

Preparing the Way: Early Arab Women Feminist Writers

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The clear dividing line between a journalist and a writer in the West has always been blurred in the Arab world. Many Arab journals and papers were launched by writers and educators who considered journalism an extension of other forms of writing and who felt that they had an urgent social and political mission. We can consider them as precursors of the formal associations that, beginning with the Egyptian Women's Union in 1927, launched the women's movement in the Arab region.

Between 1892 and 1940, Arab women writers concentrated their efforts on printing their own journals, in which they published poetry, fiction, and criticism, as well as essays aimed at promoting women's role in society. Any assessment of Arab (or, for that matter, global) women's literature cannot be done without evaluating the Arab women's press, which was for half a century the major platform for Arab women writers. It is clear from letters of readers and correspondents that the women's press during that time constituted a central element in the Arab press. But the important role these journals have played during the first half of this century is not yet acknowledged. It is unfortunate that no proper archives

exist in the Arab world of this rich heritage, and no studies have appeared about it. It deserves introduction to Arab and Western readers alike.

In 1892, the Syrian, Hind Nawfal, started her first journal, *Al-Fatat* (*The Young Woman*), in Alexandria, Egypt, ushering in a flourishing era: there were more than 25 Arab feminist journals owned, edited, and published by women - all before the First World War. These editors stated in their editorials that their most important concern was women: women's literature, women's rights, and women's future. In her editorial to the first issue (November 20, 1892) of *Al-Fatat*, Hind Nawfal wrote: "*Al-Fatat* is the only journal for women in the East; it expresses their thoughts, discloses their inner minds, fights for their rights, searches for their literature and science, and takes pride in publishing the products of their pens." Editors of other journals urged women who are "attentive to the future and betterment of their sex to write so that their works may be read and become, in the meantime, a part of the literary heritage." These journals appeared in Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, and to a lesser extent, Baghdad. The editors displayed profound political knowledge, sensitivity to the sources of social problems, reliable economic sense, and sophisticated professional skills in the domains of publishing, marketing, and financial viability. To name just a few: *Anis al-Jalil*, owned, edited, and published by Alexandra Afenuh (Alexandria, 1898); *Shajarat al-Durr*, by Sa'dya Sa'd al-Din (Alexandria, 1901); *Al-Mara'a*, by Anisa Attallah (Egypt, 1901); *Al-*

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Saada, by Rujina A'wad (Egypt, 1902); *Al-A'rus* by Mary A'jami (Damascus, 1910); *Al-Kitadir*, by Afifa Sa'ab (Lebanon, 1912); *Fatat al-Nil*, by Sara al-Mihaya (Cairo, 1913); and *Fatat Lubnan*, by Salima Abu Rashid (Lebanon, 1914).

Although regular coverage was given to the experience and achievements of Western women, all these journals stressed the necessity to learn from women's movements in the West without giving up what is positive in Arab culture and Muslim religion. (As far as women and Islam are concerned, studies often confirmed that there is nothing in the *Qur'an* that makes 'the veil' a required Islamic duty, and that polygamy is against the spirit and the actual wording of the *Qur'an*.)

A stream of articles that appeared in a number of these journals established an interesting link between the emergence of political movements for national independence and the awakening of a feminist consciousness in the Arab world, arguing that no country can be truly free so long as its women remain shackled (an important connection that Arab women in the next generation failed to stress). The point that feminist issues are national issues was made not only by women, but also by such prominent men as Adil Jamil Bayhani and George Niqula Baz. Women writers expressed real interest in national affairs and political issues, and gave no indication whatsoever that they were living on the periphery of political life. Suffice it to mention that the Arab Women's Union, with its clear pan-Arab vision, was formed in 1928, 17 years before the League of Arab States.

Some nationalists even started to see in the feminist writings of this era a key for national reform. The well-known nationalist lawyer Habib Faris wrote to *Fatat Lubnan* in 1914: "National reform could be achieved once the government decides to support women writers, who are the best qualified to sow the seeds of just and righteous principles among the people. The writings of women in newspapers and journals are more compelling and more effective in bringing about reform than any other force."

Yet several women writers dealt with feminist issues that we are still, almost a century later, trying to resolve. Labiba Shamti'n wrote in 1898: "I can't see how a woman writer or poet could be of any harm to her husband and children. In fact, I see the exact opposite: her knowledge and education will reflect positively on her family and children.... Neither male art nor creativity has ever been considered as a misfortune to the family, or an impediment to the love and care a father may bestow upon his children. The man who sees in a learned woman his rival is incompetent; he who believes that his knowledge is sufficient is mean, and the man who believes that

woman's creativity harms him or her is ignorant."

Articles about the position of European, American, Chinese, Indonesian, and Indian women appeared regularly in these journals, as well as biographies of great women, both European and Arab. The accounts of non-Arab women, in general, never conveyed the slightest feeling of prejudice against Western women or their style of life. Most of these articles stressed the necessity to benefit from the experiences of other women without losing sight of Arab history, culture, and religion. In addition, the journals published accurate social studies about the status of rural women, of employed women, of educated women, and of housewives. These studies often pointed to the source of social ills that kept women on the margin of life, and called for true reform. Quite a few of these articles stressed that if differences between the sexes were to be examined accurately, we would find that the results are in women's favor. They argued that women surpass men in sensitivity, kindness, sympathy, and deep thought, because women are the source of life and the origin of everything valuable in it. But most of the articles stressed that the point is not to prove the superiority of women over men (and by so doing commit the same mistake men have committed for centuries); rather, such arguments try to prove that what others used to call weakness in women's character is, in fact, true strength and a solid basis for social structure.

The journals also reported on the feminist societies that began to appear in all quarters of the Arab world, and on news of international women's conferences. Little record remains of these societies and activities, and their true history has still not been written. But we cannot doubt the closeness of the connection between women's writing and the beginnings of women's organizing. Whether the same women were involved in both, what kinds of associations were formed, what were their aims, memberships, structures and modes of operation are topics that call for research. We also know little about connections between women's charitable associations, which began to appear towards the end of the 19th century, and associations calling for women's rights.

In addition to feminist networks that were set up in Cairo, Alexandria, Damascus, Beirut, and Baghdad, women journalists corresponded with the organization 'Women and Peace', which called upon women in all corners of the globe to use their powers against the escalation of tension and the production of weapons. They argued that women are the first, and the worst, hurt by war. These journals exerted a real effort to win Arab women to the cause of peace. No less noteworthy is the fact that, even in this early period, an aim of Arab women writers was to subvert Western stereotypes of Arab

women, within a framework of closer ties with Western feminists.

In 1893 Hana Kasbani Kurani (1870-1898) attended an international women's conference in Chicago held to exchange opinions about international women's movements. At the end of the conference she gave an address in English in which she tried to highlight some of the merits of Eastern women in opposition to inveterate stereotypes.¹ After the conference she spent three years in the United States, touring New York, Boston, and Brooklyn addressing American audiences in English while wearing the Syrian national dress in an audacious effort to help American audiences unlearn what they had learnt about Syrian women. Unfortunately she caught tuberculosis and was advised by doctors to go back to Lebanon for her treatment. As soon as she returned to Mount Lebanon she gave an address in which she explored the influence of modernity on the East. She died soon afterwards at the age of 29. Her three novels and all the lectures she gave in the US were burnt "in fear of transmitting the germs of the disease to others".

Hana Kurani was not the only Arab woman at that time engaged in a dialogue with women in the West. There was also Zaynab Fawaz (from Lebanon), who wanted to attend the 1893 conference in Chicago but was unable to send a copy of her book, *Scattered Pearls in Women's Quarters*, in which she documented the lives of 456 women from both East and West, to Berta Onori Palmer, the head of the Women's section in the Chicago exhibition. But when the conference called on women to confine their activities to 'feminine domains' Zaynab Fawaz was furious, and dispatched a letter to the conference expressing her strong objections to this call stressing that the lives of both men and women would be impoverished if women's duties were restricted to family and children. Her letters to the conference, in which she insisted that women should participate in all spheres of life, were published in *Al-Nil* newspaper in Egypt. Besides attending women's international conferences which took place in the US, London and Paris,² Arab women tried to reach an international audience and build bridges with Western women through the journals they published. In these they kept their readers well informed of the progress women were making all over the world, as well as of the obstacles which still persist in their way. American women were considered pioneers in women's liberation, and their achievements were often cited with pride to

give examples to Arab women, who were invited to take their American sisters as role models. Quite a few Arab women's journals, for example *Anis al-Jalis*, published by Alexandra Aferno, appointed correspondents in many parts of the world, to send reports on the position of women there, and publish the journal there as a way of introducing Arab women to the West. After a visit by *Anis al-Jalis's* editor to Europe, she was invited to publish a feminist journal in French aimed at informing readers about the status of women in the East. Aferno responded, "Although many articles in the journal speak about the affairs of Eastern women, and are translated and published in European magazines, this is perhaps not enough. I have therefore decided to publish a journal which includes articles that interest both Eastern and Western people". She applauded the support of men of letters, and invited Arab writers to show the same enthusiasm for *Anis al-Jalis*. We also know that the Women's Union in Egypt began in 1936 publishing the journal *Egyptienne* which was published in French and directed towards an European audience, and carried Egyptian women's opinions on national issues.

Another early writer, Afifeh Karam, deputy editor of *Al-Huda* Newspapers in New York, took a year off in 1906 in order to write a novel in which she dwelt on the relation between Eastern and Western women. As an Arab woman living in New York she could see how many misconceptions, particularly those about women, traveled back and forth between East and West, with some people having a vested interest in such traffic. Her novel *Badia Wa Fouad*, published by the *Al-Huda* press, was perhaps the first novel in women's literature to discuss international feminism and its internal cultural variations. In Afifeh Karam's view, there was no contradiction between Eastern and Western feminism.

Yet in the context of struggle between Western hegemony over the Arab region and resistance to that hegemony, such contradictions emerged and became ever more politicized. In her *Images of Women*, Sarah Graham-Brown studies the portrayal of women in photography in the Middle East from 1860 to 1950.³ In this study she argues that three themes are intertwined in the development of Western photographic imagery of women in the Middle East. "The first reflects the fact that the invention of photography coincided with a period of European imperialism on a global scale. The second is the particular and uneven relationship between European cultures and those of the

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Middle East, embodied in what has become known as Orientalism. The third theme is the tension between the Orientalist images of women in the Middle East and changing attitudes to women's social, cultural and economic role in Europe. Underlying all themes are unequal power relationships: between colonizer and colonized, the creators of Orientalist fantasies and their subjects, male and female".⁴ But more often than not women of the Middle East were regarded as exotic sexual objects, and more often than not 'the Oriental woman' was taken "to represent the Orient itself or its essential characteristics".⁵ Graham-Brown highlights a very interesting contrast between, on the one hand, the invisibility of women in the Orient and the assumption that they are locked away behind barriers of the veil and seclusion, and on the other women's sexual exposure in another version of the Orient. In 'Orientalist' paintings and photographs, women appear naked in scenes of the harem and in the hamam (public bath).⁶ In America, however, the Orient, as Holly Edwards argues, "provided a therapeutic foil whereby America could name its accomplishments and its problems, and, in the process, construct a flattering self-image."⁷ While the United States had no imperialist agenda for the Middle East in the 19th century, Islam "represented to the founders so false a religion that it vied with Roman Catholicism as the ultimate in anti-Christianities."⁸ It is also significant to remember that in the 1780s and 1790s Americans famously warred against the Islamic Orient, and many works followed in the aftermath such as *The Algerine Spy* (1787) that recited "many of the negative stereotypes about the Islamic Oriental but also fantasized the capacity of the democratic principles to entertain the world and then to lead it to decency. The characters of these stories began as monsters but evolved through exposure to American institutions, among them the stable family, into ardent republicans. These works, published in abundance throughout the early nineteenth century, were major first steps in creating Islam's place in American culture as an icon of terror."⁹ Islam still exists in the minds of most Americans as an icon of terror and Muslim women as the icons of the oppressed and the humiliated against the image of American women, the privileged, free and equal citizens of the republic.

It is self-evident of course that neither the West nor the East, either then or today, has accorded women the status they deserve, yet both East and West claim that their

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women are by far better off than women on the other side. Much of the hostile stereotyping sustained by popular media in the West rests on a false idea of Arab women's exclusion from the public sphere, itself based in an exaggeration of the boundary between 'public' and 'domestic'. To my knowledge the only woman who has challenged this impaired vision is an Arab woman from Egypt, Nabawiyya Musa, in her pioneering treatise *Al-Mara'a wa al-'Amal (Woman and Labour)*, published in 1920 in Egypt. In this treatise she presented an exciting argument against what amounted to a cultural blackmailing of women by Farid Wagdi, who notoriously opposed her strong contention that women should go out to work. He defined woman as "a noble creature created to reproduce and multiply the human race, a function in which man cannot compete", and further justified his position by describing "scenes in America's factories that broke his heart - women working inside factories in front of huge cauldrons, sweating and toiling for their daily bread". In a brilliant response, Musa wondered how Wagdi managed to be aware of those conditions in America while he remained blind to worse conditions in his own country. She wrote this rare and precious piece highlighting what is still being done to women today:

How did he close his eyes and never see the Egyptian woman while she suffered and groaned carrying her heavy burden of fruits and vegetables which she has to sell for a living, while she makes her way in winding lanes and is exposed to the insults of men? How can he ignore those Egyptian Muslim women who make a living washing clothes for families and for the British and Egyptian armies? These women are not only exposed to a harsh life, but they have no guarantee that their honor will be safe... Hasn't His Excellency seen the woman construction worker who climbs on scaffolds carrying a heavy load of mud and bricks? Hasn't he seen the maidservants who, aside from their arduous tasks, are subject to the lusts of foreign men? Our writer closed his eyes to all these sights, and could only see the fate of the American woman laborer... he forgot a simple fact about human nature, that people tend to be blind to what they are accustomed to.

Women are truly suffering in their toil in Egypt. We do not feel it, whereas we are sensitive to what befalls American women, who in fact suffer less, but retain our attention because it is strange to see them work in factories.

The Egyptian woman is not barred from mean, arduous jobs, which proves that women are forced to work when in need to make a living because we have not trained them for more comfortable work. Women are forced to accept these physically demanding tasks, which do not require any education. In that they are equal with the American woman worker. Our women are only barred from professions that require experience and knowledge, such as management, editorial jobs, scientific institutes, medicine, high governmental positions and law. Forcing them out of these job opportunities leaves them with no other resort. Is there justice in this? Can any of those who stand in her way claim that they seek women's comfort and security?¹⁰

Eighty years after Nabawiyya Musa, the West still refers to women in the East as the ultimately oppressed and deprived of all rights, and the East refers to women in the West as victims of pornography and sexual libertinism. For women in both East and West what this argument suggests is that they should preserve their traditions because they are ultimately less oppressive than what women have to put up with in other cultures. Carrying this argument to its extreme limits results in the tragic scene of Jordanian women demonstrating against a Parliamentary draft law for striking out the article on honor killings from the Jordanian law. According to the law of honor killing a man may kill his kinswoman if suspected of adultery or disgraceful sexual behavior and get only six months imprisonment; much of the time they are not served at all. On the other hand despite all the injustices still affecting the lives of Western women, the

West presents its women to the East as free and equal, whose example can only be liberating to women in the East. This was never more clear than during the 1st Gulf War when the presence of a few American women combatants in Saudi Arabia was hailed in the American press as having a magical effect on Saudi women who led a demonstration and drove their cars in defiance of the Saudi law that prohibits them to drive. No mention was made of the fact that in all neighboring Muslim countries women have been driving their cars for years, or that the Saudi women who demonstrated were mostly university professors.

Despite all the big talk both in East and West, 70% of the poorest people in the world are women and 70% of illiterates in the world are women. Hence, women desperately need to try and change the nature of the political system which is more often than not, as author Upadhyay said, "centered around self-evaluation rather than societal development and which encourages politicians to put their party and the selves before the state", and certainly before women.¹¹ Most significant of all, women should not be blackmailed to believe that just because they are working in the public sphere they have become equals. Needless to say that not all men working in the public sphere are equal. Women from both East and West have to ask the question: who controls the tools of producing wealth and power and who shapes events and defines them for the entire world? From the perspective of a Middle Eastern woman, the answer to these questions is the rich, the men, the West and the government.

ENDNOTES

1. See George Kallas, *Women's Intellectual Movement in the Renaissance, 1849-1928* (Arabic) (Dar al Jil, Beirut).
2. For example, they attended the Conference of the Italian Society for Peace convened in Paris 1902, and the Egyptian women chose princess Alexandra Khuri Aferno as their representative. They also attended the conference on Women Volunteers for Training and Education, convened at the University of Toronto, Canada and the International Women's Conference convened in Paris in 1926, with Farida Aqal representing Lebanese women's societies.
3. Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women*, (London: Quartet Books, 1988).
4. *Ibid.*, p 4.
5. *Ibid.*, p 7.
6. *Ibid.*, p 10.
7. Holly Edwards "A Million and One Nights: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930" H. Edwards ed., *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p 20.
8. Brian T. Allen: "The Garments of Instruction from the Wardrobe of Pleasure: American Orientalist Painting in the 1870s and 1880s" in *Noble Dreams*, p 60.
9. *Ibid.* pp 60-61.
10. Mona Mikhail ed., *Images of Arab Women: Fact and Fiction*, (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1979), pp, 32-33.
11. R. K. Upadhyay, "Women in the 21st Century, Problems and Challenges" in Upadhyay ed. *Women in the 21st Century, Problems and Challenges*, (New Delhi: Harnam Publications, 1996), p i.