

Gender Anthropology in the Middle East: The Politics of Muslim Women's Misrepresentation

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The Western view of the role of women in Muslim societies presents a strikingly ambivalent attitude. On the one hand, the patrilineal, patriarchal structure of the Muslim family has been so emphasized that it is believed to be at the heart of the assumed subordination of women in Muslim societies (Rassam 1983; Joseph 1985). On the other hand, a matrilineal structure is believed to exist in at least some Muslim societies. Frantz Fanon speaks of how the French colonizers of Algeria developed a policy built on the "discoveries" of the sociologists that a structure of matriarchal essence did indeed exist. These findings enabled the French to define their political doctrine, summed up by Fanon as: "If we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women, we must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves, and in the houses where the men keep them out of sight" (Fanon 1965, 39).

France's success or failure in adopting this policy, and the repercussions of the adoption of this formula, are beyond the scope of this paper. What is important here is its implication vis-à-vis the importance of women. Also, it enables us to be cognizant of a structured irony in the politics of studying Muslim women, whether for practical colonial purposes, or for intellectual orientalist aims. In the case of women, for example, French colonialists tried to use them to destroy the structure of Algerian society by attributing to them an almost absolute "significance." On the other hand, orientalist have used Muslim women also, but with the aim of destroying the image of Islam by rendering them absolutely "insignificant" within the religion.

The view of Islam as a purgatory for women underlies most works written on Muslim women. They are commonly depicted as isolated from men, passive actors in the so-called public domain, confined to their kin groups, and so

on. Such views have limited the discussion of women to the narrow topics of veils, honor and shame, patriarchy, kinship, and polygamy. And, of course, Islam has been held responsible for this presumed degradation despite a considerable amount of literature, both historical and sociological, which characterizes these negative tendencies as being either pre-Islamic, non-Islamic, un-Islamic, or as being one result of a process of the ideologization of Islam (Abdalati 1977; Alhibri 1982; Izzeddin 1953). Goody, for example, finds the position of women in seventeenth-century Turkey as one bearing no relation to any notion of a large patriarchal family. Women appeared freely before the court, sued other citizens, and were sued themselves. They were owners of property and made no less than 40 percent of all transactions (Goody 1983, 28). In relation to polygamy, Goody relates that in the Turkish city of Bursa in the seventeenth century, only 1 percent of men had more than one wife, compared with some 33 percent in Africa in the recent past (*ibid.*, 34). This shows that Islam permits polygamy, but that it can by no means be considered a polygamous system.

The Western view of Muslim women is usually cast in terms of an implicit contrast to Christian Europe, a continent in which some see pre-industrial England as a particular paradise for women (*ibid.*, 27). This contrast reflects certain theoretical, cultural, and gender biases, all of which had their effect on the way Muslim women were perceived. Pastner alludes to the fact that Victorian and post-Victorian England's practice of separating women and men into separate spheres inhibited English writers who had a great impact on Middle Eastern anthropology (i.e., Burton, Daughy, and Dickson) from appreciating the interdependence of sex roles in Muslim societies (Pastner 1978). Said sees the gender bias as a result of nineteenth- and twentieth-century orientalist thought which described men and women as isolated from each other, and which presented them in an image of sensuality and seductiveness (Said 1978, 311). Joseph blames not only orientalism, but also functionalism, sexism, and certain feminist approaches which strengthened one another in emphasizing the powerlessness of Muslim women (Joseph 1985, 3). Nelson views the prevalent misrepresentation of the reality surrounding Muslim women as a result of the maleness and foreignness of the researchers, both of which denied them direct access to Muslim women (Nelson 1974). In fact, the combined impact of functionalism, orientalism, and sexism reveals another irony: on the one hand, Muslim women come across in orientalist literature as isolated strangers and as individuals alienated from their society, while on the other hand, they are used as a vehicle for constructing an image of the whole culture.

Gender Relations in Existing Literature¹

The idea of a presumed structural opposition between men and women in Muslim society also seems to be a consequence of feminist literature which attempted to explain women's "subordination" in terms of universal public/domestic dichotomies. This theme stimulated a large number of studies purporting to clarify its various implications on the power of women either as a function of their separation from men or in spite of it. Nelson (1974) and Makhlouf (1979) argue that women are powerful over their children and their kin. Others demonstrated that through female-to-female relations, women are able to exchange information, support other women, create solidarity for economic purposes (Maher 1976; Aswad 1978), and have control over other women (Farrag 1971). Tapper (1978) and L. Beck (1978) even argue that sex segregation helped create a women's subculture which gives them status in the whole community. Caplan sees women's autonomy as being a function of two factors: Islam gives women the right to hold property, and Islam views marriage as a contractual relationship. This, according to Caplan, has helped ensure that the household/family has not emerged, as it has elsewhere, as a corporate property-owning group under the control of a male head. Rather, the Muslim family has remained a loose, coresidential group in which individuals hold private property while at the same time having rights to communal property via their membership in descent groups (Caplan 1984, 42).

Within the same dichotomy, another type of interpretation has also emerged. Dwyer (1977) and Mernissi (1977) have documented women's direct intervention in the public sphere via female intermediaries between themselves and the legal system. Al-Torki (1973) demonstrates women's manipulation of natal and marital connections for political purposes in the public domain. Nelson (1974) presented ethnographic evidence which indicated that women do approach public affairs, although they do so from private positions. Joseph contends that not only are women-to-women relations part of the public domain, but that their intervention in the polity is direct and that as a result of this women share a common political culture with men. She bases this assertion on her study of women's visiting patterns in urban working-class areas in Beirut (Joseph 1985, 1-22).

¹Interested readers can consult other literature on the subject of Muslim women. In addition to the bibliographies of Gulick and Gulick (1974), and Al-Gazzaz (1977), Joseph (1985) prepared one that covered literature published between 1976-1984, and Barbar collected a bibliography of bibliographies (1980). Other bibliographies were also published by Meghdessian (1980), Raccagni (1978), and Ruud (1981). Several other writers should be reviewed, such as Fernea (1965), Beck (1970), Maher (1974), Mernissi (1975), Dwyer (1978), Eickelman (1981), and Davis (1977).

Nelson and Olesen critique the Western feminist use of the concept of "equality." According to them, the idea of equality "not only undergirds the thinking and the platforms upon which Western feminism stands, but also is put forward as a universal moral imperative for all human societies" (Nelson and Olesen 1977, 21). Moreover, equality "was the solution appropriate to a culture where self is opposed to other, where society has to be protected from the encroachment of the individual; the solution of a society which holds an either-or conception of duality" (*ibid.*, 26).

For Nelson and Olesen, what makes an understanding of Islamic principles of male-female relations so difficult for the Western feminist is Islam's overwhelming commitment to the notion of complementarity; that is, where "dualism is complementary, so that the terms of the duality are not opposed, nor measured against each other, nor seen as discrete units" (Nelson and Olesen 1977, 26).

Nelson and Olesen's paper is an important attempt to scrutinize taken-for-granted assumptions, but like other attempts, it only forms part of a general grand theory for interpreting and explaining gender relations in the Middle East. Such a general theory has not yet emerged, despite the attempts of Rassam (1983), Joseph (1985), and maybe others. Rassam, drawing heavily on the Marxist feminist approach, suggests that this problem has three dimensions: the social organization of power, the ideological and institutional means of controlling women's sexuality, and the sexual division of labor in society (Rassam 1983, 21). Within a similar framework, Joseph suggests the study of the family, especially in its relationship to the political culture, as one of the areas which should be included in gender studies dealing with the Middle East. Presenting case material on the family and the state in Iraq and Lebanon, Joseph applies Guichard's basic model of how the contrast between East and West was perceived from medieval Spain to the twentieth-century Middle East. Joseph finds that the Arab family is corporatist and over-protective, morally based, given by God, not contractual and, therefore, not negotiable. Loyalty to the family is absolute and personalistic, and national leaders tend to be like family leaders. In sum, the Middle Eastern family of today supposedly displays the same characteristics proposed by Guichard for medieval Spain: patrilineality, weak conjugal pairs, agnatic links, endogamy, rigid sexual segregation, and honor (Joseph 1985). It is interesting that Joseph does not explain how such a remarkable continuity came to persist in spite of the strong winds of change.

However, studies of change are in vogue. The changing position of Muslim women is very often emphasized in terms of statistical changes concerning their education and work outside the home. In addition, change has usually been viewed as a function of state intervention through reforms. However, very little scholarship has focused on the consequences of unplanned, gradual

change, something akin to the domino theory when one step is taken which opens the gates to all kinds of change (Arebi 1984). For example, little attention has been paid in the literature to how women's position has been shaped in crucial ways by broader forces set in motion via economic and political development almost totally unconcerned with women and their equality. This is not unusual in the context of revolutionary regimes.

Massell (1974) shows how Muslim women in Soviet Central Asia have been used as a "surrogate proletariat." Tekeli, in the Turkish context, postulates that because Atatürk was sensitive to Western accusations that he was a dictator, he acted to distinguish his own party's rule from Germany's Nazi Party, whose "credo about women was *kinder, kirche, and kuche*" (i.e., children, church, and kitchen), thus deciding to give full enfranchisement to Turkish women in 1934 (Tekeli 1981, 298-99).

The fact that the Muslim woman's experience of change has not brought about a total rupture with the past, but rather a partial assimilation and even reintegration of old attitudes, receives scant attention in the literature (Arebi 1984). This is unfortunate, because it is only through the study of this experience that one can understand and assess the forces of change which affect women's position.

Feminism: East and West

The fact is that Muslim women are not unaware of the general impact of certain changes. I have shown elsewhere how social change in the context of Libyan society has stripped women of their powerful independent position and resulted in dependency and subordination (Arebi 1984). But, it is also true that there is a genuine lack of expression of such awareness among women, and that their experience remains intellectually diffuse and unarticulated on the collective level. This has been the result of several factors, some of which originated in the area itself, and others imported (directly or indirectly) from the West. With reference to the latter, one has to state at the outset that feminism is not an indigenous idea, but one which came from outside. Leila Ahmed explores the development of this idea in Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, and South Yemen. She points to forces that, in her view, modify the progress of feminism. First, she considers the nature of the attitudes of the society shaped by Islam regarding women to be incompatible with feminism. Second, she presents society's attitude towards the Western world, the birthplace of feminism. This has presented feminists with a dilemma and has caught them in the issue of cultural loyalty and betrayal, for relations between the Islamic world and the West have traditionally been confrontational (Ahmed 1982, 153-68). In the same vein, Nelson and Olesen refer to the Western colonizers' usurpation

of the paternalistic defense of Muslim women as being responsible for characterizing any change in their condition as a concession to the colonizer. Hence, women's emancipation was readily identified as succumbing to foreign influence (Nelson and Olesen 1977, 8-36).

While these factors remain more or less in play, other important ones were suggested to me by the material. My contention is that Muslim women have been unable to adopt the Western model of feminism for three reasons. The first reason has to do with the insistence of the Western liberation movement on wages as a liberating force. The experience of Libyan women, for example, with regards to work outside the home led to several conclusions. First, work was used by the rulers to exert a total political hegemony over both men and women. This is more or less true in other countries in the Muslim world where the workplace has become a formal political unit. Second, the circumstances under which women went outside of the home to work revealed that they were being used as a reserve army of labor when their menfolk were conscripted for military adventures. Third, and above all, women realize that work, as it relates to them, is a created need deliberately built into the economic system so as to "push" them to it, causing them to work out of deprivation, not to achieve any self-realization.

The second reason why Muslim women do not relate to the Western model is the insistence of Western movements that family and kinship ties are a hindrance to women's liberation. It is not difficult to understand why this is so. First of all, this contention dovetails perfectly with the state's political purposes of transferring one's allegiance from his/her kinship groups to the state. Second, people tend to form extended kin groups as an alternative to having their lives organized by a hegemonic state, and as a form of resistance to this hegemony. Third, Libyan women, on another level, realize how kinship ties provide them with a form of protection not only through the formal network of kinship, but also through informal women's groupings. These kinship ties can then serve as a basis for female solidarity which can provide female definitions for different situations.

The third reason is connected with the West's identification of "the problem" of Muslim women as a religious problem. This view is strongly resisted by Muslim women, because it reflects a sheer ignorance of Islam. Indeed, Leila Ahmed documents how feminist movements in the Middle East—Turkey being a possible exception—were initiated and became possible only through propagating original Islamic principles. Interestingly, El Saadawi also sees that the only way for a feminist movement to arise in the Muslim world is through an instrumental use—only as a tactic—of Islamic principles (El Saadawi 1982). Feminist literature by Westerners, Third World feminists, or even by some Middle Eastern women with a Marxist bent, generally presents Muslim women as a prey fought over with equal ferocity by Islam and the colonizing

West (e.g., El Saadawi 1982; Gendzier 1982). As Fanon was able to realize in the Algerian context, this is a simplified and pejorative way of presenting the value system which causes people to resist a colonial offensive (Fanon 1965).

To conclude, one should also mention that Western feminists (especially socialists) are probably right in viewing women's position as being inseparable from the aspiration to create a more just society. However, the specific implications of such an approach for women in the Muslim world are usually ignored. The fact that the power to decide on any issue—economic, political, or military—is absolutely monopolized in most Middle Eastern societies, if not by one person then by a small ruling elite, is given scant attention as a factor which modifies the whole question of gender relations in those societies. Many indigenous writers have alluded to this fact as part of their diagnosis of the “problem” of women in the area. In 1899, Qāsim Amīn, the spiritual father of feminist thought in Egypt, traced the social ills of tyranny in all its forms. When tyranny strikes a nation, he said, it proceeds from the rulers downwards, infecting all classes and poisoning all relations (Izzeddin 1953). Recently, M. Ḥijāzī explored the idea further within the context of the psychology of the “coerced person” (Ḥijāzī 1976, in Arabic).

The inseparability of gender relations from broader social concerns is even more demonstrable in the context of the Muslim world's present political culture. Western feminists might find it surprising to know that their premises concerning the “liberation” of women in the West have proved self-defeating in the hands of Muslim women, for these same premises seem to intensify the very crises for which they claim to hold the solutions. One result of women working outside of the home, for example, has been that the state's hegemony over the Muslim family is now almost complete.

Gender anthropology in Muslim societies faces the responsibility of explicating the effect of change upon the Muslim woman's position in terms of the change in gender relations within the family, which, in turn, has to be analyzed within the context of the nature of each country's political organization. This cannot be done within any Western theory of feminism, be it liberal, Marxist, socialist, or radical feminist ideology, but only within a theory of gender that could encompass the specificity of Muslim women's experience.

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