

Dismantling Bridges, Building Solidarity:

Reconciling Western and Arab Feminisms

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Abstract

This article attempts to address how Western and Arab (North and South) feminists are able to envision solidarity and empower women across local and national boundaries through (1) connecting local and global gender issues and (2) reconciling Western feminist scholarships and Arab women's culturally specific positions in international and cross-cultural frameworks. Given the historical background of the Middle East, there is a need to understand multiple factors such as class, nation, racism, sexism, colonialism and imperialism that influence Arab women's struggles for liberation. Arab women's struggles cannot be defined and situated in a context that removes the diversity of their historical experiences, location, religion and cultural factors. I would like to examine how Arab women are marginalized within the sphere of Western feminism(s) because they have been portrayed as passive victims instead of active participants seeking mobility and changes in their society. In dismantling the binary construct of East/West, liberated/oppressed, colonizers/colonized and progressive/backwards in global feminist discourses, there is an urgent need for a cross-cultural dialogue between Western and Arab feminisms in order to create space that allows differences to be recognized and examined, and crafting a meeting point for women to relate across their differences. For Western feminists trying to make sense of Middle Eastern issues and Arab women's struggles, solidarity will remain elusive unless they recognize that women's experiences and struggles cannot be separated from race, class, nation, colonization and imperialism.

Introduction

Feminism is seen as a political and philosophical movement, which challenges all power structures, laws, and conventions that keep women servile and subordinate. Various Western feminist theories such as Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, Marxist Feminism and Post-Modern Feminism have been formulated with an effort to better understand and overcome women's oppression. There is no doubt that the struggle of Western feminist movements have brought

changes in the lives of women since Mary Wollstonecraft wrote her masterpiece, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, which became the foundation of modern feminism.

Today, feminism has crossed the boundaries of the Western world and has become transnational. Women's response to their social, economic and political situation varies from location to location and their empowerment strategies are also diverse. Originally, feminist theories were an effort to bring insight from the feminist movement and from various female experiences together with research to produce new approaches towards understanding and ending female oppression (Humm 1992: 173). However, the Western feminist movements have fallen short in comprehending and conceptualizing the diversity of women around the globe. This is partly due to the fact that the discourses of Western feminisms are "largely shaped by gender relations in Christian capitalist cultures and by the exhausted paradigms of Western social thought" (Majid 1998: 334). Approaching Arab women's rights, struggles and liberations through Western feminists agendas cannot be effective because these agendas were cultivated in a different environment based on Western history, needs, experiences and values. For feminism(s) to be accepted in the Middle East, Arab women need new liberation movements that are based on their experiences and values with some acceptable feminist ideas and practices.

The dominant ideology of feminism as cultivated by the West, and the idea that women everywhere experience a 'common oppression' is a dangerous platform that is narrowing women's diversity in a complex social, economic, and political reality. Borrowing Chandra Mohanty's term, Western feminists should start 'theorizing from women's struggles' instead of assuming that women around the globe suffer from the same kind of patriarchal domination (e.g., patriarchy operates differently from different countries, regions and cultures without regard to history, racism, sexism, colonialism, imperialism and monopoly capital). Despite having struggled for social, economic and

political changes for decades in the Middle East, Arab women have been marginalized because they are portrayed as passive victims of society who have no control over their lives. By focusing on Middle Eastern women's veiling, passivity, and subordination; Western academia, media and feminists have created the image of the "other." The category of the "other" has denied the recognition of Middle Eastern women's active participation in the public arena (e.g., Iranian women's participation during the Islamic Revolution, Arab women soldiers during the Gulf war, Palestinian women's role in the Intifada). There is a wide gap between Western feminist discourses and the actual lives and practical needs of women from various ethnic groups, cultures and backgrounds. Therefore, it is crucial for the survival of feminism(s) to devise new approaches that acknowledge individualities and particularities of each woman and feminist movement.

Beyond Borders: The North-South² Dialogue

Nawal El-Saadawi, the founder of AWSA, believes that "solidarity can only grow in the light of knowledge and understanding" (1997: 28). In envisioning solidarity with Arab women, Western feminists should utilize the vast resources and knowledge available in dismantling global oppressions, which include not only gender apartheid, but also social, economic and political components to understand how Arab women have continued to be victims of racism, colonialism, and imperialism. Western feminism(s) tend to focus more on individual rights of women (although there are some women's groups that take up structural, social, cultural and global issues), whereas many Arab feminists, while recognizing the importance of these individual rights, also stress the problems faced by many women in the Arab world as a whole due to social, structural, cultural and global factors. Most Arab women's groups place their struggle against gender inequalities within the overall context of social and global problems and inequities. Gender issues are very important to address, but is that enough? Focusing on gender relations alone is insufficient to bring about the liberation of women. Women of the South would no doubt argue that gender issues and feminism, in actuality, is a concept that is associated with privilege and power. How can women of the South talk about feminism(s), when they are faced with poverty, starvation, unequal access to education, resources and health care, culturally sanctioned violence against women (e.g. female circumcision, honor killing), and armed or other kinds of conflict (e.g.

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Palestinian women under Israeli occupation)? But how can women of the North understand why they (women of the South) are not overtly concerned with the importance of a woman's individual autonomy and why their struggle is so embedded within the concept of nation-state, globalization and (neo)- colonialism? How can Northern feminists begin to develop an understanding of international social relations, power relations between different cultures, and the social, economic and cultural effects of discourses of colonialism in the context of race, class and gender?

From these questions, we are able to look at how women's groups and movements, through participating in community-based political, social or economic concerns, are able to promote activism on the local

level, and connect it to the global arena. There has been considerable evidence that despite the local/global divide, women have come together around diverse issues, and are able to cut across regional, national and international differences in solidarity, demonstrating a powerful global vision that transcends lines of division. For example, in armed conflict such as in Palestine, local³ and international⁴ women have come together as activists and peacemakers, embodying and challenging the Arab/Israeli or other divisions that have defined the conflict. In another example, activism on the part of Arab women about the practice of honor killing, which started off at

grassroots levels has now been framed as a global human rights issue. Although a local problem, the practice of honor killing has not only gained international attention but has also increased awareness and activism through connecting local and international women's groups. As El-Saadawi (1997: 19-20) has stressed, "Women in the South have to cooperate with the progressive forces in the North who are fighting the same battle (of oppression and discrimination), but resistance starts at home. We can only change the international order by each one of us, step by step, changing the system in which we live." In this case, the diversity of women's organizations is a rich pool of resources and ideas from where all women can build upon and confront the existing power structures that sought to dis-empower women.

However, we should remember that this cooperation should not be perceived as a triumph of Northern groups over Southern based organizing and issues. I would argue that the exchange should never be in the terms of "how Northern feminists should help the

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oppressed Southern women in their struggles.” It should be about understanding and respecting our differences, while meeting at a point where we (North and South) would be comfortable in facilitating dialogues and exchanging information. Arab women should not hesitate to take the lead in defining the international women’s movement and what should be on its agenda. Solidarity with Northern feminists is important, but they must be willing to broaden their framework to include issues such as social, economic, political and global inequities in addition to gender. As Bell Hooks (1984: 65) wrote:

Women do not need to eradicate differences to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression. We do not need anti-male sentiment to bond us together, so great is the wealth of experience, culture, and ideas we have to share with one another. We can be sisters united by shared diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity.

Therefore, in the struggles for liberation, Arab women should not be robbed of their identities, culture, history and beliefs as they struggle for empowerment and self-determination.

The Veil - Between Sexism and Racism

I have chosen to discuss the veil in this paper because there is a need to reconsider Western feminists discourses on issues of the veil, a discourse that has witnessed veiling as a sign of submissiveness and male domination. The images of most Arab-Muslim women in the eyes of Western feminists (inherited and kept alive from the days of colonialism) are ones that are oppressed, secluded and hidden behind the veil. They are often the nameless, faceless and voiceless victims of culture, religion and tradition, which can be taken as a symbol of women’s passive and insignificant existence, warranting little or no recognition of individuality.

The relationship between the East and the West during the period of colonialism is best defined in this phrase, “We came, we saw, we were horrified, we intervened”(Ghosh and Bose 1997: 189). In the Middle East, colonial rule not only gave birth to ethnic nationalism but also heightened female consciousness. Leila Ahmad (1992: 154) states that, “the

idea of Western feminism essentially functioned to justify morally the attack on native societies and to support the notion of the comprehensive superiority of Europe.” As women were seen as transmitters of social values within the private spheres of the home, they were the key to converting the so-called “backward” and “savage” Arab society into a “civilized” Western existence by Colonial patriarchs and missionaries. Islam was attacked and accused as one of the primary reasons for Arab-Muslim society’s inferiority, and the veiling of women was seen as the most visible form of oppression. The colonial rule sought to Westernize Arab-Muslim women by unveiling them, encouraging women to adopt Western ideas and culture, reject Islam and the Arab culture completely. As a result of this, veiling has not only become the most visible marker of cultural identity, but is also entangled with issues of colonialism and imperialism.

By defining the veil as a form of cultural oppression, Western feminists are subjecting themselves to the role of racists and oppressors, perpetuating an oppression that is considered “taboo” in the feminist movement, of women oppressing women. However, Western feminists would undoubtedly deny this by saying, “I’m a feminist, therefore I could not be a racist,” or “ I am also oppressed as a woman, so how can the oppressed become the oppressor?” As Joan Wingfinger wrote, “Other indigenous women can understand a lot better than most Whites...We’re not all the same, we have differences but they can accept the differences without trying to change us to being the same as them...Many Whites don’t accept differences” (cf. Bulbeck 1998: 216). In other words, Western feminists are asking Arab-Muslim women to choose between fighting racism and sexism. That is, in struggling to overcome their own social, political and economic oppressions, they have to accept Western superiority.

Leila Ahmad states the dilemma of Arab feminists in choosing between fighting racism and sexism:

It is only when one considers that one’s sexual identity alone is more intricately oneself than one’s cultural identity, that one can perhaps appreciate how excruciating is the plight of the Middle Eastern feminists caught between these two opposing loyalties, forced to choose between betrayal and betrayal (cf. Kandiyoti 7).

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By forcing Arab-Muslim women to choose, Western feminists are forcing them to reject feminism(s) in their struggles. Did Western feminists ever stop to think that in an intricate tradition where culture, history, and religion are closely intertwined, the veil might be a tool for women's liberation? Hence, universalization of the veil solely as a manifestation of patriarchal domination is unjust, creating a "double oppression" for some Arab-Muslim women. Western feminists

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have laid the foundation for accomplishment in women's social, political and economic standing, and therefore should assist Arab women in their struggle for liberation instead of "forcing" them to rank their oppression.

The Future of Global Feminisms

The International Decade for Women (1975-1985) taught Western feminists that their priorities, interpretations and political solutions are not acceptable or adaptable for women from other various ethnic groups and backgrounds. The United Nation's Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995 was an important catalyst for Arab feminists as the conference not only increased their visibility and activism, but also the opportunity for open interaction with Western feminists. Building solidarity while acknowledging and accepting the differences of women from diverse ethnic groups and backgrounds would produce a coalition that would be beneficial to the feminist movement. The ultimate challenge for feminist movements is providing new ways of linking the particulars of women's lives, activities, and goals to inequalities wherever they exist. A cross-cultural dialogue between Arab and Western feminists might overcome the cultural blinders and help develop a deeper understanding of the two different feminisms. Western feminists should look at themselves and see what other women see in them. They should also look at the "other" women and see those women in their own social, cultural and historical context. Without accepting Arab women as subjects in their own right, and "making way for them to come forth not as spectacles, but in their contradictions", cross cultural inquiry will remain a relationship of domination, and feminist solidarity will continue to be elusive (cf. Ghosh and Bose 1997: 203). For feminism(s) to succeed in Arab society, it must be an indigenous form of

feminism, rather than one conceived and nurtured in a Western environment with different problems, solutions and goals. I leave you with this quote:

"It would seem that if the outsider wants you to understand how she sees you and you have given your account of how you see yourself to her, there is a possibility of genuine dialogue between the two" (cf. Bulbeck 216).

End Notes

1. Western feminisms usually refer to the work of North American, Australian and European-descended feminists (Bulbeck 1998: 2).
2. The term North and South in this paper are interchangeable with Western and Arab feminists. The terms North, Northern women, women of the North represent the Western world while the terms South, Southern women, women of the South represents the so-called "Third World" – the economically underdeveloped countries of Asia, Africa, Oceania, and Latin America with common characteristics, such as poverty, high birthrates, and economic dependence on the advanced countries.
3. In Palestine and other parts of the Middle East
4. In the United States and other parts of the world

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