

Contemporary Feminist Writings in the Arab World: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract—Women became a moving force in the development of Arab societies with their courage and numerous efforts; we will in this paper look how the writings of Arab women played a pivotal role in portraying the real image of women in the region. The literature in the Arab world took a rebirth after the independence of Arab states, this becomes an important task to unveil the literary figures of eminence during the post-colonial period. From the self-liberation to national liberation, we saw how feminist writings evolved as a subject of study in the Middle East. Women of this region were more inclined towards ware time stories and feminist discourses because of their continues clashes between traditions and modernization. Despite of all odds women of these regions had different experiences from country to country and class to class.

This paper will highlight that Arab women were not granted equal rights and liberty to do things of their own. They also were deprived of higher education and learning which hampered their development in arts and literature albeit women did not keep silence to their voice rather they amplified their say through arts and literary composition. Activist and writers like Nawal Al Sadaawi, Huda Sharawi, May Ziabe, Fatima Mernessi, Nilofur Gole, Zainab Al Ghazali etc put enormous efforts in creating a paradigm for women development through their literary works. This paper will examine the roles of literary salons and committees for women where publications of essays and poems raised male consciousness among women of the Arab world.

1. INTRODUCTION

Arab women could not grow in international areas of literature because of lack of education, social political conditions poverty and local traditional norms. Popular activist and Islamic scholars like Abdusallam Yassine, also a political leader of al-Adl wa Al-Ihasaan (Justice and spirituality) largest Islamic movement in Morocco argues that feminist movement and its demand for women equality, is the product of a conspiracy by secular, atheist and imperialist forces against Islam.

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2. BEGINNING OF ARAB WOMEN'S CONTEMPORARY LITERARY WORKS

The craft of writing by Arab women embarked at the beginning of the 20th century when Lebanon and Egypt became bastions of women's journalism, women writers from the Levant or the Arab Eastern world began to grow and rapidly spread all across the Arab lands. The style, quality and modes of expression of the Arab women displayed an increasing professionalism in capturing and portraying social realities of greater complexity. In Egypt it was Huda Sharawi who paved the way for women's unions all across the Arab world and in Lebanon, it was Ibtihaj Qaddura, who is known to be the first eastern Arab women's voice on behalf of women's rights. Julia Tu'ma imashiqiyya who was the founder of the famous magazine "Al-Mara Al Jadida" (The new women) and from Syria it was Mary Ajami, who was a great writer and educator.

The main approach and areas of literature on women in the Arab is concerned largely on social sciences. This literature manifests an interpretive division in two major points firstly to absolve Islam as such from blame for the low status of women and secondly, the defense of Islam in gender equality. However, the coverage of the literature was uneven because of political reasons as well as regional attentions. New scholarly views of the two points would be apologetics towards women's lives that rise from the conservative groups and on the other hand, it how women is suppressed under Islam under the 'orientalist' perception. Scholarly literature has both negative and positive takes on women's lives in Arab societies under Islam and Modernism.

The positive aspects of women as manifested by feminist scholar counters ethnocentrism and the perceived western portrayal of women's status. Iranian political economist, Valentine Moghadam, argues that women's low labour force participation in the Middle East and North Africa shows the functioning of oil economics, more than of Islam. Similar accounts are given by Mounira Charrad, that the sociopolitical participation of women and access to legal rights are not so much of blame but by ways of kidnapping

system in these societies. On the other hand, scholar like Haideh Moghissi and Hameed Shalidian, sometimes criticized as 'weistofified' offers negative status of women's current status under Islamic societies. Moreover, the rereading of sacred texts for arguing against women's betterment affirms the relevance of Islam.

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This further blocks the path of separating religion and state. Therefore, women interests in literature are best pursued in secular terms and reforming Islamic view. Therefore, literature on women of the Arabs surrounds the poles of religions and modernism. Literature within religious spectrum holds two ways of arguments whether Orientalist and on the other hand Islamic feminist. The role of state and religion varies across the Arab states and inclination towards secular standpoints for women created debates on many issues. The Islamic and feminist movements have nevertheless created a flow of literature on gender and feminism as well as on the road to equality in these patriarchal societies.

Scholars agree that Arab women are stenotype by Westerners as Author Nouha al-Hegelan, mentions that the misinformation by the west has portrayed a deprived image of women. In Literature Westerners compare Arab women to Western women where westerners women are a standard and the Arab women are just born yesterday. This struggle of Arab women continues to grow and these stereotypical assumptions are called Hegelan as Born Yesterday Assumptions. The western writings on Arab women thus play an important part in the portrayal of Arab women's perceptions.

The Noteworthy fact on the writings of Arab women is their reflection of the socio political beliefs of their societies. Whether they are religious, western worldviews or social ills, the writings often come with a narrative of some kind of problem or diseases of the Modern Age. Writers like Therese Awwad and Fadwa Touqan, reflects in their writings the themes of loneliness and freedom.

The contribution of men in literature is also not to be ignored as writer like Jamil Sidiqi-Zahawi, Ahmed shawqi, Hafiz Ibrahim and Ma'uf al Rusafi, were pioneers of women emancipation in Arab literary genres. Short story and Novel writes like Layla Ba'albaki, Alifa Rifaat and Suhayr al-Qalamawi, had significant contribution in the development of Modern Arab literature.

The period of consequent growth of Arab literature was the post-colonial era, in which women amplified their voices and

sketch their issues in their writings. However, the literary works of Arab women could not achieve international attention as much as they ought to, nevertheless, it appealed scholars to begin their quest for knowing Arab women by large. The Orientalist's of view of Harems and fairytales became bygones and a new wave of Arab women's writings embarked on the shelves of literary genres.

3. ORIENTALIST DISCOURSE AND THE LITERARY SALONS

The release of Edward Said's 'Orientalism' in 1980 created a worldwide debate in the field of literary criticism. This work was seen as providing a strong rationale for more careful research. The stereotypes of Arab women have been important to the negative depictions of the Arab region and its culture. Many scholars tried to explore women's image, role and literary contribution in the Arab world. The representation of Arab women in their literary works became a whole new area of study for scholars all around the world in the fields of social sciences and literature. The oriental view of deprived Arab women and the voices of these women from behind a veil was a common sympathetic portrayal of Arab women by the Orientalist. Although Said's book is not really about women and gender but it has engendered feminist scholarship and debates all over. Works from Rana Kabani and Malek Alloulla were inspired by the arguments of Said' important distinction of 'Talent' and 'manifest' Orientalism. Scholars like Mayda Yegenoglu paved the ways for oriented discourses, which later followed by many more scholars from the region. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, who also translated and published Middle Eastern women's writings with Basima Barzigan.

The popularity of Said created ways in the development of contemporary feminist studies, because somehow it concerned on the conditions of society all together where women were seen an oppressed.

This scholarship usually involved a critique of the structure that oppress them. Since Said's criticism of policies parties of the West became the ignition for the scholars in literary criticism, and Post-Modernist theories, the regional Arab states could not offer much to the women of the Arabs. However, women continued to struggle through their activism and writings to achieve a good status in their societies, if not equal. Scholars like Fatima Mernissi became popular because of her courageous writings and critiques of postmodern western ideologies to be implicated in the Arab world. A whole new filed of criticism emerged out from the Arab region concerning oriental literature critics bebience that there are domestic modernities which challenges the western Oreinutalist distinction between Western progress and 'Islamic traditions'. However, the literary works of Arab writers by and large, treated women more as symbols than individuals who are in control of their destinies. But gradually historiography changed enormously with the emergence of socio cultural history of the Middle East by using

interdisciplinary Methodologies that challenged previously held stereotypes and myths. The early Oriental traditions was based on historical enquires on philology but now creative and newer usage of primary sources by social and cultural historians has made vast difference.

The emergence of enormous works by women has somehow shifted the Oriental lens of stereotyped women to more liberated and contented women in their own ways.

By the openings of literary saloons in the Arab world the women had a new mode of communication through literature. Through women's associations, clubs and saloons, a wave of women's voice raised in sociopolitical platforms throughout the Middle East. The saloons and organizations thrived in publications of articles and books simultaneously with holding meeting and seminars on the issues of women. These clubs were the initial platforms for women of the region to come up with their literary skills with the publications of numerous literatures. From this time the Modern Arab women had not looked back and gradually became an important part of contemporary literary growth in the Middle East Orient, Manwia Al- Wartani and Habiba al Minishari, were the pioneers of Tunisian movement, the popular saloon of primers princes, Nazil Fadil was of particular importance. In 1892 the first monthly journal 'Al-Fatah' was published in Egypt. The success of these saloons encouraged women to pursue careers in journalism and literature, Madame de Sevigne and May Ziyadah, influenced the opening of saloon culture across the Arab world. Many topics were discussed on the discretion of the hostess called as 'salonieress' Famous men also visited the saloons and discussed on the issues of women and their literary works. One of the first saloons after the revival movement of the 19th century was the Maryana Marrash's salon, in Aleppo. The Lebanese salon by the name 'Down of Syria' in Beirut got prominence along with The Association of the Arab Women Awakening from Beirut in 1914. The most popular among these were may Ziadah Salon in Cairo, which ran from 1913 to 1936. Huda Sharawi's salon was also well attended in Cairo and Beirut. In Syria, the women's literary club was founded by Mary Ajami in 1920. It involved in the revival of Arabic language and understanding western literary thought. Thuraya al-Hafiz also launched a salon in Damascus by the name of Sukayna salon in 1953.

Gradually these saloon lost popularity and their importance declined. Only the women's literary club, in Damascus continues to run with the a little international attention and a few literary circulations, Although, House of Poetry became popular in 2010 in Damascus. The contemporary writings of women of the Arab world in these salons were largely effected by the socio political conditions of their region. The contemporary writings has become the part of mainstream culture which is leading women to produce literary works globally. Modern writers today are opting for European and American publishing houses in order to get international attention and wide circulation. Although, the number of

literary works by Arab women is still very few on international literary arenas Nevertheless, they have succeeded in attaining respect and wide attention worldwide.

4. LITERARY GENRES

Arab writings of prose and poetry have a long history from the pre Islamic times to the modern day the contemporary writings of the Arab women has so far given little attention in the literary areas. Most of the Arab women writers write novels criticizing patriarchal practices and ideas of their societies which they observed in their experiences. Another important factor of women's participation in growth is the absence of men due to migration and martyrdom, which made new responsibilities on women which gave them opportunities to adopt new traditional roles in societies. The effects of wars and national crises became the moving force of the women of the Arab world to go from feminist movements to literary movements for social and National awareness. The representation of their social problems in their literary works and a quest for finding solutions to these became the major themes of functional and nonfictional writings. The traumas of wars and emergence of the feminist conscious awareness are reflected in these writings.

Realism and imaginative literature emerged in the writings of the Arab women including existentialism, absurdity and Surrealism, which reflected their reality. The new female literary culture was based on domestic and social issues, attracting interests in young female readers. Women writer wrote poetry, biographical writings of famous women and made translations of Western literary works. There translations started a new genre in literary arenas, giving new insights to scientific and humanistic ideas to the Arabs.

These genres was popularized by Zaynab Fawwaz and Maryam-Al- Nahhas by documenting lives of women in the form of Biographical Dictionaries and by publishing stories of famous women across the globe. Large popularity was gained by Short story writing and was often published in periodicals for Arab women. Short story suited women more than novels and other forms of writing, which later became a part of educational text. Women who were involved in Care work took educational tutorials which focused topics of Family care, Childrearing and Domestic Management. For other young women reader another important aspect of contemporary women writing is the class factor, by which the upper class women held an upper hand in the writings that were produced in the Arab region. The upper class women put forward their idea and understandings of their societies which were often partial in the view of the lower class women. The lower class women had their own issues which the upper class women were ignorant of Hence, the real picture of women's lives were sometimes untold in their writing. The upper class women increasingly became visible and active in the public domain and also in the politics. Often women writers tried to delineate their struggle to assert their personalities and

individuals Laila Balbaki and Ghada al Saman were the focus of an argument for their daring treatment of the subject.

5. MAJOR CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS

To understand the problem Arab writers' face we need to look at the long and complex history of their reception in the West. Historically, the west's interest in Arab women is part of its interest in and hostility to Islam. This hostility was central to colonialist project, which cast women as victims to be rescued from Muslim male violence. The fixation on the veil, the harem, excision, and polygamy made Arab women symbols of a region and a religion that were at once exotic, violent and inferior. There is also increased visibility of the new Islamist political groups in Algeria, Egypt and Sudan. "Fundamentalist Islam" has become the number one enemy for a post-cold war West desperate for something to hate. The Gulf war once again cast the Middle East as violent and threatening.

This history cannot be simply dismissed as irrelevant, nor these political events seen as marginal to literary reception. Arab women novelists still carry the burden of this history, whose effects are too obvious to ignore. They can be seen in the way Arab women's books are marketed and received in the West, in the way they are manipulated to meet the expectations and assumptions of western readers.

Reviewers of Arab women's books seem to take their cues from the titles and covers. Unfailingly, they read these novels as sociological and anthropological text that "reflect" the reality of Islam and the Arab world and "lift the veil" from what one reviewer called the "unimaginable world of Arab Women". Most reviewers conclude that Arab Muslim culture "is vastly different from the West," especially regarding the treatment of women.

Although colonial and neo-colonial biases inform western interest in Arab women, this fact should not be used to reject any interaction with the West. The renewed political interest in the Middle East region also coincided with the established of women's studies programs in the Euro-American academy. These programs, along with more recent interest in multicultural education, have helped clear space for Arab women writers on college syllabi. Arabic books are being taught now more than at any other time.

Moreover, recent events, especially the Palestinian Intifada and Arab Spring, Gulf War have politicized a new generation of Arab and Arab-American scholars. Their commitment to making Arabic works more widely available has two aims: to better inform a hostile American public and to educate the young generation of Arab Americans about the culture of their parents and grandparents.

In talking about the increased visibility of Arab women writers in England and the United States we must not underestimate this tireless work of Arab intellectuals situated in the west. They (along with many excellent non-Arab scholars) are active agents in this effort to promote Arabic literature.

It is simplistic, then, to assume that Arab women writers are just pawns being manipulated and used by the West.

The more Arabic books made available in English, the better. The complexity and diversity of the Arab world and its literatures can be represented best by a wide range of works. Even though reviewers tend to represent whatever Arab women writer they happen to be reviewing as a "lone voice" and a victim of Arab censorship, there is really no dearth of talent: the literary historian Joseph Zeidan lists 480 Arab women writing between the 1880s to 1980s.

6. CONCLUSION

But this is not all. We need to encourage a vigorous critical discussion about Arabic literature and culture in the West-one that does not limit itself to the academy. The debate should go beyond "appreciative" criticism that condescendingly praises Arab women writers for "daring" to put pen to paper. Serious debates about fiction will remind readers that they are reading not documentaries, but "literature", which draws on particular conventions and emerges from specific traditions. Critics aware of the original context in which these works appeared should convey a sense of these contexts to their readers.

To teach about the Arab context require Arab critics to play a pivotal part in the debate. To guarantee their active involvement, we should encourage the translation of both literature and criticism. So far, the Arab world has been supplying the cultural "raw materials" which then get ground in the First World critical mill.

Arab critics, particularly those situated in the Arab world, are viewed with suspicion, especially when they are men writing about women. If they don't write about Arab women writers, they are chastised for ignoring them. If they do, they are accused of attempting to "contain" and "marginalize" them. Worse, if critical, they are branded as hostile to women and their cause. While this judgment may be true of some, it should not be used, as it often is, as a blanket statement to dismiss Arab critics as a whole. We don't want to silence voices that have much to contribute to the debate. After all, Arab women writers have no reason to fear a strong critical movement.

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