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In the Gender War, Was Patriarchy Victorious? Theoretical Concepts of Gender Discrimination in Patriarchal Societies and Solutions

Karim Mitri

“I personally knew it is a curse being a woman, but I never imagined how much of a curse”
(Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2004, p. 74).

Introduction

Humans have been evolving for millions of years. Evolution started as primal, mundane and slow, but somehow began taking shape remarkably as time passed and humans decided to live in unison, in societies. Over the years, each society developed its set of rules, traditions, and norms which has created the concept of culture. Each member of these diverse societies is a product of their own unique culture. Although education and intellectual knowledge play a big role in forming one's mind, it is typically and primarily affected by culture and tradition. As Mitchell (1988) states, “in a sense the brain was selected by culture” (as cited in Joseph, 2012, p. 5). The reader naturally agrees that each person who is part of a community, a society, a *culture*, unwillingly lives a life inspired by, derived from, and relying on this culture. While this seems like a beautiful picture, a culture's influence is not always good. When it comes to gender discrimination, patriarchal cultures and traditions are part of the main event: a phenomenon which has grown so wildly and strongly, that it has surpassed the boundaries of family or community and invaded politics, the workplace, and even laws. This socio-cultural ideology has acquired so much power that it now controls whole societies, including countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. To understand the workings of gender discrimination in the patriarchal societies of the MENA region, this paper will conduct a comparative analysis of research produced by two well-known and fundamental MENA feminists: Suad Joseph and Lila Abu-Lughod.

This paper presents two arguments: the way patriarchal culture has pushed women to dedicate their lives solely to their assumed roles as mothers and caregivers, and, second, the concept of aperspectivity, a term that will be described and defined below. Finally, this paper will provide recommendations and solutions from a cultural and anti-patriarchal lens to lead this uphill battle as gender activists in the MENA region.

Suad Joseph

Suad Joseph is an established Lebanese-American feminist scholar whose work focuses on patriarchy and gender in Lebanon and the broader MENA region. In her work, Joseph establishes the reasons behind men's actions in MENA countries such as Lebanon. Joseph relies on concepts such as gender stereotypes, the norms and tradition of the area, as well as the influence of religion. This section will focus on a few key concepts used by Joseph, and their utility or thinking about gender and gender-based discrimination in the MENA region.

Intentionality

To start with, Joseph focuses on a theoretical concept she calls "intentionality" in response to and challenging the dominant liberal feminist ideology in Western academic theory. In her work "Thinking Intentionality: Arab Women's Subjectivity and its Discontents," Joseph starts by describing that "attachment, connection, [and] relation is primary to human motivational processes ... attachment is instinctive and some needs like dependency or security are more fundamental than others" (Joseph, 2012, pp. 6–7). "Intentionality" is a crucial concept for through it, a large part of the relationship dynamics between men and women is clarified and accounted for. Joseph explains the concept of intentionality as entailing that "the human mind is fundamentally dyadic and interactive and the individual is understandable only in the context of the interpersonal field" (2012, pp. 5–6). In other words, women do not stand as individuals but are, rather, the products of their relationships. In particular, in the MENA region, they become the products of their relationships to their male family members and spouses. Building from this

relational definition, women are therefore subjects “that are simultaneously active and acted upon” (Joseph, 2012, p. 10). Thus, women are turned into subjects “of representation, culture, patriarchy, and politics” (Joseph, 2012, p. 10), which is the main issue women face in such societies.

As “*subjects* of both culture and patriarchy,” women do not exist as autonomous individuals with individual interests (2012, p. 9). Rather, women are passive through the whole process, and as mentioned earlier, women are “acted on” and thus, decisions are made *for* them. Thus, the notion of what is good for a woman comes to life through an external analysis of her interests.

Joseph also notes that “intentionality is wrapped tightly in a web of *Wajbat* in Lebanon” (Joseph, 2012, p. 19). *Wajbat*, according to Joseph, can be defined as “duty, responsibility, and power.” She therefore argues that there is a blurred line between duty and choice for a woman in the Arab world. This blurred line exists because “what is considered reasonable exists within a social tradition and thus reason is the outcome of relationships within social traditions” (2012, p. 9). In other words, women’s actions cannot be understood along the binary of “agent” or “object.” Instead, her actions must be understood in relation to the blurry situational context that positions her within this challenging environment. Rather than arguing that women in the MENA region are “forced” to be the primary caregiver, for example, Joseph urges us to think about how these patriarchal structures might create a situation wherein women might *desire* to be the primary caregivers, in line with gender norms (2012, p. 19).

Citizenship

Joseph also relies on sociological concepts such as “citizenship” in relation to gender. Firstly, Joseph (1996) criticizes the Orientalists who “assume the existence of a stable set of characteristics (culture, language, political boundary, religion)” (p. 5). Joseph (1996) further elaborates her argument on “citizenship” as she hints at the lifestyle of women in these Arab countries. “The state is mediated through family ties. Women are valued in society, but their

importance is abstracted in terms of familial care-giving roles” (p. 7). With that in mind, “intentionality” and “citizenship” are complementary and offer two theoretical frameworks; through both of them, marginalization and discrimination become clear. Finally, Joseph argues that “it is the conflation of gender and kinship, and the patriarchal structuring of kinship that allows to view women in terms of family (mothers, wives)” (Joseph, 1996, p. 8).

Post-War Lebanon

In the spring of 2004, Joseph published an article about family relations in Lebanon after the civil war. As the financial situation in Lebanon deteriorated, “war created financial stresses in marriage, a woman may have to work so [her family] can live” (Joseph, 2004, p. 279). Through this specific example, Joseph is able to indirectly broaden the surface of this reasoning: wives no longer fit in that stereotypical bubble Arab cultures have put them in. “Wives who work” is no longer a dream that feminists strive to achieve but an economic necessity. A man’s desire for supremacy comes second to the fundamental need to survive. “The man needs for the woman to work. So he has to accept it” (Joseph, 2004 p. 11). Further, some families also agreed to reduce the size of the family, freeing the mother from a lifetime of caring for “twelve children” (Joseph, 2004, p. 280). Although such evidence is taken from people who lived in a time of war where societal order did not exist, it is essential to view how these specific consequences might make people notice the importance of integrating women into the workplace. It had been made clear by the interviewed citizens that amidst the war, girls grew more autonomous, for the world was in chaos and amazingly, this environment of mayhem allowed the girls to discover a voice they did not know that they had: “The father lets the daughter go out in the evenings, to the ocean, he gives her freedom and independence, she didn’t have this *before* (emphasis added)” (Joseph, 2004, p. 285). One limitation in this study is the fact that in her sample, Joseph took the opinion of people from the same town (fictitious name: *Yusfiyyi*), losing the aspect of geographical diversity from her study.

Lila Abu-Lughod
Aperspectivity

Lila Abu-Lughod, in her article “Can there be a feminist ethnography?” (1990), adapts a socio-anthropological framework to argue her point of view. Abu-Lughod attempts to discover the reason behind the behavior of Arab cultures and the origins of their gender-discriminatory behaviors. Abu-Lughod attempts to untangle the concept of “perspective” in Arab societies. She reasons that “the inequality between the two genders implies a concept of aperspectivity, which offers the man full responsibility and portrays the woman as purely passive” (pp.14–15). Towards the end of her paper, Abu-Lughod further develops the concept of “perspective”:

Women have been the other to men’s self. The system of difference was in nature hierarchal, perhaps this system in itself constitutes sexism. What feminists had to face was that womanhood was only a partial identity. (1990, p. 25)

Muslim Women

Additionally, Abu-Lughod offers not only anthropological and sociological theories, but also goes into the real world to gather evidence. In her study of the “War on Terror,” Abu-Lughod (2002) posed an essential query: “do Muslim women really need saving?” As Spivak (1988) bluntly puts it, the War on Terror and the attendant call to “save” Muslim women from patriarchy and gender discrimination is a story of “white men saving brown women from brown men” (as cited in Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 784). Abu-Lughod examines why “the Muslim women were so crucial to this cultural mode of explanation, which ignored the complex entanglements in which we are all implicated” (2002, p. 784). In other words, Abu-Lughod was accusing the colonial, imperial West of using the image of “the Muslim woman” to, ironically, veil a multifaceted problem. The progressive West depicts them as nothing other than victims, desperately attempting to escape the shackles of Eastern tyranny and jump into the arms of the reassuring, non-Muslim, savior. Using the example of Afghan women, Abu-Lughod (2002) goes on to say, “most women activists agreed that Islam had to be the starting point for reform” but, as US-based advisor, Fatima Gailani,

puts it, “if I go to Afghanistan today and ask women for votes on the promise to bring them secularism, they are going to tell me to go to hell” (quoted in Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 788). Here, Abu-Lughod makes a powerful conclusion: “we need to have as little dogmatic faith in secular humanism as in Islamism, and as open a mind to the complex possibilities of human projects undertaken in one tradition as the other” (p. 788). It is essential to think of the different kinds of help a person, institution, or nation can offer and the micro-structure of help as it can turn into an abusive, counterproductive solution defeating its original purpose. Even worse, it can turn into an ideological weapon of modern warfare, a powerful tool to create a narrative that covers the truth and gives life to a fairytale so far away from the truth, that it paradoxically murders those whom it deceptively promises to save. Thus, Abu-Lughod (2002) urges that “we use a more egalitarian language of alliances, coalitions, and solidarity, instead of salvation” (p. 789). As Abu-Lughod notes in a later piece:

What if we did not assume the ontological status of women’s rights or ask referential questions such as whether Muslim women do or do not have (enough) rights, do or do not want rights, gain or lose rights through Islamic or secular law, need feminists or others to deliver them their rights. (2010, p. 2)

Abu-Lughod concludes with a glimpse to the past that has not really gone away but has rather transformed into new terminologies and concepts without any true change of substance as she states, “missionary work and colonial feminism belong in the past” (p. 790).

Discussion

Now, this article will examine the similarities between the works of the two authors discussed above. papers that were mentioned in previous sections. It is important to note that although Abu-Lughod and Joseph showcased the issue of gender in different manners, they both have the same goal: to offer the world a clear understanding about the influence of patriarchal cultures on discriminated women, from an anthropological point of view. Abu-Lughod and Joseph meet through the concepts of “intentionality” and “aperspectivity.” Joseph vividly points to the fact that women’s freedoms and their *rights* are within the control of the other, the man. This relates

directly to Abu-Lughod's idea that in a patriarchal society, the woman feels like an outsider to her own world. She passively exists to satisfy a purpose, to *serve*.

The concepts discussed above have crucial consequences, one of which is "citizenship," as described by Joseph. Women in MENA countries consider themselves a means to an end instead of a valuable, respected asset of society. The term "citizens" carries a sense of uniformity with it: the citizen is universal. "Constitutions have been written in the language of the universal citizen" (Joseph, 1996, p. 4). That being said, Joseph attempts to argue the contrary and opposes the concept of the "universal citizen" as she claims that women are nothing but a complement, an addition to the principal being. "Women are brought into the nation/state as appendages of husbands and fathers" (Joseph, 1996, p. 7).

Joseph (2012) and Abu-Lughod (2002) both agree on the fact that the approach used to study and talk about Muslim women in the West is singled out and exceptionalized. For that reason, one is unable to talk about Christian and Judaic women the same way one does about Muslim. This hurts Muslim women as their struggles are abstracted, romanticized, and transformed into prejudicial narratives. Such fictional plots declare, on the surface, a message and a promise to free Muslim women, while the reality preaches the exact opposite.

Differences between Abu-Lughod and Joseph: Research and Methods

Although Abu-Lughod and Joseph's theoretical reasoning is similar, when it comes to the empirical portion of their work, their perspectives differ. In the works this paper reviewed, Joseph came into contact mainly with Lebanese families. In Lebanon, there is a vast diversity in religious beliefs and traditions: Lebanon is divided into regions of mostly Christians and Muslims, who sometimes live in similar environments but nevertheless follow different norms, each corresponding to their own religion. Additionally, she focused on one factor of this country's history, the civil war, a variable unavailable in Abu-Lughod's cited work. Abu-Lughod addressed Palestine and Egypt, countries

which contain a more homogeneous population of Muslim citizens. While Islamic culture exists in Lebanon, it is not the main focus of Joseph as it was for Abu-Lughod.

Recommendations

Rationale

When trying to find solutions for a cultural problem, one must be aware of the social structure at hand. Without recognizing this structure, activists risk facing vicious, heartless, and dangerous counteractions from the state and society more broadly. Therefore, a scenario of compromise, albeit not ideal, is realistic and could be beneficial. In other words, it is smart to think of an initiative that mediates between the existing dominant culture and the reform movement opposing it. For example, it is important for activists to try and reconcile the two sides in the fight for gender equality. In other words, it's important for activists to use a centrist approach to this crucial problem. This could look like a non-governmental organization (NGO) that, instead of explicitly fighting oppressive traditions, finds a smarter, implicit, and subtler way to co-exist within dominant structures, all while preserving women's rights in such a culture. To demonstrate, such an NGO would not viciously fight against oppressive Islamic laws, although it would oppose them, less radically. These NGOs would adopt the Islamic-feminist framework in order to create a middle ground and build from there. Abu-Lughod (2002) argues that "the concept of Islamic feminism itself is also controversial. Is it an oxymoron or does it refer to a viable movement forged by brave women who want a third way?" (p. 788). This paper attempts to provide recommendations to accomplish this third way. It consists of an innovative mediatory approach that has the chance to satisfy the two sides of the conflict partially or fully. It is not an oxymoronic solution but rather a middle ground, and a necessary one.

Demonstration

An important example comes from Abu-Lughod's work in Egypt. When the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA) offered to teach women in Egypt, ideas about the harmony

between Islam and gender equality were often introduced (Abu-Lughod, 2010, p. 12). In this way, the NGO wins the approval of the patriarchal power that reigns over a country such as Egypt, all while maintaining a safe environment to promote, educate, and protect oppressed women. This is an initiative that could prove to be beneficial in all the countries who have an Islamic majority and in which constitutional, civil, and human rights laws cannot be separated from the Islamic religion. It is necessary to state that such a process should develop slowly and carefully, for such an initiative is proposing peace between two opposing sides (the oppressors and the oppressed). Slow progress is better than no progress.

Moreover, NGOs could initiate an after-school program for young Arab boys and girls. This program could consist of activities in which children watch movies, read stories, and even participate in plays that defy gender stereotypes—a mother with a full-time job or a father who cooks—thus integrating the idea of an equal society into the minds of children. It is important that time be dedicated to religious studies, and that work be done to marry gender equality and religion.

Conclusion

Patriarchal traditions and cultures dominate the MENA region. It is fundamental to keep debating these issues and voice the struggles of women who are living in this unforgiving and demoralizing patriarchal environment.

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