



ARAB WOMEN

From Misconceptions to Reality

Hassan Hammoud, Associate Professor of Social Work, L.A.U

For over forty years, most Western and traditional Arab writers dealing with Arab women's concerns, issues, and problems, adopted a Western discourse that remains for the most part unchallenged. Only recently have two prominent Arab women successfully attempted to dismantle this discourse by deconstructing its basic premises and criticizing its concepts and theories. For example, Leila Ahmed's unveiling of the function of the Western discourse is instructive:

"... a distinction has to be made between, on the one hand, the consequences for women following from the opening of Muslim societies to the West and the social change and the expansion of intellectual horizons that occurred as a result of the interest within Arab societies in emulating Western technological and political accomplishments and, on the other hand, the quite different and apparently essentially negative consequences following from the construction and dissemination of a Western patriarchal discourse targeting the issue of women and coopting the language of feminism in the service of its strategies of domination." (1992, p. 168).

And more recently, Suha Sabbagh has shown the ethnocentric character of most Western writing on Arab women by pointing out the rarely considered idea

"that women in different cultures might have a somewhat different agenda or methods of achieving their objectives... The titles of articles that purport to analyze the oppression of women under Islam stress sensationalism and show that, when it comes to writing about Arab women, stereotypical, distorted imaging has continued unabated since the early days of orientalist writings" (1996, xiii).

The Western discourse vehemently criticized by Ahmed and Sabbagh has to a great extent contributed to the diffusion of a system of knowledge, *i.e.*, language and ideas, among Arab women that was originally produced by another culture. What is wrong with this discursive approach is that it sets for itself the task of identifying and describing certain aspects of Arab women's lives, defines them as "hot spots", and proceeds to exaggerate their importance. Thus, Arab women were described as "male dominated, speechless, veiled, secluded, subdued, and unidentifiable beings" (Sabbagh, xi), and therefore reduced to passive creatures living on the margins of society. Such a stereotypical image presents the roles of women in negative terms and obscures their participation as active members in society. Moreover, in claiming to assist Arab women in emancipating themselves from the oppressive and dominating patriarchal system, Western writers call on Arab women to "abandon native ways and adopt those of the West."

The Western position with regard to understanding the images and roles of Arab women is flawed in several respects. First, in producing knowledge about Arab women and repre-

senting it in simple and absolute terms, this discourse implicitly assumes Western standards as the benchmark against which to measure the situation of women in the Arab world. The result is a system of representations that reflects a paternalistic attitude on the part of Western writers toward women in other parts of the world, and, more generally, the perpetuation of oppressive views that "only serve to establish the positional superiority of Western women" (Sabbagh, xx). Second, this Western-constructed system of mere representations emphasizes only the negative aspects and experiences of Arab women, and, in choosing to single out some issues that it considers important in its own eyes, tends to overshadow the more essential aspects of women's struggle and their successful pursuits and achievements. The downplay of the real issues and strengths of Arab women provides a distorted and myopic view of reality and "risks of becoming an oppressive rather than a liberating tool" (Sabbagh, xviii). Third, in championing the cause of Arab women by calling on them to adopt Western ways to improve their status, Western writers prove once more to be culturally insensitive. For to substitute one culture for another could jeopardize people's own identity and could constitute a risk of complete alienation from their own society.

More importantly, Ahmed and Sabbagh not only denounced the imposition of Western discourse but have also urged to deconstruct it by exposing its arbitrary character and the cultural and historical specificity of its concepts, and the danger that their use represents in the context of Arab society. To this end, they call on Arab women to liberate themselves from such misconceptions about or negative representations of their roles and status. In addition, they encourage the production of local knowledge related to the real struggle of Arab women in various fields by exposing the true nature of the obstacles they are facing. Producing subjective accounts by Arab women based on their own experiences is the sole guarantee for advancing alternative culturally sound possibilities that can at the same time accommodate personal problems as well as public issues in the context of the local culture.

In the hope of contributing to the production of an Arab discourse on women, we present this issue of *Al-Raida*. It contains a number of articles on the Arab family aimed at exposing as much as possible the reality of women's struggle within its confines.

References

- Ahmed, Leila. *Women & Gender in Islam*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1992.
Sabbagh, Suha. *Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint*. New York: Olive Branch P, 1996.