

The History of Feminism in the Arab World

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Received: 25 December 2022

Revised: 28 January 2023

Accepted: 8 February 2023

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the history of Arab feminism. It traces how those women came from different parts of Arab world and how they developed their awareness towards women's issues, though they do not call themselves as 'feminists' at the beginning. The paper aims to study the history of feminism in the Arab world. To show the struggle of the first Arab women feminists. To focus on the crucial issues of women's concern. The paper uses feminist approach as it concerns with women's important issues. The study traces how the Arab feminism started in Egypt and then the other parts of Arab World as Egypt has been the first Arab country to get its independence from the British rule. The concern for women issues started first in the national level as struggle for their independence and after the independence the struggle changed to women issues. The paper concluded by stating that the struggle of Arab women's feminist discourse advocated to significant women's problems like education, work, and the right for suffrage. They also confronted by other troubles, such as breaking out of gender segregation.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender segregation, Pioneers and Feminist discourse

1. Introduction

To write on the history of Arab feminism is a challenge because there is no much writing about that, so this paper investigates the history of Arab feminism and how women came from different parts of Arab world, and how they developed their awareness towards women issues though they do not call themselves as 'feminists' at the beginning. As in many other developing countries, early Arab feminist consciousness went hand in hand with national consciousness, feminism being a product of Arab political and socio-economic dynamics. There is, no doubt, the Arab feminism started in Egypt much earlier than any other country as Egypt has been the first Arab country to get its independence from the British rule. The concern of Arab women feminists' issues started first in the national level as struggle for their independence and after the independence the struggle changed to women issues.

1.1 Objectives of the study:

The objectives of this study are the following:

- i. To study the history of feminism in the Arab world.
- ii. To show the struggle of those women who came from different parts of the Arab World.
- iii. To focus on the crucial issues of women's concern.

1.2 Scope and Limitation:

This study focuses on the history of feminism in the Arab world. It traces how those women came from different parts of Arab world and how they developed their awareness towards women's issues, though they do not call themselves as 'feminists' at the beginning.

2. Methodology:

This paper makes use of feminist approach because it concerns with women's crucial problems along with education, work, and rights regarding marriage. It studies and analyses the works of the pioneers of Arab feminists to trace the developments of the history of feminism and to show how those women feminists came from different parts of the Arab world.

3. Analysis:

From the late nineteenth century, with the rise of nationalism, the first feminists grounded their growing feminist consciousness in nationalism, as can be read in the new Arab women's journals in Cairo and Alexandria. Those women added new dimensions to nationalist debates and activism. Badran has investigated Egyptian women's militancy in the national revolution from 1919 to 1922 in which feminist nationalists advocated a society restructured on feminist principles.

After independence, Egyptian women started a social movement under the auspices of the Egyptian Feminist Union. In 1938 and 1941 [2] they united in pan-Arab meetings in Cairo to strengthen Arab feminist consciousness. In 1944, they founded the Arab Feminist Union. Among Palestinian women, during the entire period of work and after the establishment of the state of Israel, women's nationalism prevailed over the absence of threats and the reality of their land. In Sudan, women participated in a nationwide war of independence in the mid-1950s and survived as an organized feminist movement. During the Algerian Revolution of 1954-1962, most of the women who participated were young, and much later some emerged as feminists. In the late 1970s and 1980s, Palestinian women asserted themselves simultaneously as feminists and nationalists. Meanwhile, women in the Arabian Peninsula have taken advantage of new educational opportunities, and the country's policy to reduce the number of foreign workers has opened up new job opportunities. In Kuwait, where women have more opportunities for compromise and a clearer perspective of the debate, feminism has the biggest visible face, even in Saudi Arabia, where women are more restricted and speak more openly and are less visible.

In the mid-Eighties, Pan-Arab feminism re-emerged within the framework of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA)[3] under the chairmanship of Nawal El-Saadawi in Cairo. Arab feminists gathered in large numbers at the NGO discussion forum in Nairobi in 1985, marking the end of the United Nations Decade for Women. There are now (AWSA) offices in various Arab countries and also in Europe. In some Arab countries, (AWSA) has invisible nuclei. The new Pan-Arab feminism is aiming to combat reactionary or conservative move throughout the Arab world to drive women out of the public workforce back into the home and to challenge the rescinding of even minimal gains in family laws. The new patriarchal conservative thrust, which most progressive men do not challenge, is led by Islamic conservatives and is symbolized by the veil. While some Arab feminists, such as Fatima Mernissi of Morocco and Nawal El-Saadawi and Amina Said of Egypt, continue to speak out, most others are cautious or openly silent. However, as Mernissi wrote in the introduction to the 1987 edition of her classic, *Beyond the Veil* [4]: "Are we all going back to the veil, back to the secluded house, back to the walled city, back to the national, proudly sealed, imaginary boundaries? It is very unlikely". (Mernissi: 3) [4]

The genealogy of recognized Arab women writers and poets dates back to pre-Islamic Arabia, a time when women competed with men in public debates. The elegance of Al-Khansa of the Mudar tribe is considered one of the masterpieces of Arabic poetry. In the early days of Arab Islam, Aisha, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad, published religious interpretations. In

the 8th century, the mystic Rabia al-Adawiya composed esoteric verses. Among the poets of the medieval Abbasid court in Baghdad were Ubaida Al-Tamburiya, Sakina and Queen Zubaida, whose lyrical correspondence with Caliph Harun al-Rashid was highly regarded. In the late 18th century, the Egyptian historian Al-Jabarti said that Cairene women were wonderful because of their education. In the 19th century, late Arab intellectuals such as Zainab Fawwaz and Maryam Al-Nahas, mother of Hind Nawfal, founder of the first women's newspaper, had cataloged their fore mothers along with more contemporary sisters in the new biographical dictionaries and compendium of women. This compendium served a hortatory function: they pinpointed desirable qualities in great Arab and non-Arab women of the past to reclaim their experience for contemporary women.

Arab's 19th century women began to benefit from the spread of education. Although their contributions remain largely undisclosed in the public domain, these women were part of what in the Mashriq was called the nahda or cultural renaissance. From the 1870s, Al-Yaziji and Aisha Al-Taimuriya, an upper class Turco-Circassian woman living in Cairo, exchanged poems and essays. Early in the twentieth century, Bdhitat al-Badiya sent letters and verses to May Ziyada [5] from the Fayyum, an oasis east of Cairo. She subsequently published these letters in the press.

In Egypt, By the 1890s, Eugenie Le Brun Rushdi, French female who had married an upper elegance Egyptian and converted to Islam, held a salon which served as a forum for upper elegance women to come together, organize debates and examine their circumstances as women. The women's salon of the 1890s paved the way for other collective intellectual activities, such as women's lectures. In 1914, Huda Shaarawi [1], supported by princesses of the Egyptian royal family, spearheaded the founding of the Intellectual Association of Egyptian Women. May Ziyada was a member and Labiba Hashim, the founder of the women's paper *Fatat Al-Sharq* (1906) was its Arabic secretary. Already at this early stage, women writers knew of each other and appreciated the revolutionary potential of writing; when women write, they enter the field of power and knowledge. When Warda al- Yaziji died in 1924 a group of Lebanese women wrote her obituary, and, as Ziyada writes in her biography of Al-Yaziji. They "contributed to a portrait and donated it to the public library in Beirut so that the poet's picture should hang next to those of the great men" (Ziyada: 25) [6]. It was the first time that women had publicly acknowledged another woman in this way. In 1918, Shaarawi's first feminist speech was the eulogy she delivered at the commemoration for Bahithat Al-Badiya when she died. By this period, communications between female and male litterateurs were becoming

widespread. One of the best known correspondences is that between Ziyada and Gibran Khalil Gibran, the Lebanese writer who had immigrated to America in the late nineteenth century.

Arab's journalism began in the nineteenth century in Egypt. Unlike most other Arab lands, independence from Ottoman controls allowed a free press to emerge. Its earliest foundations laid mainly by women and men who had emigrated from the Arab province of Greater Syria. In the 1880s, women were already contributing, to male-founded journals: Aisha Al-Taimuriya published in *Al-Adab* and various Syrian women contributed to journals such as *Al-Lotaif* and *Al-Muqlataf*. Early in the twentieth century, Bahithat Al-Badiya published feminist essays in *Al-Jarida*. These women pioneered in finding space in male-run journals.

In Saudi Arabia, the continued segregation of the gender has not kept women as journalists and editors out of the pages of the male-run major dailies, such as *Al-Riyad*, although they have been housed in separate editorial offices and are subordinate to male administrative and editorial authorities.

In 1892, Hind Nawfal, a Syrian lady residing in Cairo, established *Al-Fatah*, the first women's magazine in the Arab world. Many others followed it. The first militantly feminist journal in the Arab World appeared in Egypt in 1925 when The Egyptian Feminist Union founded (*l'Egyptienne*). It lasted fifteen years. In 1925, Fatma Yusif, a Lebanese immigrant to Egypt, was the first woman to establish what would become a major mainstream journal called by her stage name, *Ruz Al-Yusif*. Until today, it is an important Cairo magazine. In 1937 *Al-Misriya*, a sister journal to *l'Egyptienne* in Arabic, was initiated. In 1945, the Arab Feminist Union published the first Pan-Arab, women's journal called *Al-Arabiya* [7]. Nine years later, its editor Amina Said started *Hawa*. This journal has brought significant gender issues to abroad readership, although recently under new direction it has become conservative and many of its articles are trivial. The seventies and eighties of the nineteenth century saw the founding of other journals such as the Moroccan *Thamanya May* (Eighth of May), the Tunisian *Al-Nisa*, the Sudanese *Ahfad*, the Libyan, *Al-Bait* (The Home); and the Saudi *Sayyidati*, which is published in London, and most recently *Al-Mara al-Misriya* and *Bint al-Ard* in Egypt. In 1989, nearly half a century after the first Pan-Arab women's journal founded, the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA) began to publish a magazine called *Nun*. With the continued proliferation of women's newspapers and magazines in response to a growing readership, writing to publish became more or less acceptable for middle-class women.

From the late 19th century, women gained limited access to male Publishing Houses, as entries in this volume attest. Notwithstanding that a few liberal men who favored women's emancipation and opened their journals to women and whose presses published their books,

the very issue of literacy for women was inflammatory and remained anathema to entrenched male patriarchy which has linked female immorality with literacy. It was argued that educated women are prone to immorality: they can absorb subversive ideas and engage in dangerous interactions that lead to inappropriate behavior. Nabawiya Musa confronted such male fears in her 1920 essay, "The Effects of Books and Novels on Morals." Patriarchal elites showed a class as well as a gender bias, construing literacy as inappropriate and politically dangerous in men of the lower classes, yet not morally threatening to men as it was for women of any class.

Women also tried to fight the patriarchal bias of publishing their texts. The Egyptian Feminist Union has published publications since the 1920s. Women established and ran their own publishing houses in the 1980s, including the Arab Women's Solidarity Association Press in Cairo, Gada Samman Press in Beirut, and Simon Fatal's Apollo Press in California, founded with the Lebanese.

Novels, poems and short stories were the most popular genres followed by writing articles. Fiction and poetry are given the umbrella of optional appearance. Intimate and critical reflections, beautifully expressed in a form that aims to draw attention to itself, the desire of the author and his message, which can be an effective idea for a feminist concept, especially when one needs or seeks the invisible.

Aisha A-Taimuriya and Warda Al- Yaziji wrote and disbursed Poetry and reminiscences inside the past due nineteenth century. They have been brought up in liberal households, and that they had fathers who supported their studies. These guys, dismissing gender 'rules', foiled their wives' efforts to deliver women of the needle in the region of women of the pen. The fathers added in special tutors and recommended their daughter's literary dispositions. On these surroundings, the girls were allowed to increase and specific opportunity views on their society until they were ready to be married, after which they have been geared up to conform. Al- Taimuriya's poetry has been commonly considered traditional and 'genderless', yet a careful reading of Hilyat Al-Tiraz (Embroidered Ornaments, 1909) displays anger in these lines of her poem:

I challenge my destiny, my time
I challenge the human eye
I will sneer at ridiculous rules and people that is the end of it;
I will fill my eyes with pure
Light, and swim in a sea of unbound feeling,
I have challenged tradition and my absurd position,
I have gone beyond what age and place allow (Al-Rabie: 45) [8].

AI- Yaziji's poetry anthology *The Rose Garden* was the first book by an Arab woman to appear in print and published in 1867, and it enjoyed considerable success, so that it was republished in increasingly expanded form in 1887, 1894 and 1914. May Ziyada praised it as the first anthology by an Arab poet to be reprinted more than twice in the nineteenth century. The first half of the twentieth century was a time of experimentation and innovation in Arabic literature. The short story and the novel were new genres from the West that writers tried to appropriate, most were concerned with the plight of the individual, and particularly of Women in a society in rapid transition. The short stories of the Egyptian, Suhair Qalamawi, and the Syrian Ulfa Idelbi and the novels of the Egyptians Amina Said and Latifa Zayyat fell in that period. They organized the public feminist movements made headway during the first half of the twentieth century, it was not, until the sixties and seventies, and those women's feminist voices found wider published literary expression. At the time, a novel by a Lebanese woman caused a stir: *I Live* by Laila Baalbaki, published in 1958.

In Lebanon, the civil war (1975-82) opened opportunities for women to express themselves and to publish in a situation where norms had given way. As the war progressed and the men left, women like the Lebanese Emily Nasrallah, the Palestinian Nuha Samara and the Iraqi Daisy Al-Amir wrote about a society reconstructed in terms of a feminist consciousness. They went beyond criticism to subversion of patriarchal structures. Not simply the authors of a number of compelling individual books, they have through their collective discourse gained recognition as a radical feminist school. In fact, it should be noted that what is considered the first Arabic literary school for women is feminist. The emergence of the feminist school of women writers affects the further development of women's literature. The volumes of writings by Arab women published in places like Lebanon and Egypt inspired other women. It is striking how, in Saudi Arabia, women have begun to write in full awareness of other women writers. Titles of some Saudi women's stories and novels self-consciously intertextual with other women's works; especially those of the Syrian Ghada Samman. The Saudi Fawziya Al-Bikr's *Swimming in the Lake of Nothingness* (1979), recalls Samman's *Swimming in the Lake of the Devil* (1974), while her compatriot Raja Muhammad Auda's *He is my Destiny* (1982) refers to Samman's *Your Eyes are my Destiny* (1962).

The writing and publishing by Arab women of their very own memoirs and journals is particularly a twentieth century phenomenon. Personal and family lives were deemed non-public, and not to be referred to as personal. The first feminist memoir was dictated by Huda Shaarawi in the mid-1940s; in it she candidly recounted her life as a girl and as a woman and analyzed gender experience. Other Egyptian feminists have written memoirs such as Munira

Thabit, who has recalled her life in journalism and politics; Nawal El-Saadawi and Farida Al-Naqqash - who does not call herself a feminist Mary Eagleton have written prison' memoirs. The Palestinian Raimonda Tawil has published *My Home My Prison* (1978) [9]. There was also pan of the 1984 memoir of the Palestinian poet Fadwa Tuqan, an autobiographical essay by the late 19th century.

Warda Al-Yaziji's *The Rose Garden* written in 1867 became a primary step in the direction of reputation of sisterhood in writing. One of the first women to evoke a self-conscious sense of literary sisterhood was May Ziyada (1886-1941). In 1913, five years after her arrival in Cairo, she began a weekly salon frequented by men and women of the literary luminaries of the day. In her biographies as well as in her Press Club Speech in Cairo in 1928 she praised Warda Al- Yaziji, Aisha al-Taimuriya as well as Bahithatal Badiya. By mentioning these names, she acknowledged in society her predecessors, women with whom she could relate in the same generation. The weight and substance of what other women had to say when Ziyada died in 1941, the recognition of those talented writers by the Egyptian Feminist Union, which published a commemorative volume in honor of her literary sister.

The cultivation of such a tradition, while begun earlier, achieved a new level of activity in the 1970s and 1980s, when Arab women increasingly wrote introductions to each other's writings as well as critical reviews of essays. Such works represent a growing tradition of Arab feminist literary criticism. Mary Eagleton wrote in *Feminist Literary Theory* (1986) [10] that the search for women writers is a major problem. To ask the questions where are the women's writing? What has aided or inhibited their writing? How has criticism responded to their work? — introduces into literary criticism the determinant of gender and exposes literary tradition as a construct. In the 1980s, the type of female writers expanded significantly, with mutual focus and recognition of ongoing or competing rejection becoming the norm.

4. Conclusion:

The paper concluded by stating that the struggle of Arab women's feminist discourse has advocated to important women's problems like education, work, and marriage. At the same time has confronted by other problems such as breaking out of gender segregation. Traditionally, Arab women have had to push their feminist expressions in rural societies that have recently experienced modern urbanization and in societies where religion remains an important regulator of daily life and a source of identity. Arab's societies have generally experienced European colonial rule and Western imperialist hegemony like other Third World countries, but women in the Arab world have had a more difficult battle than feminists in the West for their own strangely unique history and reasons.

5. Acknowledgement:

The researcher would like to thank the Journal of the University of Science and Technology for providing him this opportunity to publish his research paper in their Journal.

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