



Arab Writers and the Rearticulation of the Orientalist-Feminist Images of Muslim Women

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that both Arab reformers and feminists fail to go beyond the feminist/orientalist paradigms that essentialise Muslim women as one homogenous group who suffered from the 'oppression' of patriarchal society. It shows the extent to which Arab feminist literatures confirms the Orientalist paradigms of knowledge that essentialise Muslim women as one homogenous category distinguished by oppression and marginalization.

Key words: representation, feminism, clichés, tropes, emancipation

1. Introduction

This article is concerned with the politics that framed the representation of women in the Arab reformers' and Feminist scholarship. In so doing, it places much focus on the writings of Feminists and reformers such as Quasim Amin and Fatima Mernissi. It pinpoints the gaps in their criticisms which are likely to perpetuate the orientalist clichés about Muslim women. Such representation traps are perhaps resulted from the adherence to the western feminist/ and orientalist methodologies without any negotiation of the ideological and political assumptions that frame them. Thus, this article tries to offer critiques to the Arab feminist and reformers' approaches so as to contribute to the huge academic tendencies that unravel and demystify the orientalist clichés that are likely to persist in the Arab and reformers's models of representation.

2. Arab reformers

The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of larger Muslim elites that seek to reform their societies. These elites concentrated on the "liberation of woman" as its main political concern. For them, liberating woman is vital for both the development of the Islamic world and its emancipation from colonialism. Thus, the liberation of Muslim woman has become the political weapon used by the reformers to challenge the colonial discourse and the traditionalist discourse as well.

However, the discourse of Muslim reformers, in colonial times, was widely criticized by critiques, like Leila Ahmed and Catherine Bullok, for it used the Orientalist argument about Muslim woman without negating the humanist and Eurocentric assumptions embedded in such a discourse. Taking the Egyptian reformer Qassim Amin, as its focus, the following section will be concerned with how Muslim reformers subscribe to the Orientalist representation of Muslim woman.

In his discussion of western humanism, Franz Fanon argues that western colonizers' burden and project to propagate the essential qualities of western culture was transmitted to the Oriental elites by the imperial academies:

The colonialist bourgeoisie, in its narcissistic dialogue expounded by the number of its universities, had in fact deeply implanted in the minds of the colonized intellectual that the essential qualities remain eternal in spite of the all blunders man may make: the essential qualities of the west of course.¹

This shows how the "essential qualities" of the west were implanted in the minds of the colonized elites during the colonized era. So, the colonized elite did not move beyond the Eurocentric and Humanist assumptions that likely inform the Orientalist discourse, which brought the question of woman to the arena of discussion and debate. The liberation of woman as a vehicle for the development of the nation was taken wholesale from the Orientalist rhetoric for representing the Oriental societies as "backward" and in need of the West to enlighten them.

¹ Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (New York: Routledge. 1990), P. 122.

Having taken the Orientalist discourse without any negotiation, Muslim reformers, during the colonial times, reproduced the Orientalist frameworks. That is, they reinstall the binary opposition between the Orient and the Occident, tradition and modernity.² This binary opposition between the civilised west and uncivilized Orient could be highly recognized in Qasim Amin's approach to the Egyptian woman:

Westerners who love truth, behave well, value honour for its own worth, empathise with the sick, are kind to animals, value management and good principles in their work, are serious and diligent, venerate and honour their country, or value perfection in life have not developed such traits because they have read appropriate books ... they have developed them through the active roles of their mothers.³

Clearly, then, Amin attributed the development of the westerners to the active roles western woman played in their society. Amin is implicitly presenting the western woman as a model for Egyptian woman to follow if she wants to be emancipated and civilised. Thus, Amin's discourse echoes the very structures of knowledge constructed by the Orientalists. That is, he has taken Western woman as prototype for civilising his nation. This relates to the humanist argument which presented the "essential qualities" of the West as the model that should be followed by others so that they can be humans⁴. Moreover, the persistence of the Humanist discourse in Qasim Amin's approach to Egyptian woman is manifest in his use of Humanist imperial discourse to convince other nations that survival required them to be westernised. Hence, Amin believed that if the Egyptians are "unable to compete successfully in the struggle for survival they would be eliminated"⁵.

In this regard, Qasim Amin praised the westerners' objectivity and knowledge:

Westerners have achieved a high level of education and have been able to research and explore the social conditions of the eastern and Muslim societies ... The driving force behind their work was their interest in identifying the truth ... we have not achieved this level of education ... So it should come as no surprise that they understood our current condition, with its strengths and weakness, before we did.⁶

Clearly then, Amin, as Muslim reformer, took for granted the Orientalist suppositions that placed the West in high scale of civilisation; that gives the West the advantage and the power to study and restructure other nations⁷. In addition to that, Amin believed that the Orientalist study of the Orient was objective and positive since westerners understand as he said, "our condition with its strengths and weaknesses, before we did"⁸. This reveals his strong conviction of the importance of the Orientalist discourse for approaching the Orient in general and particularly its women. NergisMazid argues that by insisting on the western model as a remedy for "Egypt's inferiority", "Amin seems to rearticulate the binary of Orientalism and imperialism's civilizing mission".⁹

Thus, westernization is discursively reformulated by Muslim reformers as reform and change. For example, Amin called on Egyptians to adopt western "methods of education" and "child rearing"¹⁰. So, the idea that westernization and modernization equal liberation for Muslim woman is likely to be taken for granted by many Muslim reformers. This can be seen in the fact that reformers used the Orientalist approach to discuss issues related to the question of women, such as dress codes the veil and domesticity.

In this sense, Muslim reformers used Orientalist lenses to see the veil. They talked about the veil as a symbol of patriarchal society that oppresses woman. For that reason, Muslim women have to take it off if they want to be modernized and civilized. Cathrin Bullock argues this point as she says: "in the colonial times Muslim elites accepted the western version of the measuring of the veil, and they also saw its disappearance as essential to the modernization of their countries".¹¹ This show how the orientalist trope of the veil as a symbol of backwardness of Islam persisted in the discourse of Muslim reformers. Thus, the veil was seen as "a part of the backwardness from which reformers and nationalists sought to distance their nation."¹² This shows how Muslim reformers in colonial times subscribed to the Orientalist framing of Islam. Joanna De Groot critiqued Muslim reformers:

They accepted the Orientalist terms of reference which positioned veiling as a defining characteristic of East through which people might be known or critiqued, while contesting its use to stigmatize or denigrate Egyptians, turks or Iranians¹³

Hence, the reformer's methodology to discuss the veil is characterised by the same double standard found in the Orientalist discourse. That is, the veil is used to "homogenize" Muslims and to "stigmatize" them at the same time. Having judged the veil from Orientalist perspective, which embodies liberal assumptions, the reformers will then, see the veil as oppressive to Muslim woman. This shows the failure of Muslim elite to negate the essential

²Kathrine Bullok, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Modern and Historical Stereotypes* (Surrey: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2002), P. VII.

³Qasim Amin. Cited in NergisMazid, "Western Mimicry or Cultural Hybridity: DeconstructingQasim Amin's Colonial Voice," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 19:4(n.d.), P.51.

⁴Robert Young, *White Mythologies*, op-cit.

⁵Qasim Amin. Cited in NergisMazid, "Western Mimicry or Cultural Hybridity: DeconstructingQasim Amin's Colonial Voice,"op-cit, p. 47.

⁶Ibid., p. 45.

⁷Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge&Kegan Paul). 1978.

⁸Robert Young, *White Mythologies*, op-cit.

⁹NergisMazid, "Western Mimicry or Cultural Hybridity: DeconstructingQasim Amin's Colonial Voice,"op-cit, p. 51.

¹⁰ Ibid. p., 46.

¹¹Kathrine Bullok, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Modern and Historical Stereotypes*, op-cit, p. xviii.

¹²Joana De Groot, "What Goes Around Comes Around: Veiling, Women's Bodies and Orientalism Past and Present," (N. D)., p. 9, Retrieved (February, 25, 2011) from: <http://www.historians.ie/women/VeilingTextFinal.pdf>

¹³ Ibid.

suppositions that frame the Orientalists ideology. That is to say, they fall in the trap of Orientalising Muslim woman since they judged her from an Orientalist method, without rejecting its assumptions.

It is my contention, then, that without negotiating the ideological assumptions behind the discourse of liberating woman, reformers will be in a simplistic way confirming and canonizing the very stereotypical images constructed about Muslim woman by the Orientalists. So, the reformers should have been cautious of the methodological problems of the Orientalists so that they can project a reform that takes into consideration the ethnic, religious, and epistemological specificities of the Muslim Orient.

In fact, Muslim reformers subscribed to this idea of the veil as oppressive to woman and that it is an obstacle to the development of the country. Thus, veiling becomes “part of the new projects of constructing and imagining nations (Egypt, Turkey Iran Algeria) which preoccupied anti-colonial reforming movements between the later nineteenth and mid twentieth century¹⁴”. Hence, unveiling was presented as “the modern binary opposite to ‘backward’ veiling¹⁵”. This may imply that the reformers fail to move beyond the Orientalist framework in a sense that they implicitly subscribed to the Orientalist argument that Islam cannot be reformed from within and that it is in need of external “institutions of thought” to be reformed¹⁶. In addition to that, the reformers have taken it for granted that Western Orientalist discourse is absolute and universal.

Furthermore, Muslim reformers reproduced Orientalist patterns of knowledge about the Muslim woman. They portrayed Muslim woman as secluded in harems and denied her right to get into the public sphere. According to Lewis, “the institution of the harem was often targeted as the epicentre of the misogyny in the Islamic world, both by western Orientalists and by Muslim reformists¹⁷”. This shows how the reformers subscribe to the Orientalist discourse in a sense that they look at the harem in the same way the Orientalist did. That is, instead of looking at the harem from the cultural specificities of the oriental societies, the reformers were convinced of the Orientalist dogma that the harem is a “symbol of the marginalized Muslim woman.¹⁸”

To conclude, the discourse of Muslim reformers was undermined by many conceptual and methodological problems inherited from the Orientalist discourse. Those methodological problems mostly emanate from the fact that Muslim reformers used the Orientalist argument without negating the humanist, imperialist, and Eurocentric assumptions that frame such a discourse. Thus, the reformers judged the Islamic social mores from Orientalist perspective, with a total dismissing of the cultural specificities of Muslim society. Hence, their discourse in a simplistic way reproduces the very orientalist paradigms of knowledge, challenged, later on, by postcolonial theorists like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Ghayatri Spivak. So, despite the fact that the discourse of Muslim reformers was criticised by many scholars for its complicity with the Orientalist an imperialist discourse, it still persists through the writings of some contemporary Muslim feminists.

4. Muslim Feminists

In his seminal book *Orientalism*, Edward Said argues that by subscribing to the Orientalist methodologies, the Oriental intellectuals are complicit with Orientalism as he said “in short the modern Orient participated in its Orientalising¹⁹”. For him, the Oriental intellectuals played the role of the native informants. Following Said, this section will examine the ways through which Arab feminists fail to go beyond the rhetoric of the western feminist framework. This is because Arab feminists did not negate the very epistemological assumptions established by the Orientalists discourse, reproduced and canonized by western feminists.

In their project to challenge both the “traditionalist” and Orientalist discourses, Muslim feminist faced methodological problems that undermine their work and make them in a simplistic way subscribe to the orientalist discourse. That is, they did not the discursive strategies that frame the western body of knowledge identified by Edward Said as Orientalism. That is to say, though Muslim feminists do not, in any way, want to repeat the Orientalist clichés and stereotypes about Muslim woman, they reproduce the same stereotypes. This emanated from the fact that they did not have a profound vision about the problems of the politics of representation. According to Lila Abu Lghod, providing non-distorted and positive images about Muslim woman do not solve the problems posed by Edward Said.²⁰ For Said, the problem lies in the production of knowledge, As Meyda Yegenoglu puts it, clarifying Said’s point of view:

The power of orientalism comes from its power to construct the very object it speaks about and from its power to produce a regime of truth about the other and thereby establish the identity and the power of the subject that speaks about it.²¹

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Hope Bordeaux, *Un-Veiling Islamophobia in the post-9/11 Era: Orientalism in the Veil Debate in France and the United States*, December 2003 to June 2004,” (2007), pp. 1-59. Retrieved (March 10, 2011) from http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl1!%3Furl_ver=z39.88-2004%26res_dat=xri:pqdiss%26rft_val_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:dissertation%26rft_dat=xri:pqdiss:1442252

¹⁷ Paul Lewis, “Zainab Al-Ghazali: Pioneer of Islamist Feminism,” (N.D), p. 8. Retrieved March 9, 2011) from http://www.umich.edu/~historyj/pages_folder/articles/W07_Lewis.pdf

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, op-cit, p. 325.

²⁰ Lila Abu-Lghod & Meyda Yegenoglu, “Orientalism and Middle East Feminist Studies,” *Feminist Studies*. Inc. 27: 1 (2001), pp. 101-113.

²¹ Lila Abu-Lghod & Meyda Yegenoglu “Orientalism and Middle East Feminist Studies,” op-cit, pp. 101-113.

This means that without subverting the epistemic regime established by Orientalism about Muslim woman, Muslim feminists will fall in the same trap of Orientalizing. That is, they will produce narratives that echoes those constructed by the Orientalists. Hence, Muslim feminists should divorce feminism from its Orientalist, Eurocentric and humanist assumptions.

This methodological problem caused by working within the Orientalist epistemic regime can be found in Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass*. Though Mernissi intends to challenge the Orientalist construction of the harem as a fantasy, by depicting the harem as a space for woman's activities, including leisure and signs of resistance against patriarchy²², she reproduces the very clichés she wants to subvert. That is, she reinstalls the same binaries drawn by Orientalists. Criticizing Mernissi's method, Abu lghod writes that the binaries of:

Tradition and modernity. Harems and Freedom. Veiling and Unveiling. (these are the familiar terms by which the East has long been apprehended (and devalued) and the West has constructed itself as superior. These are some of what Said calls the dogmas of Orientalism²³.

This shows how Fatima Mernissi fails to go beyond the scope of Orientalism. This is because she did not negate the epistemological assumptions that frame the orientalist representation of the harem. That is, she reproduced the hegemonic orientalist binaries that reinforce the western Eurocentric discourse. So, Mernissi could have approached the harem with a perspective that goes beyond the tradition/modernity dichotomy, which is installed by the Orientalists to essentialise Muslim woman as oppressed and secluded in "traditional" patriarchal society. Hence, I argue that it is this methodological problem of reinstalling the binaries that makes Mernissi fall in the trap of orientalising. Such methodological problem of installing binaries could also be found in Nawal el Saadawi's writings, especially her novel, *The Innocence of Devil*. In this novel, El Saadawi was critical to "dichotomized thinking".²⁴ However, she falls in the trap of Orientalising since she used what she calls the God-Satan dichotomy to understand the process of the marginalisation of woman. So, this dichotomy echoed the Orientalists' binaries of: tradition/modernity, East/ West, Civilised and Uncivilised. Moreover, she simply confirmed the Orientalist trope that Islam oppressed women.

Therefore, many critics have argued that non-western feminisms need to formulate a feminism of their own, a feminism that is historically, culturally and geographically grounded²⁵. In his discussion of Eurocentric feminism, Jing Yin argues that non-western feminists should be "cautious of the pitfall of replacing one form of oppression with another."²⁶ Thus, non-western feminists should be aware of the discrepancies they may have if they did not depend on their own cultural epistemologies. That is to say, without refusing the universalistic assumptions of western feminisms that essentialise the western social norms as right path to be followed by non-western woman, if they want to be liberated, non western feminists will be in a simplistic way replacing a form of oppression by another one.²⁷ So, as Yin puts it, non western feminists "would never truly have equal rights in any meaningful way if they have to accept a definition of womanhood that does reflect or resonate with their own experiences".²⁸

In her portrayal of Moroccan harem, Fatima Mernissi echoes the Orientalist sexualised construction of the harem. That is, by invoking the images of the harem, as a symbol for Muslim woman's domesticity and seclusion, and patriarchal families Mernissi confirms the Orientalists' perception and construction of Muslim orient as erotic and sexualised space. This sexualised and fancified image of a secluded oppressed Muslim woman is also manifest in the writings of the Egyptian feminist el Saadawi who presented the veil as "primitive symbol of slavery, evidence of the men' objectification of woman"²⁹. Such perception of the veil as oppressive to woman is profoundly informed by liberal assumptions.

Ironically, there is double standard characterizing the liberal judgment of the veil. This is in the sense it "precludes" any understanding of the veil that can grant the veiled woman the right to choose to be veiled. Muslim feminists subscribed to this western feminist perception of the veil without negotiating the politics that constructed it as a symbol of oppression and backwardness. So, these images of oppressed, victimized and marginalized Muslim women that persist in the writings of Muslim feminists such as el Saadawi and Mernissi work as "signifiers" to confirm western superiority over Muslim Orient, or what Lila Abu Lghod describes as "a native confirmation of already negative and simplistic images"³⁰.

To conclude, by adhering to feminism without negotiating its validity, Muslim feminists confirm and consolidate the western universalistic notion of womanhood. More than that, Muslim feminist literature confirms the orientalist feminist paradigms of knowledge that essentialise Muslim woman as homogenous category distinguished (marked by) oppression and marginalisation.

5. Conclusion

The article shows the extent to which Orientalists' paradigms of Muslim woman persisted in the contemporary feminist discourses. In this regard, the article has focused on Qasim Amin to show the extent to which Arab elites in the colonial times confirmed the Orientalist discourse about Muslim

²² Ibid., 10

²³ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁴ Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (London: Routledge, 2001)

²⁵ Jing Yin, "Toward a Confucian Feminism: Critique of Eurocentric Feminist Discourse," *China Media Research*, 2:3(2006), 9-18.

²⁶ Ibid. p., 9

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. p., 12.

²⁹ Amira Jaramakani, *Imagining Arab Womanhood: The Cultural Mythology of Veils, Harems, and Belly Dancers in the U.S* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

³⁰ Lila Abu-Lghod & Meyda Yegenolgu, "Orientalism and Middle East Feminist Studies," *Feminist Studies. Inc. op-cit*, p. 107.

woman. In the same vein, Muslim feminists, like Fatma Mernissi and Nawal el Saadawi have, by taking for granted the feminist discourse, fallen in the trap of orientalising their societies. Importantly, the article clarified how feminist methodologies were inherited from the Orientalist discourse. More importantly, the article has suggested that Arab feminists could have been cautious about the ideological assumptions that framed western feminist methodologies.

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