

Islamist Feminism: A Transformation of Orientalist Opinion

Dina Odeh

Professor Elizabeth Gardner

Abstract: The Middle East has been a subject of discussion for many years due to growing tensions with the United States. The topic of this paper will be centered on the women of the Middle East and the manner in which they are depicted in the media. Rather than understanding a culture in all of its forms, the media embellishes the radicalism that only exists in small percentages of the region. This paper hopes to dispel the inaccurate Western depiction of Middle Eastern women. The essay will provide an eye into an otherwise shadowed part of the world, thus giving an accurate and well-rounded portrayal of Arab women both in the United States and abroad (through the discussion of culture, religion, and art).

Prior to the tragedy that struck the United States on September 11, 2001, the subject of the Middle East was rarely brought up. Several aspects of the region's cultural and religious practices had remained foreign concepts to the average American citizen. At the time, there was no reason to put Arabs under a magnifying glass, amplifying every detail of their behavior. However, the post-9/11 world has led to universal intrigue of this politically distressed region; the media has not only misinformed the public on political grounds, but it has also misdirected Western opinion of Middle Eastern women, portraying them as subservient and culturally insignificant. The United States' media propaganda provides a blatantly dishonest portrayal of the nation's foreign policies. In the context of marriage, Arab women are portrayed as submissive, in religion they're shown as having no opinion, and in society they're made to seem complacent in their obedience. Within the last few decades, the United States appears to have waged its war against Middle Eastern men while simultaneously sympathizing with their women, hoping to save them from their tyrannical cultures.

In her article, “Islamophobia and the ‘Privileging’ of Arab American Women,” Nada Elia emphasizes this very paradox. She describes this phenomenon as “colonial patriarchal racism, which views ‘other’ women as powerless victims of their own culture,” (Elia 155) while demonizing their male compatriots. Clearly, the existence of subjugation in the Arab world cannot be ignored; however, the West continues to disregard the region’s advancements on the feminist front. The Middle East is a culturally rich region that has long been victim to the biases of the Western media, portraying its men as dangerous and its women as weak.

With increasing technological advances in the past two decades, traditional forms of media have been able to transform themselves to suit society’s fast passed demands; however, the extent to which this revolution can be deemed successful lies within the media’s content. Because the media is vast, it is important for the sake of research to limit the definition to the World Wide Web and its influence on the skewed depiction of Middle Eastern women both in the United States and abroad.

In his writing “Muslims and the Media in the Blogosphere,” Daniel Varisco investigates a multitude of blogs either about Islam or written by Muslims to diffuse inaccurate mainstream media views. He states that one of the major injustices voiced by Muslims worldwide is the “continuing representation of Islam through stereotypes and political prejudice embedded in European and American cultural traditions” (Varisco 159). There will always remain a barrier between the West and the Middle East so long as the misrepresentation of religious, cultural and political circumstances continues. Though the West publicly protests the mistreatment of women in the Middle East, Elia stresses that “Arab women are ultimately victimized by the United States” because the reality of the situation is that the oppressive regimes under which some of these women live would not still be in place were it not due to the nation’s relationships with the oppressors themselves (Elia 157). Elia’s statement displays the hypocrisy of the US government. Women’s ability to move freely and obtain basic rights in Palestine are as Elia explains,

“denied them not by Arab men, but by the brutal Israeli occupier, very generously backed by American tax dollars”; she goes on to emphasize that the most oppressive regimes of the region in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are kept in place due to ties with the American government (Elia 157). Facts such as these are easily made available to the public through the Internet; however, the opposition of Middle Eastern customs overshadows them.

Human nature involves recognizing differences between one’s self and others, which often leads to undeniable judgment. Therefore, because Middle Eastern cultural and religious practices are so vastly different from the West, it becomes easier to criticize as opposed to assigning blame. Varisco strongly believes that “the medium is not the problem, but the message in its Western Orientalist frame often is” (Varisco 159). The “Western Orientalist frame” can be defined as Western designations of what societal norms should be. Implicitly, anything lying outside its lines is deemed “un-American”, and thus un-free. These social norms range from basic Constitutional Rights, largely focused on the First Amendment, all the way to standards of dress, and gender equality. Thus, Middle Eastern customs fall outside the bounds of American norms because of their widely known conservative lifestyle. Dressing conservatively, for the sake of religious practice, is an example of a notable difference between the Western culture and the Middle East. Oftentimes in the West, dress becomes an outlet for personal expression, most popularly recognized by a lack of substantial clothing. Therefore, opposite behavior, particularly covering up one’s body is viewed as something far *less* normal by Western standards. Freedom intends to incorporate the ability to make choices without the fear of being labeled *Un-American*.

By defining freedom in an Orientalist frame, the government’s media propaganda is able to campaign the US involvement in the affairs of the Middle East as intending to release a people from tyrannical leadership, kept in place by the West, so as to free them through liberal ideologies. In the year following the incidence of September

11th we begin to see the United States waging its war against Muslim men specifically. In his article “Threats and Responses: Immigration” published in *The New York Times*, Raymond Bonner covers an immigration policy passed by the Bush administration in 2002 that displays this very point. He explains this policy to require “that officials in Washington approve visas for every male between the ages of 16 and 45 who is a native of any one of 26 [Muslim] countries” (Bonner 2002). It should be noted that this change in immigration policy does not apply to Muslim women, but to Muslim men alone. Passing of policies such as this influence Western public opinion, which thus leads to greater pressure to fit into *the frame*. Evidence for the impact of the Orientalist frame can be seen on the popular Muslim group blog, Muslimah Media Watch, whose aim is to “counter misogynist and sexist images of Muslim women” (Varisco 166). Providing freedom for individual commentary, this site gives voice to Muslim American women. A woman who had attended the three hour discussion confronted Makki in reference to her hijab, or head scarf, and said the following: “What you’re wearing is not our culture” (Makki 2013). This Second Wave feminist believed that “covering for reasons of modesty only benefits patriarchy and cannot allow for female agency” (Makki 2013). And after an exchange of opinions regarding what is *American*, Makki frustratingly came to the realization that the woman listened but did not hear what she and her fellow panelists had said. She states, “to her, being American while being an observant Muslim woman is impossible and we were confused about our identities” (Makki 2013). This incidence illustrates the confinement of Western ideologies regarding what is and isn’t *American*.

Western media coverage of the effects of US foreign policy in Middle Eastern countries has been corrupted by political alliances, thus attributing to an inability to fully understand regional religious and cultural practices. The increased lack of knowledge of the conservative customs and circumstances in the Middle East, coupled with unfortunate acts of terrorism against the US have lead to the emergence of virulent Islamophobia in the West. Elia mentions in her writing, “in the non-

progressive media, whenever Muslims were represented, they invariably appeared in the role of villains—and always as foreigners—Arabs, not Arab Americans” (156). In this context, Elia is implying that there are two types of media: progressive media in which we bare witness to accurate and realistic representations of the Middle East, and the more prevalent non-progressive media that highlights a fraction of the whole region. Although cinematography is not considered a credible source because of its embellishment of stereotypes, the consistent casting of Arabs in dangerous, criminal, aggressive, and abusive roles does indeed influence the audience to correlate these traits with the overall race. The 1980’s and 1990’s demonstrated the Arab debut onto the silver screen in movies such as *The Siege*, *Executive Decision*, and *True Lies*, amongst others. However, this marked the beginning of an ongoing type casting of Middle Eastern roles in cinematography. Laurie Goodstein discusses this phenomenon in her article in the New York Times titled, “Film; Hollywood Now Plays Cowboys and Arabs.” In her article, she quotes professor of broadcast journalism, Jack G. Shaheen, as having said, “The problem is, you take the lunatic fringe and make the lunatic fringe represent the majority” (Goodstein 1998). In other words, the media has created an image in which the extremists of the Arab and Muslim world represent the race in its entirety. The point of confusion, however, appears to be that Western media does not demonize all Arabs, but rather it pinpoints its intolerances against Arab and Muslim men.

The United States is privileging the female population whilst patronizing the husbands, sons, brothers, and fathers of these supposedly victimized women. National security is a matter that depends upon a multitude of administrations including the military, FBI, CIA, and police forces. Protecting the people is the job of these organizations; however, there is a fine line between protection and spying. In an editorial published in *The New York Times* titled “Spying on Law-Abiding Muslims,” an unnamed author puts the New York City police under scrutiny for its invasive surveillance of Muslims. A man from Queens, solicited and paid by the NYPD to spy on Muslims, quoted

the department as having said, “being a religious Muslim is a terrorism indicator” (Spying on Law-Abiding Muslims, 2013). Based upon an American citizen’s First Amendment rights, an individual has the right to practice his/her religion freely. In this context, the NYPD is in violation of the Constitution. According to court documents, Muslim groups are selected “for surveillance and infiltration, even when they did not sponsor unlawful or terrorists acts and were not accused of contributing to them” (Spying on Law-Abiding Muslims, 2013). Thus, the organization has, without just cause, invaded the privacy of Muslim groups worshipping in mosques, attending Islamic instruction classes, and going to other religious gatherings. Men and women worship separately in Islamic settings due to religious beliefs that the two should not intermingle with members of the opposite sex were they not kin. The infiltrator mentioned in the article is male, so it can be deduced that the NYPD is unconstitutionally investigating Muslim men in particular.

Considering the growing discourse over gender roles and the necessity for men and women to be held to the same standards in the United States, it should be assumed that the nation would not emphasize gender differences when dealing with foreign affairs and issues of national security. If American citizens, both male and female, are to be treated equally on all grounds, then this rule should apply to Arab and Muslim Americans as well. The United States Department of Homeland Security, created in response to the attacks on September 11th, ultimately “reveal[s] a pattern of viewing the women as harmless and redeemable, [and] the men as perennial enemies, never to be trusted” (Elia 158). However, it is necessary to point out that radicalism is not confined solely to the male population. BBC News covered a story in 2008 in which Middle East correspondent Paul Wood went to meet a Palestinian woman who had volunteered to go through training in Gaza to become a female suicide bomber (BBC 2008). The woman interviewed, who went by the name Um Anas, was a new bride who was being trained by an Islamic Jihad to take her own life in the name of Palestinian freedom. Her tone in the interview was calm and articulate, wielding the same

strength and conviction to kill as the male martyrs of her group. To victimize women and make them out to be less dangerous than men is unfair and inaccurate. Extremism does not discriminate based upon sex, but rather exploits Western misconceptions to its advantage.

Before continuing this analysis, it is necessary to properly define the fundamentalism and repression that some women in the Middle East face in their countries. Anna King examines the vast dimensions of the Middle East in her writing “Islam, Women and Violence.” She recognizes that “there are profound differences in the status of women within and between predominantly Muslim countries” (King 292). The most widely known country that gives its women little power is Saudi Arabia, home to two of Islam’s holy cities: Mecca and Medina. In the majority of this country’s cities, excluding compounds, women must dress in the appropriate attire which comprises a traditional long black dress known as a *‘abayeh*, a veil, and most often a *niqab*, which is a piece of fabric that covers the face, leaving only the eyes to be seen. It is also, as outrageous as it may sound, illegal for women to drive. Saudi Arabia is not the only country in the Middle East that shares these extreme measures. It is, moreover, important to note that “the treatment of women by fundamentalist regimes in Afghanistan, Sudan, Algeria, Pakistan and Iran is known to be repressive, yet there is little outrage in the academic literature of the West” (King 295). In her article, King questions whether Western academics have become accepting of some of the inexcusable practices in the Middle East.

The lack of political interference brings up the question of whether the West truly sympathizes with these women or simply claims to for the purpose of challenging the Arab men that are seen as threats to national security. FEMEN, the Ukrainian based feminist protest group, finds that governments like the ones mentioned and Islamic laws teach the inferiority of women. They waged their war against female oppression with their highly publicized Topless Jihad Day that took place all over the world on April 4th, 2013. Once images of the topless protest began to surface, Muslim women launched a campaign called

“Muslimah Pride Day” in which they challenged FEMEN’s behavior. Al-Jazeera’s online program known as *The Stream* has since been displaying images of Muslim women voicing their opinions. One image shows a woman in *hijab* holding a sign that reads, “Nudity DOES NOT liberate me – and I DO NOT need saving!” Twitter feeds have become flooded with the trend (#MuslimahPride) expressing the widespread disapproval of FEMEN’s protest that spoke for, but did not represent the collective voice of Muslim women worldwide. King notes that “Many Muslim women are emphatic that the Qur’an not only preaches spiritual equality of men and women, it offers women more rights than other religions, or at the very least no more inherently patriarchal” (King 297). The United States and Europe cannot speak for a group of women whose values are so inherently different from those in the West. According to Makki in her article on *The New York Times* website titled “Fighting For or Against the Hijab is Distracting,” she states, “There is no one-size-fits-all approach to feminism. A headscarf doesn’t preclude empowerment; a bikini doesn’t preclude oppression” (Makki 2013). In order for feminist fronts to move forward, they must stop speaking over one another and instead join together in an understanding that there are more pressing issues at hand than fashion.

In order to accurately understand feminism in the Middle East, one must look to define femininity and womanhood through the eyes of Arab and Muslim women as opposed to assuming that they desire to live liberally. FEMEN’s actions are a source of concern because they validate the idea that the West is speaking for Arab and Muslim women, lacking consideration for the difference in cultural perceptions of freedom. Hannah Kapp-Klote posted an article titled “FEMEN Protests: Nobody Asked This Group to Speak For Oppressed Muslim Women,” establishing this very point. Acknowledging FEMEN’s questionable methods, she states, “far more concerning is their claim to speak for all Muslim women who are being ‘oppressed,’ especially without regard for the actual needs of Muslim women or an awareness of how their nudity is equally oppressive” (Kapp-Klote 2013). It is

for this reason that it is vital to understand the basis of femininity and liberation from the perspective of the women we are analyzing. To an Arab Muslim woman the definition of femininity and gender are interlaced with religious expectations. Asifa Siraj conducted a study in which she individually spoke to 30 Muslim women living in Western society regarding gender constructions. She compiled her research into an article called “‘Smoothing Down Ruffled Feathers’: the Construction of Muslim Women’s Feminine Identities.” It is important to note that gender and sex differ. While the former implies traits of femininity and masculinity, the latter refers to biological differences. When considering men and women in the Qur’an, Siraj notes that “we have to recognize that it does not equate men and women because they are intrinsically different” (Siraj 187). This implies the obvious: men and women differ in a multitude of ways and thus, they cannot be equated perfectly, a concept that defies the Western opinion that men and women should be treated equally. However, “women’s experiences have been assumed and accepted to mean ‘white women’, marginalizing the existence of non-white women” (Siraj 188) and disregarding their right to be understood. The environment in which we grow up influences our conceptual understandings of gender, and transforms our outlooks on what our roles are in society. The majority of Muslim women believe that femininity is rooted within the importance of “upholding the norms of ‘appropriate or respectable’ femininity, which involves appearance, honor and motherhood” (Siraj 189). “Appropriate” and “respectable” can be clarified within the sanctity of religious modesty. Muslims find that Western style clothing poses a threat to their purity because this form of dress defies Islamic ideologies of how women are to present themselves in public.

While the West continues to equate women to men, it is important to bring attention to a movement that Muslim women themselves have begun in their own communities, challenging the patriarchal norm but not aiming for gender equality. In her article “Middle Eastern Women in Gendered Space: Religious Legitimacy and

Social Reality,” Ruth Roded discusses the value of women in Islam. Many Muslim women recognize that from the early days of the Prophet women played a crucial role in the spread of Islamic knowledge. In the time of the Prophet Muhammad, women were able to participate in communal prayers along with men, though separated by standing behind them (Roded 4). Today many communities oppose female participation in communal prayers; however, women are gaining more knowledge of their faith and better understanding of their place, thus challenging the old norms. By becoming more knowledgeable in the area of their faith, these women are able to better understand who they are in the world. In doing so they are claiming their place in society and applying their learning, thus defining themselves as fully competent and capable of attaining their own success within Islam. These strides by Muslim women to improve their positions in society both as followers and scholars “have been linked to a movement known as Islamic feminism” (Roded 6). The primary goal is not as the West would assume. Islamist fundamentalist women or Islamic feminists do not aim for equality to men; instead, they aim to be recognized as intellectuals whose abilities are not to be undermined but rather to complement their counterparts. Maryam Jameelah, a scholarly convert to Islam, states that “men and women are not the same... Women are not equal to men. But neither are men equal to women” (King 307). The roles of men and women are not meant to compete with one another in society; Islam created the two to work together, recognizing each of their strengths and weaknesses.

In order for global progression to exist on the feminist front, women everywhere must learn to work together as well. The Middle East has a long road ahead of itself, but it has already begun moving forward. In her article “War, Resisting the West, and Women’s Labor: Toward an Understanding of Arab Exceptionalism,” Michele Angrist discusses some of the factors that have led to Middle Eastern resistance of Western liberality. She states, “Islamists have articulated an ideology that casts tradition, identity, and cultural authenticity in religious terms and have argued that Islamic identity is in danger” (Angrist 64). An individual’s

identity lies within his/her culture, religion, and traditions. The Islamic identity feels threatened by the Western ideologies that are far different from its own. The lack of understanding between the Middle East and the West is what hinders global progression of women’s status. Rather than fighting one another’s practices, the two should learn to accept their differences. If feminists all over the world, from various backgrounds, were to join forces with a mutual respect for cultural and religious distinction, they would together influence change. Speak over one another and the world will not understand your cause. But speak together and you will be heard.

Works Cited

- Angrist, M. (2012). “War, Resisting the West, and Women’s Labor: Toward an Understanding of Arab Exceptionalism.” *Politics & Gender*, 8(1), 51-82.
- Bonner, Raymond. “Threats and Responses: Immigration.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 10 Sept. 2002.
- Elia, N. (2006). Islamophobia and the “Privileging” of Arab American Women. *NWSA Journal*, 18(3), 155-161.
- Goodstein, Laurie. “Film; Hollywood Now Plays Cowboys and Arabs.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 01 Nov. 1998.
- “Just Married and Determined to Die.” *BBC News*. BBC, 13 Oct. 2008.
- Kapp-Klote, Hannah. “Femen Protests: Nobody Asked This Group to Speak for Oppressed Muslim Women.” Web log post. *World, Human Rights*. PolicyMic, 11 Apr. 2013.
- King, Anna. “Islam, Women and Violence.” *Feminist Theology* 17.3 (2009): 292-328.
- Makki, Hind. “Fighting For or Against the Hijab Is Distracting.” *Room for Debate*. The New York Times, 24 Apr. 2013
- Makki, Hind. “Of Hijab, Stereotypes and Pop Culture.” Web log post. *Muslimah Media Watch*. Patheos, 9 Apr. 2013.
- Roded, Ruth. “Middle Eastern Women in Gendered Space: Religious Legitimacy and Social Reality.” *Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World* 10 (2012): 1-17.
- Siraj, Asifa. “‘Smoothing Down Ruffled Feathers’: The Construction of Muslim Women’s Feminine Identity.” *Journal of Gender Studies* 21.2 (2012): 185-99.
- “Spying on Law-Abiding Muslims.” *The New York Times*, 10 Feb. 2013,

New York ed.: SR10.

Varisco, Daniel M. "Muslims and the Media in the Blogosphere." *Contemporary Islam* 4 (2010): 157-77.