

## *The Moral Landscape* and Women's Agency: Toward a Feminist Theory of Transnational Responsibilities

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### Mary Turner Lane Award

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## *The Moral Landscape and Women's Agency: Toward a Feminist Theory of Transnational Responsibilities*

Khaled Rajeh

*First my mother beat me. Then she brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor-blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between my thighs. I cried all night.*

Nawal el Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*

The emergence of postcolonial feminism in the late 20th century ushered in new debates surrounding the theory of agency and women in non-western countries. In feminist discourse, agency can be defined as a woman's capacity for individualized choice and action, free from the invasive influence or coercion of any other individual. All contemporary schools of feminism, whether liberal, radical, socialist, or poststructuralist, tend to converge on this particular goal: instilling a sense of autonomy and self-determination in women so that they are personally capable of improving their own oppressive conditions. Nevertheless, defining agency is considerably easier than recognizing an exercise of agency in practice. How can we tell when

someone is truly acting in accord with their own decisions/principles, and not merely behaving in ways into which they were socialized? If we admit that women's identities can sometimes take shape in environments that might encourage them to act in ways that run contrary to their interests as independent individuals, then how can we respond to the women who claim that they are conforming to these cultural norms out of their own volition and desires? Would their choice to conform, then, not qualify as an exercise in agency?

These questions yield no straightforward answers, yet they are questions that are becoming increasingly pertinent to our Arab world<sup>1</sup> today. The Middle East's long and ongoing struggle with American interventionist politics and cultural imperialism is reflected in local feminist discourse, which is becoming increasingly wary of accusations of "Westernization" and more readily inclined to denounce any signs of a "West is better than the rest" attitude. Moreover, as a backlash against rising Islamophobia in Europe, the U.S., and (as we have learned from the tragic Christchurch shootings) Australia and New Zealand, many Muslims across the world have taken up traditional practices—like veiling and female genital mutilation—with renewed zeal, as a way of asserting their religious and ethnic identities and political presence. What all this antagonism has done is widen the gap between Arab and Western women, with the latter tending to adopt a culturally relativist position of idle quietism out of fear of being accused of intolerance or worse, Islamophobia.

To avoid such accusations, it seems as though Western feminists today would have to turn a blind eye to the evident injustices being committed against countless women in the Arab world, and this is the dilemma they now find themselves facing. Resolving this dilemma is clearly a daunting task, but it is nonetheless a theoretically workable task. The key lies in developing a pluralist framework of feminist responsibilities that, as Bowden and Mummery (2009) note, is "both open to differences and critical of unjust differences" (p. 162). In this paper, I will present a theoretical basis for one such framework, centered around the role of scientific literacy. Through an analysis of Qasim Amin's (1900) *The New Woman*, I will first illuminate some of the obstacles that hinder Arab women's attainment of agency. I will then move on to the culturally-sensitive problems that can arise from setting "agency" as a goal itself, before demonstrating how these problems can be overcome through a feminist reading of Sam Harris' (2010) ethical philosophy in

*The Moral Landscape*. I will conclude by demonstrating how such a reading of Harris does provide a solution to the aforementioned dilemma by allowing us to develop a transnational framework of feminist responsibilities that meets the three essential criteria: It is (1) open to differences, (2) critical of unjust differences, and (3) largely emergent from within its respective culture, rather being imposed from the outside.

### *The New Woman*

Any inquiry into modern feminist movements in the Arab world is expected to include the contributions of the Egyptian reformer, judge, social critic, and “father of Egyptian feminism,” Qasim Amin (Booth, 2001, p. 174). A founder of the Egyptian National Movement, Amin channeled his Islamic modernism into works that sought, at the time, to revolutionize discourse surrounding women, their roles in society, and their duties toward their nation. The work we will examine is Amin’s 1900 treatise *The New Woman*, in which he lobbies for the Westernization of Egypt in terms of equal opportunities between men and women, particularly in education, as that alone, he believes, can equip women with the tools for raising healthy, refined, and productive generations in the future.

Before I begin my criticism of Amin, it is only right to credit the role he played in bringing feminist issues to the public consciousness, and stirring the long stagnant waters of debate about the role of women in society, particularly because female voices at the time, such as Zaynab Fawwaz (1860–1914) or Maryam al-Nahhas (1856–1888), were largely silenced or overlooked by the Arab literati. Even today, many of Amin’s views ring progressive in Egyptian society, where recent studies revealed that only 45% of men and 76% of women were shown to support gender equality (Pew Research Center, 2010); 91% of Egyptian women between the ages of 15 and 49 years old had undergone female genital mutilation (UNICEF, 2013); and 83% of Egyptian women had been sexually assaulted at one point in their lives (Estrin & Mullins, 2011). In light of such appalling figures, Qasim Amin still seems to be doing the Egyptian woman a favor by calling for equal opportunities in education. “This is because all human actions,” he writes, “originate from one source – knowledge and emotions. If this source is refined, its impact on everything is considerable, useful, and commendable. And if it is inferior, its impact is paltry, harmful, and reprehensible” (1900). From this sacrosanct requirement to refine the “knowledge and emotions”

of Egyptian society he launches into tirades about the need to educate Egyptian women about the importance of hygiene in reducing mortality rates, of proper parenting methods, and of being allowed freedom to take up traditionally male-dominated roles in order to share the interests, hopes, and concerns of their opposite sex, and through that acquire a deeper understanding of how the world works. All very unobjectionable measures, yet it is Amin's ends, and not his means, with which I will take issue.

The reason Amin is relevant to our discussion of women's agency is that he offers an excellent case study how:

- A) Relying on generalized assumptions of "the Arab woman," one can create a binary choice within feminist thought that grants Western women an imaginary moral high-ground. Politically, this leads to harmful misconceptions of western feminism as the reference point for "understanding" and "improving" the lives of Arab women.
- B) Some prevalent social views, even when masquerading as "pro-woman," actually have the effect of curtailing agency.

In *Women and Gender in Islam*, Leila Ahmed (2011) vehemently criticizes Amin's portrayal of the traditional Egyptian woman as ignorant, uneducated, unhygienic, and irresponsible, claiming that he has drawn those conclusions based on his limited personal interaction with a very narrow slice of Egyptian women: the aristocrats and the prostitutes. In contrast, the westerner in Amin's work is presented as the wielder of all moral righteousness, the antithesis of the traditional Arab. Amin even makes such extraordinary generalizations as "no Westerner is ignorant of woman's status in society or her important role in the family" (p. 52).

Such a binary discourse—where the west is represented as culturally and morally superior to the poor, uneducated, unmodernized, and tradition-bound Arab world—is the kind brandished by some western politicians as justification for their interventionist policies. The George W. Bush administration made it clear, for example, that one of their primary motives for sustaining the war in Afghanistan was "to fight for the rights and dignity of women" (Berry, 2003, p. 137), who were portrayed as prisoners of an oppressive regime in desperate need of rescue by the West. Now, there is no doubt that women living under Taliban rule endured some of the worst conditions imaginable (it would take a fairly extreme cultural relativist to say that pouring battery acid over

the faces of unveiled girls is a practice that must not be stopped). Today, however, there is doubt about whether interventionist politics always yield the intended results. Needless to say, Bush's "fight for the rights of women" proved counterproductive. It was seen as an attack on Islamic values, and thus resulted in a backlash from Afghan populations, including many women whose natural reaction to the outside threat was to stand together in solidarity with what they regarded as their own cultural values (Kolhatkar, 2002, pp. 12–20).

In her famous postcolonial critique, Gayatri Spivak (1994) summarizes this type of interventionist policy as "white men saving brown women from brown men" (p. 92). Bush's pseudo-feminist intervention is one of the many manifestations of hegemonic feminism—our first obstacle toward the attainment of agency for Arab women. Western interventionist politics, which aim to empower the Arab woman, however, run the risk of using women "as symbols and pawns in a geopolitical conflict, thereby muting their diverse needs and interests and foreclosing the possibility of contributing to the realization of their self-defined priorities and aspirations" (2003, p. 137). For this reason, any framework of feminist responsibilities which seeks to instill agency in women must be, as our third criterion states, largely emergent from within its respective culture, rather than being imposed from the outside.

Having established that agency must be produced locally, let us turn to the role of some local pseudo-feminist ideologies curtailing women's agency. An essential requirement of any definition of agency is that an agent's actions must be free from the invasive influence of other individuals, meaning that no individual can truly be acting autonomously if they are unknowingly under the control of a third party. Amin, I will now demonstrate, is guilty of precisely that.

According to Amin, "everyone agrees that the status and management of the household is primarily the responsibility of the woman...it is the most important and useful task that a human being can perform on earth" (1990, p. 161). His belief in this statement is so firm that all of the very unobjectionable measures mentioned earlier serve only one ultimate purpose: Helping the woman undertake her household responsibilities more constructively, because that alone can foster Egypt's national development. "A partner skilled at managing her household, a friend ready to sacrifice her most precious possessions for her husband, and a mother competent in her duties toward her children and knowledgeable of the best ways of bringing them up" is all a woman

should aspire to be in order for Egypt to follow in the footsteps of its Western neighbors (p. 169). This begs the question: does this ideology not single out women who wish not to or are unable to bear children? What about the men who wish to raise and nurture children but believe this to be the exclusive domain of women? Are women truly liberated when their societies show them that they not only expect but utterly rely on and revere their domestic performance?

The reign of Joseph Stalin saw revived interest in one particular hero of medieval East Slavic folklore: Mikula Selianinovich. Mikula appears in epic poems (*bylinas*) dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the form of a peasant-hero, a prolific plowman wielding a plow only he was strong enough to lift from the earth. He was characterized by his superhuman capacity for work and symbolized agricultural fertility. The reason this “hero of the common man” was rebirthed into public consciousness is simple: the Communist Party saw it in their best interest that he be. Glorifying the routine and diligence of the simple farmer was high on the party’s agenda. Posters depicting farmers with head held high, brows furrowed, gaze fixed intently on something in the distance, red flag in one hand and sickle in another, as though the fate of the whole Union rested on their heroic shoulders, spread among the masses—along with the idea that there was nothing nobler, nothing more worthwhile, nothing more instrumental in the eventual success or failure of the country than the role of the common plowman. The profession became more satisfying to those who were engaged in it and exceedingly attractive to those who were not, helping the party maximize its produce without the risk of using direct force, threats, or costly remunerations to make its farmers work exceptionally hard. The myth of Mikula morphed into a valuable ideological tool for suppressing dissatisfaction and furthering nationalistic aspirations.

Reading *The New Woman*, we can see a similar phenomenon at play. In attempting to “liberate” the Egyptian woman, Amin manages to create a Mikula-like being to which Egyptian women can aspire, and, in so doing, falls prey to an illusion that serves to oppress far more than to liberate. Just like Mikula, Amin’s “new woman” becomes a tool for achieving his own vision of the “new” Egypt.

The form of power Amin exercises—whereby a dominant group seizes control of a subordinate group not merely through telling them what to do, but through controlling the very institutions that shape their wants and desires (schooling, mass media, processes of socialization,

etc.) so that they conform to those of the dominant group—is perhaps the most insidious method of suppressing agency. It is also a form of power that has been addressed by several Marxist sociologists. I believe that Marxist theory can enrich any discussion on women’s agency, as it helps us conceptualize certain power dynamics between an oppressed group and its oppressor and discern some methods by which power can be seized and sustained.

Within Marxist theory, the concept of “false consciousness” came to describe a situation where a subordinate social class consciously and willingly adopts the ideology of a ruling class, despite the antithetical nature of this ideology to the actual interests of the subordinate class. It was used to refer to the workers in capitalist societies who were supposedly under the influence of an ideology that not only blinds them to the extent of their exploitation, but makes them eagerly compliant with it. Think of the Egyptian woman who reads *The New Woman*, and decides to forsake her career in law and instead resign herself to the household, as she falsely believes that the latter will bring the greatest amount of good to her beloved nation. She would then be acting under false consciousness. The term, however, often carries some unwelcome historical baggage, and is underlined by a haughty implication that one has access to truths that are presumed unattainable to less privileged people—and the superior cognition to discern their real interests. I will therefore resort to reworkings of the idea of false consciousness proposed by some contemporary Marxist theorists, who can add to our understanding of Arab women who willingly choose to comply with oppressive norms.

In his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James Scott (1990) expands on two manifestations of the phenomenon of false consciousness, which he terms the “thick” and “thin” versions:

The thick version claims that a dominant ideology works its magic by persuading subordinate groups to believe actively in the values that explain and justify their own subordination...The thin theory of false consciousness, on the other hand, maintains only that the dominant ideology achieves compliance by convincing subordinate groups that the social order in which they live is natural and inevitable. The thick theory claims consent; the thin theory settles for resignation. (p. 72)

Scott makes a useful distinction, and we can see both of these versions at play in *The New Woman*. For example, when Amin writes of a woman’s domestic duty as “the most important and useful



task that a human being can perform,” he is attempting to explain to his female audience that their confinement to the household is entirely justifiable considering the supposed benefits it brings to their society, putting them under the thin version of false consciousness. On the other hand, when Amin’s female readers are persuaded that “everyone agrees that the status and management of the household is primarily the responsibility of the woman,” they would internalize these responsibilities as the natural and inevitable order of nature, keeping them under the sway of the thin version of false consciousness. Therefore, before any Arab woman can fight off both versions of subordination and acquire agency, she must first be skeptical of any social structure imposed by a ruling group and reject the possibility that it (and all other social norms) might be essentialist in nature.

At this point we must stop and ask: What is the difference, then, between these accounts of false consciousness and the normal processes of inculturation, by which everyone acquires their personal set of beliefs, desires, truths, and moral intuitions? When does the influencing of these personal characteristics in an individual begin to constitute a form of oppression?

I, a Lebanese student of English literature, am writing this essay in English, rather than Arabic, Aramaic, Latin, Greek, or Phoenician, because I was born at a time when the ruling class on this narrow stretch of land had decided to implement a school curriculum in English. I have had to comply with their decision, which had also been forced on them by the cultural imperialism of the west, and learn the language. It feels as though the decision to become a speaker/student of the English language was taken outside of my own desires and volition, laid out for me by external parties before I was even born. Am I a victim of false consciousness?

The reassuring answer to that is no, not really, mainly because I am able to inquire into the socioeconomic and cultural contexts which gave rise to my desires, and I can understand these contexts as ephemeral and artificial human constructs. I also have the freedom to vow never to utter a single word of English after finishing this sentence, without risking imprisonment, ostracism, or my health. Yet, after a quick calculation of the cost/benefit ratio of such a decision, I choose not to. Of course, this, like any other decision, was by no means a fully “free” decision. My calculation is bound by countless restraints, such as the demands of capitalism and the thought of my mother’s face when she finds out that I have decided to renounce the English language just

weeks before the final exams of my degree in English, an example of what is often referred to as “relational autonomy” (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). Yet, I had the ability to perform the calculation within my socioeconomic context, find the path toward my best interests, and pursue it risk-free.

Nevertheless, if we were to interrogate the mother of Firdaus in Nawal el Saadawi’s (1983) novel, *Woman at Point Zero*, about her decision to cut off a piece of her daughter’s genitalia, she might well give an answer along the same lines as mine. She might say that she could have chosen not to perform the mutilation, but after a rational assessment of the costs and benefits within her socioeconomic context, she freely decided that it was best to reach for her razor. She might have had many different reasons for this decision: preventing the social ostracism of her daughter, improving her chances of marriage, enhancing the sexual pleasure of her prospective husband, safekeeping her chastity and modesty, or just pleasing God (UNICEF, 2013).

Yet, despite all her reasons for choosing to act the way she did, one might still call into question the status of her agency. Why is that so? For one thing, all these reasons stem from, and happen to mostly fall in line with the interests and desires of a dominant social group in her society: conservative men. As Fran Hosken (1980) points out, regardless of any additional layers of meaning that the practice has gone on to acquire, it is traceable to a common root: the male desire to “assure female dependence and subservience by any and all means,” be it through their religious preaching, interpretations of scripture, or political views and enforcements (p. 14). Her decision was also motivated by the extremely high level of risk associated with choosing any alternative course of action. If Firdaus’ genitals remained intact, she was guaranteed to grow up displeasing her male suitors, the male God, and the male ruling class. In a society where women receive minimal education and job opportunities, her uncut genitals could deny her the prospect of marriage, her only hope of earning any kind of livelihood. You can see by now how difficult it is to say that Firdaus’ mother and the woman who assisted her (as this practice is almost exclusively carried out by women on one other) had really acted out of their own desires to *improve* Firdaus’ well-being, and not out of a desire to conform with the custom which will avoid jeopardizing her well-being. Agency must lie in risk-free self-fulfillment, and not in safeguarding against social ills.

Let us take this further and give Firdaus' mother a more cogent case and the benefit of the doubt. Female genital mutilation (FGM) strongly correlates with illiteracy rates, but let us assume that Firdaus' mother is an educated woman who has read up on the associated dangers of the practice, including "infections, abscesses, small benign tumors, hemorrhages, and clitoral cysts, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), depression, chronic problems including difficulties of urination and menstruation, excessive pain with attempts at coital penetration, extreme sensitivity in clitoral remnants, sexual dysfunction and various urinary tract, gynecological, and obstetric problems" (Dalal et al., 2010). Let us also assume that she believes God is indifferent to this practice, finding no mention of it in the Qur'an, and she is also not under the influence of the thin theory of false consciousness, knowing that FGM is only practiced on a very small group of women globally; and it is by no means just a part of the natural order of things. Yet, let us assume she still champions FGM and would be very happy to mutilate the genitals of all her granddaughters. Can we argue that this still might not be an informed and autonomous decision?

Elster (1983) believes we can. In his book on rational choice theory, *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality*, he presents a wide range of evidence for what he terms "the mechanism of sour grapes." The term is a reference to Aesop's fable, "The Fox and the Grapes," which Aphra Behn elegantly summarized in her quatrain from 1687:

The fox who longed for grapes, beholds with pain  
The tempting clusters were too high to gain;  
Grieved in his heart he forced a careless smile,  
And cried, "They're sharp and hardly worth my while. (Lippert, 1987)

This mechanism relies on a coping strategy called "adaptive preference formation," whereby one's desires and aspirations are themselves subconsciously adjusted to fit the circumstances and dictated by what is feasible. In short, we content ourselves with what is offered to us, and grow happy with what we see as an unchangeable circumstance.<sup>2</sup> Elster seeks to identify those cases in which this process of preference formation is non-autonomous and distinguish them from what he calls "autonomous wants": the changes in desires that come from learning and experience, character planning, "precommitment" (the deliberate exclusion of other possible choices), and all such "intentional shaping of desires" (1984, p. 117). He argues that the non-autonomous adaptive

preferences are “shaped by the lack of alternatives” (p. 120) and caused by “habituation and resignation” (p.113). He sees this as a “strictly endogenous causality” (p. 116), as it is confined to the society which dictated it. The mechanism of sour grapes occurs among those who are not “in control over the processes whereby their desires are formed” (p. 21). In other words, it occurs among those who are not running the government, the press, or the religious/educational institutions.

Rereading *Woman at Point Zero* in light of Elster’s theories, one can see how all the prerequisites of an adaptive preference formation are present among the women of Firdaus’ society. A strong case can thus be made against the agency of Firdaus’ mother and the autonomy of her decision. As Nussbaum (2000) writes, if “someone who has no property rights under the law, who has no formal education, who has no legal right of divorce, who will very likely be beaten if she seeks employment outside the home, says that she endorses traditions of modesty, purity and self-abnegation, it is not clear that we should consider this the last word on the matter” (Clegg, & Hauggard, 2013, p. 97). It is therefore crucial that we “reflect before we conclude that women without options really endorse the lives they lead” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 43).

We can reflect all we want about the agency (or lack thereof) of women like Firdaus’ mother who engage in activities that are inimical to their long-term interests, but the problem remains: How are we to point out to these women their apparent wrongdoings? As Indian feminist scholar Uma Narayan would ask, would our actions not constitute “a lack of respect for traditional practices and its associated culture?” (Bowden & Mummery, 2009, p. 137) It seems as though there is no common ground for our different values, desires (autonomous or otherwise), and feminist responsibilities to converge on, but I will conclude this paper by arguing that there can be.

First, before we can break out of the stalemate forced upon us by proponents of absolute cultural relativism, and begin to make progress in our debates about transnational feminist responsibilities, we must accept three basic premises:

- 1) Morality stems from a concern for our well-being and the well-being of other living things.
- 2) Well-being stems from the interaction between favorable events in the world and healthy states in the human brain that can be understood psychologically.

3) It is possible to identify societies which enjoy a greater amount of well-being than others. These are the premises laid out by Sam Harris (2010) in *The Moral Landscape*, in which he argues against a separation between facts and values, and for a moral philosophy in which answers to the question of what behavioral norms are preferable to others are grounded in empirical facts. Building on the three premises above, his thesis boils down to the following claim: If we admit that we behave “morally” out of concern for the well-being of ourselves and others, and science can inform us on what types of behavior promote our well-being, then it must be able to inform us about what should be considered moral. He writes:

Values, therefore, translate into facts that can be scientifically understood: Regarding positive and negative social emotions, retributive impulses, the effects of specific laws and social institutions on human relationships, the neurophysiology of happiness and suffering, etc. The most important of these facts are bound to transcend culture—just as facts about physical and mental health do. Cancer in the highlands of New Guinea is still cancer; cholera is still cholera, schizophrenia is still schizophrenia, and so too, I will argue, compassion is still compassion, and well-being is still well-being. (2010, p. 2)

To use one of Harris’ examples of how this method of reasoning works, think of corporal punishment. A 2017 report on Lebanon by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child stated that “experts were very concerned that corporal punishment was not criminalized and was still practiced and accepted in schools” across the country (OHCHR, 2017). Thousands of students are still subjected to this form of violence every year. The perpetrator’s rationale can run anywhere along the lines of “it is the only way they can learn,” “this is how my parents and I were all raised,” and even “this is what God told us to do.” These reasons might all be well intentioned and understandable within the cultural context, yet they reveal a profound degree of ignorance about child psychology. If we are concerned about human well-being and treating others in a way so as to maximize it, would it be a prudent decision to subject young boys and girls to pain, public humiliation, and terror as a method of encouraging healthy emotional development and mental well-being? Not when all our research indicates that corporal punishment is a detrimental practice which leads victims to more violence, social pathology, and even greater support for corporal

punishment (Pollard Sacks, 2009). If we are concerned about the well-being of our children, it would be immoral to leave such judgments to culture or tradition.

Of course, Harris (2010) concedes that the present state of science cannot answer all our moral questions. There will always be differences of opinions, yet these opinions on how our well-being can be improved would be increasingly founded on scientific evidence, which is to say we would be making progress. Moreover, we must not let our inability to answer a certain question lead us to the false conclusion that it has no answer. A question like “how many tadpoles hatched in the last five minutes” is impossible for us to figure out within our present capacities of data gathering, but it is nonetheless an answerable question that admits of a simple numeric answer. Our inability to work out the answer does not mean that any alternative answers must be taken as equally valid. The same logic must apply to our moral codes. As Harris writes, “mistaking no answers in practice for no answers in principle is a great source of moral confusion” (2010, p. 4).

It is vital to point out that Harris does not suggest that there is one right solution to every moral question, or a single best way for humans to conduct their lives. Different cultural practices, modes of government, and moral codes translate into different degrees of human flourishing, what he terms the “many peaks on the moral landscape.” There are vastly different ways of thinking about moral questions that might produce similar degrees of well-being, just as there are ways of thinking which might limit and even produce the opposite of well-being. A helpful analogy would be that of how we regard physical health. There are many different diets one can adopt, all more or less healthy, but the fact that there is no one right food to eat does not blur our distinction between food and poison. It does not lead to views like “dietetic relativism” wherein all food is equally healthy in principle so long as your parents had eaten it. The abundance of diverse culinary practices never tempts anyone to suggest that there are no facts to be known about human nutrition. Harris sees “human flourishing” and “health” as fields of knowledge which admit of their respective facts, methods, evidence, and experts. The fact that “health” is a vague term, which might mean a number of things, does not prevent us from studying it through the discipline of medicine and measuring it through certain yardsticks, such as “a healthy person is one who is not continuously vomiting.”

We have to recognize that if, in some bizarre set of circumstances, an individual claims that they enjoy continuously vomiting, they are not presenting an alternative paradigm of medicine that the medical community has to regard as equally valid or that anyone is likely to benefit from. "A science of human flourishing may seem a long way off," he writes, "but to achieve it, we must first acknowledge that the intellectual terrain actually exists" (Harris, 2010, p. 7).

## **Conclusion**

Let us now tie together the many theoretical strings of my argument and see how they point to this conclusion: the "intellectual terrain" Harris speaks of is one example of a feminist framework of responsibilities that can resolve our earlier dilemma of passive quietism versus cultural criticism.

Our first criterion for such a framework was that it had to be "open to differences." As we have just seen, the moral landscape allows and even thrives on the abundance of different "peaks," insofar as these are all cultural, political, economic, or spiritual differences in maximizing well-being. Our second criterion was that it had to be "critical of unjust differences," which is also central to the moral landscape, as it is only through the open criticism of differences, which fail to produce conditions conducive to human well-being, that different communities can help one another progress to moral peaks. This criticism can never be rooted in nationalistic, chauvinistic, or racist views, nor can the critics be accused of holding such views, so long as the relevant evidence is presented and logically defended within an objective scientific framework. This leads us to our third and final criterion, it being "largely emergent from within its respective culture." We have seen some of the adverse consequences that can arise from the forceful encroachment of one culture on another, and agreed that positive change comes best from within the respective culture itself. Also, we know that the laws of biology, physics, and chemistry transcend borders, and the scientific method has proven to be equally fruitful regardless of the background of who wields it. This makes it possible, within the framework of a moral landscape, for each culture to uphold and develop their own ways of life, so long as they can be shown to maximize human flourishing.

Again, cross-cultural discourse within this framework today is nearly impossible in practice, especially as it would require a standard of scientific literacy, yet this must not give us grounds to dismiss it altogether. It is still perfectly plausible in theory, and not only would it allow us to move forward with debates around transnational feminist responsibilities, but it would also remind us about the importance of scientific literacy for the empowerment of the Arab woman. With scientific literacy comes the natural skepticism toward the validity of the man-made institutions and belief-systems that are thrust upon a woman since birth. With scientific literacy comes the ability to question the productivity of the roles taught to her by her male guardians, teachers, and religious demagogues. With scientific literacy comes the ability to reject certain “truths” about her place in the world, on the grounds of inadequate evidence, and thus be free of any states of false consciousness. If we want to empower the Arab woman, we must not, like Bush, “fight for her liberation” with unsolicited interventions, nor must we, like Amin, give her the example of superior culture to follow. Instead, we must ensure access to a quality education, as that alone is indispensable to her autonomous attainment of agency.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> While I do share Chandra Mohanty’s (2003) opposition of vague and simplistic terms like “third world women” — which have the effect of homogenizing the women of vastly different cultures and concerns into one monolithic and apolitical group, unified by nothing but their “object status”—I will nevertheless allow myself to use the equally objectionable term, “Arab world.” My justification is that the issues of agency addressed in this paper, and the notion of an autonomous human being, can be spoken of in relation to any person or group of people, and transcend the religious, cultural, and dialectical differences between the Arab women. I focus on the Arab world in this paper because it is the subject of much postcolonial debate about the roles and duties of Western nations towards it, and especially towards the women of its Muslim majority.

<sup>2</sup> For some empirical data on how our minds learn to grow happy with unchangeable circumstances, see Gilbert (2002).



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