begun to yield diminishing returns. There is therefore a need to think about strategies that can be used by women to make state repression and control more costly to those who use them. One tactic that has recently emerged in a regional context is the reliance on international actors and policies to change authoritarian state policies. Alliances with active women's groups in the international arenas offer a mixed outcome: they embarrass these states, but at the same time they can be used to reproduce the old argument that women and/or feminist groups are not loyal citizens, and that they encourage foreign intervention in the affairs of the nation.

## **Between secularism and Islamism**

### *New divisions among middle-class women*

The rise of political Islam in the Arab world since the 1970s, its popular support and successful re-Islamization of the discourses of many Arab societies have been viewed with hostility and suspicion by the secular and nationalist intelligentsia and feminists alike. They have rightly seen the rise of the Islamist discourse and its advocates as threatening their privileged position and their dominant discourse. For the most part, the Islamist discourses have shown themselves to have conservative social and political gender agendas. The widespread embrace of the Islamic mode of dress by Muslim women has shown the popularity of the Islamist agenda among younger middle-class women. Secular older women have been mostly uncomfortable with the spread of this new mode of dress as a symbolic retreat from earlier approaches to Islamic dress that equated unveiling with the golden age of Arab feminism.

While this reactive attitude is understandable, it does not justify the objectionable language used by some secular feminists to denigrate and devalue Muslim women who have chosen the modest and conservative Islamic mode of dress. These same secular feminists base their attitudes on stereotyping a sizable section of Muslim women based on their dress. As far as I am concerned this attitude is not different from the orientalist representations of Muslim women and shows the extent to which some feminist women have internalized clichéd views of Muslim women. Nawal El Saaddawi and Fatima Mernissi (Mernissi 1991, 95) provide prominent examples of this attitude, and are joined by the Algerian Khalida Massoudi (Burgat 2003, 140), and the Jordanian Member of Parliament Tujan al-Faysal in their attack of the *hijab* and/or the modestly dressed Muslim women as backward and opposed to social progress.

El-Saaddawi stands out among these prominent Arab women as an iconic figure of Egyptian and Arab feminism. She discussed male and female sexuality at a time when

the topic was taboo; consequently, she was fired from her position in the Egyptian Ministry of Health. This did not stop her efforts to engage in public debate, organize women and pursue a feminist agenda. State harassment eventually led to the closing down of her organization, Arab Women's Solidarity, in 1991. In all of these activities, she built an impressive feminist record.

In the 1980s, when the Islamic mode of dress, *al-hijab*, spread among younger women, El-Saadawi coined a popular phrase in articles published in her association's magazine, *Noon*, that summarized her negative attitude towards that development. She described the Islamic mode of dress as the equivalent of '*hijab 'ala al-'aql*' (barrier to reason)! This particular phrase showed the extent to which this feminist had internalized the orientalist view that used Muslim women's dress to summarize their entire existence and the only indicator of their passivity or agency. Most empirical studies of the social attitudes of the women who wear *al-hijab* have indicated that they shared the educational and work aspirations of their secular counterparts. Nor were these women different from secular women in their emphasis of their aspirations to marry and have children. In fact my examination of the secular and Islamist public discourses on gender showed that both stressed the primacy of women's family roles (Hatem 1994). What is ironic about El-Saadawi's denigrating view of the Islamic mode of dress is that it mimicked past and present condescending attitudes of Western feminists towards Muslim women's dress, which Arab feminists criticized. With El-Saadawi, who is Arab and Muslim, making similar negative representations in Arabic of other Muslim women based on dress, Arab feminists seemed to have come full circle.

To be fair to El-Saadawi, many secular intellectuals retain a crude belief that religiosity and rationality are antithetical to each other. This very simplistic and crude representation of the vast realm of religion and spirituality is not useful. What it shows is a fundamental lack of tolerance of the complex needs of women and the different religious, ideological and generational choices that they make. The *hijab* may not be my choice, but one cannot in the name of feminism deny others the freedom of choice that one wishes to enjoy. Doing so shows a tendency among some secular feminist women to monopolize agency for themselves and to deny it to their Islamist counterparts. I think the work of Saba Mahmood (Mahmood 2005) has offered a powerful critique of this attitude and its assumptions that should be helpful to many of us as we ponder what these differences mean to a feminist agenda.

### ***Islamic Feminism***

One of the most important developments that emerged from the rise of Islamism as a dominant social and political force in the Arab world is the recent debate on Islamic Feminism. This new approach to feminism in the region debunked one of the most cherished assumptions of the modernization literature on Arab women and their societies. For the longest time, the modernization discourse convinced many Muslim women that Islam was an obstacle in the struggle for women's liberation. The only way they could achieve equal rights is through secularism, which marginalized Islam as the source of gender inequality in divorce, inheritance, marriage and testimony in court. It is now clear that students of modernization offered a crude reading of the Qur'anic text that overlooked the mediating role of the male interpreters of the religion. As a result, modernization offered Muslim women only one choice: if you are a feminist or a supporter of women's rights, you must operate outside the Islamic religious and moral framework. Islamic Feminism lays

this argument to rest. It makes an important distinction between the religious texts and the male interpretations that have dominated our understanding of its religious tradition. One of the most promising theorists of Islamic Feminism is Omaima Abou Bakr, whose work offers a framework for reinterpreting Islam and its religious traditions from a 'woman-friendly' standpoint (Abou Bakr 2001, 1–2; Abou Bakr 2002). I like her argument that when the early Muslim women complained to the Prophet about how some Qur'anic verses were addressed only to the male believers, leaving women out, the revelations that followed responded to these grievances, leading Abou Bakr (2002, 16) to state : If God were open to the needs and concerns of women, how can one justify interpretations of the divine text that sought to exclude or deny women their rights?'

It should be pointed out here that in addition to Abou Bakr, there are others who work on developing these 'women-friendly' interpretations of the religion. They are working on issues that relate to divorce, inheritance, court testimonies of women and adoption. Farida Banani of Morocco and Zaynab Radwan of Egypt are other women who are attempting to build a Muslim religious tradition in which Muslim women's voices and perspectives are available to counter the dominant male interpretations that have contributed to gender inequality in Arab societies.

Last but not least, it is possible to be simultaneously opposed to the political project of Islamism, which is the creation of a religious/Islamic state, but to support the project of Islamic Feminism. If one supports the efforts by some Muslim women to introduce gender-friendly interpretations of the Islamic religious traditions and Islamic history, I do not see this as a cause of a major division in Arab feminist circles. The danger may come from the attempt by some Islamic feminists to reproduce the old objectionable attitude of some secular feminists who wished to monopolize the right to speak for all women and to silence dissenting feminist voices. If Muslim feminists deny the secular feminists their place at the table in the discussion, then we are doomed to repeat history instead of moving forward.

We have come a long way, but our journey is far from over. There is a lot of work that still needs to be done, but I am more than confident in our collective ability to do it.

### Acknowledgement

*Contemporary Arab Affairs* thanks I. B. Tauris for its permission to publish this paper ahead of its inclusion in a collective volume entitled *Arab Feminisms: Gender and Equality in the Middle East* edited by Jean Said Makdissi, Noha Bayoumi and Rafif Rida Sidawi (forthcoming).

### Notes

1. Conversation with Dr Susan Lazar, 19 September 2009.
2. For extended citations from Amin, see Hatem (1999), 113.
3. The conference papers were published in Arabic as *nisa' al arabiyat fi al 'ishrinat: huduran wa hawiyya* (2002/2010).

### References

- Abou Bakr, Omaima. 2001. "Islamic Feminism: What's In a Name? Preliminary Reflections." *Middle East Women's Studies Review* 155 (15–16): 1–2.
- Abou Bakr, Omaima. 2002. "al-niswayya: qadhaya al-mar'at wa al-ru'iyya al-islamiyya [Feminism: Women's Issues and the Islamic View]." In *al-mar'at wa al-gender fi al-watan al-'arabi* [Women and Gender in the Arab World], edited by Omaima Abou Bakr and Sherine Shukri, 11–77. Damascus: Contemporary Thought House.

- Amin, Qasim. [1899] 1984. *tahrir al-marát wa al-marát al-jadida* [The Liberation of the Woman and the New Women]. Cairo: The Arab Center for Research and Publishing.
- Al-Arqash, Dalenda, 2002. "al-ishrinat fi Tunisia wa milad al-Wayy al-nisa' [The Nineteen–Twenties in Tunisia and the Birth of Feminist Consciousness]." In *nisa' al arabiyat fi al-ishrinat: huduran wa hawiyya* [Arab Women in the Nineteen-Twenties: Presence and Identity], pp. 449–464. Beirut: Tajamu' al-Bahithat.
- Badran, Margot. 1999. "Women and Qasim Amin: The Rise of a Feminist Discourse." In *mi'at 'am 'ala tahrir al-mar'at* [One Hundred Years After the Liberation of the Woman]. Vol. 1, 93. Cairo: al-majlis al-'a'la lil thaqafa.
- Baron, Beth. 1994. *The Women's Awakening in Egypt*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bergner, David. 2009. "What Do Women Want?." *New York Times Magazine*, January, 25: 28.
- Booth, Marilyn. 2001. *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Burgat, François. 2003. *Face to Face with Political Islam*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2003.
- Crystal, Jill. 1990. *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Elsadda, Hoda. 1998. "Notions of Modernity: Representations of the 'Western Woman' by Female Authors in Early Twentieth Century Egypt." In *The Arabs and Britain: Changes and Exchanges* (Proceedings of a Conference). Cairo: British Council.
- Hatem, Mervat. 1994. "Egyptian Discourses on Gender and Political Liberalization: Do Secularist and Islamist Views Really Differ?" *Middle East Journal* 48 (1): 661–671.
- Hatem, Mervat. 1999. "'a'isha taymur wa qasim amin wa ru'a mutamayza lil hadatha." In *mi'at 'am 'ala tahrir al-mar'at* [One Hundred Years After the Liberation of the Woman], Vol. 1, 103–127. Cairo: al-majlis al-'a'la lil thaqafa.
- Hatem, Mervat. 2009. "Women and the Fraternal Nation-State in the Middle East and North Africa." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *The Politics of Piety*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- al-Makdis, Jean Said, al-Shaykh, Nadia, Yarad, Nazik Saba, Bayumi, Nuha and Hamadi, Watfa', eds. *nisa' al arabiyat fi al-ishrinat: huduran wa hawiyya*. [Arab Women in the Nineteen-Twenties: Presence and Identity], pp. 369–386. Beirut: Tajamu' al-Bahithat.
- Mernissi, Fatima. 1991. *The Veil and the Male Elite*. New York, NY: Addison-Wesley.
- Noufal, Hind. 1892. *al-fatat* [The Young Woman]. Cairo.
- Qashi, Fatma al-Zahra'. 2002. "al-mas'alat al-niswiyya fi al-jaza'ir fi al-ishrinat min al-qam al-ishrinatalu' 'ila al-hudur [The Feminist Question in Algeria in the Nineteen-Twenties]." In *nisa' al arabiyat fi al-ishrinat: huduran wa hawiyya* [Arab Women in the Nineteen-Twenties: Presence and Identity], pp. 449–464. Beirut: Tajamu' al-Bahithat.
- al-Rafi'I, Abdel Rahman. 1951. *'asr muhammed 'ali* [The Age of Mohammad'Ali]. Cairo: Egyptian Nahda Library.
- al-Rasheed, Madawi. 2002. *A History of Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rugh, Andrea. 2007. *The Political Culture of Leadership in the United Arab Emirates*. New York, NY: Palgrave.
- Shakry, Omnia. 1998. "Schooled Mothers and Structured Play: Child-Rearing in Turn of the Century Egypt." *Remaking Women*, edited by Lila Abu-Lughod, 126–170. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- al-Tahtawi. Shaykh Rifa'a Rafi'. 1873. *al-murshid al-amin lil-banat wa al-baneen* [The Faithful Guide for the Education of Girls and Boys]. Cairo.
- Taymur, 'A'isha. 1887. *nata'ij al-ahwal fi al-'aqwal wa al-'af'al* [The Consequences of Changing Speech and Actions]. Cairo: Matba't Mohammad Effendi Mustafa.
- Taymur, 'A'isha. 1892. *mir'at al-ta'mul fi al-'umur* [A Reflecting Mirror on Some Matters]. Cairo: al-Mahroussa.
- Yared, Nazik Saba. 2002. "nazirah zayn al-din (1908–1976): bayn al-tahadi wa al-'itlizam [Nasirah Zayn al-Din (1908–1976): Between Challenge and Conformity]." In *nisa' al arabiyat fi al-ishrinat: huduran wa hawiyya* [Arab Women in the Nineteen-Twenties: Presence and Identity], pp. 369–386. Beirut: Tajamu' al-Bahithat.