

# An Intelligent Man's Guide to Modern Arab Feminism

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The following pages are an attempt at presenting a brief introduction and periodization of the modern feminist movement in the Arab world. It takes the form of a guide because in the limited space allowed it can only provide a certain number of essential personalities, events, and currents of opinion.

## The Nahdah

The woman's question was central to the problematic of the Nahdah, the Arab cultural renaissance of the mid-nineteenth century. The pioneers of the Nahdah regarded women's inferior status as the basic cause for the backwardness of the Arab and Islamic societies, and were unanimous in affirming that there will be no renaissance for Arabs and Muslims without the renaissance of Arab women. Bustani, Tahtawi, Afghani, Abdu, Qasim Amin, Tahir Haddad and others shared the belief that the renaissance of women will be achieved mainly through education. This is the gist of the famous address by *Mu'allim* Butrus al-Bustani on the "Education of Women" in the 1860's. But the men of the Nahdah mostly envisaged an educated bourgeois or aristocratic woman confined to her home,

whose education was mainly invested in educating her children.

One major break from this tradition is to be found, very early on, in the writings of Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq (1804-1887), a Maronite Lebanese converted to Islam. Al-Shidyaq's *Al-Saq 'Ala-l-Saq* (Paris, 1855), which has been acclaimed as a founding text in Arabic modernity, was written in praise of women and the Arabic language. More than this, the author declares that while writing his book, it was "as if I myself had become a woman". In contrast to the rest of the Nahdah pioneers, who emphasized education, al-Shidyaq considered work as the main motor of the Arab renaissance. He urged the right of women to work; attacked segregation between men and women because it treats woman as a sexual object, called for the equal right of women to divorce, and critiqued the prevalent double standards in dealing with women's infidelity. The radical novelty of al-Shidyaq resides in his vision that the repression of woman's instincts was the basis of male domination, and so defended woman's equal right to sexual pleasure. Not content with calling for formal equality between the sexes, he looked into the consequences of social inequality for women. In his moving pages of observations on the England of the Industrial Revolution, al-Shidyaq discusses prostitution not only as a moral question but also as a consequence of poverty

Qasim Amin (1863-1908) is generally credited with the first work in Arabic devoted to the liberation of women.

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In his *Tahrir al-Mar'ah* (*The Liberation of Woman*, 1899), followed a year later by *Al-Mar'ah al-Jadidah* (*The New Woman*, 1900), Amin rejected the notion of woman as an inferior, and called for measures to realize gender equality. But, in direct contrast to al-Shidyahq, he was a puritan concerning relations between the sexes. Although he attacked polygamy as an impediment to the progress of women and society, he nevertheless rejected sexual pleasure, and approved of the veil (the head cover) though opposing the Niqab and the Burqu'. The anonymity imposed by the two latter forms of veiling, he argued, would encourage licentious behavior.

### The Beginnings

The inter-war period was a period of gestation for modern Arab feminism in more than one sense. Great strides were made in the battle for education. As early as 1928, Egyptian Universities had opened their gates to girls. The immediate results were wider access for women to administrative posts and, with the development of industrialization during WWI and its aftermath, their increased presence in the labor force.

Equality of Rights was no more a slogan. A new era of women's militancy started. In 1920, Egyptian women workers imposed the first legislation on working hours for women. Nabawiyyah Musa (Egypt) was among the many pioneers in the struggle for working women's rights.

This same period witnessed the proliferation of a 'women's press', especially in Egypt and Lebanon: Hind Nawfal's *Al-Fatat* (November 1892), Rosa Antoun's *Majallat al-Sayyidat wa-l-Fatayat* (1903-), Mustafa 'Abd-al-Raziq's *Al-Sufur*, (1915-), Nabawiyyah Musa's *Tarqiyat al-Fatat* (1923-), and Munirah Thabit's *Al-Amal* (1925-).

But the issues that dominated the best part of that period were the veil and gender segregation. "Unveiling or death!" was the slogan launched by the Iraqi poet Ahmad Sudqi al-Zahhawi in a founding article, "Evils of the Veil" (1908), in which he accused male-female segregation of encouraging pederasty. In another article, "In Defense of Women", a year later, he argues that freedom is a gift that both men and women share, and derides the argument about man's superiority being based on his physical strength. Animals are stronger than men, should they have superior rights over them? Al-Zahhawi

opposed polygamy and called for women's equal right to divorce, based on a simple argument: if women are given the right according to *shari'a* to approve their marriage, how can they be deprived of any say in its dissolution? Al-Zahhawi goes even further in his critique, evoking the inequality inherent in the Islamic promise of Heaven, in which men are promised the famous seductive houris (700 to 70,000 of them), whereas women are promised only their husbands. AL-Zahhawi's writings on the 'woman question' provoked demonstrations against him in the streets of Baghdad, and the city's Ottoman wali ultimately dismissed the poet from his teaching post at the Law School.

Mansour Fahmi (1886-1959) dealt with the question of the veil from a totally different angle. In his doctoral thesis entitled "La condition de la femme dans la tradition et l'évolution de l'Islamisme" (Paris, 1913) he presents ample philological and historic evidence to prove that neither in pre-Islam nor in the Prophet Muhammad's time, did there exist a piece of cloth designed to hide women's faces from men. Among the evidence cited by Fahmi is that the *hijab* in *ayah* 52 of *Surat al-Ahzab* refers to a cloth partition inside the tent, while the *jilbab* in *ayah* 59 (of *Al-Ahzab* also) refers to a shawl for the body. Fahmi was bitterly attacked in his homeland Egypt, and forced to renounce his theory. His dissertation remains untranslated into Arabic.

Zaynab Fawwaz Al-'Amili (1860-1914), Lebanese author of a book relating the lives of 455 Arab women who played important roles in their societies (1893), was probably the first Arab-Muslim woman to criticize the veil. She advocated celibacy as a form of resistance to polygamy. Long before Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, Zaynab Fawwaz held women responsible for their inferior status, blaming them for "seeing themselves and their lives from the perspectives and opinions of men...so that they came to recognize themselves only through them".

Nazirah Zayn al-Din (1908-1975) was one of first Syrian-Lebanese women to unveil. She advocated complete equality between men and women, defended women's right to vote and participate in government, and called for interpretation (*ijtihad*) in matters of religion. In her book *Al-Sufur wa-l-Hijab* (Unveiling and Veiling, 1928), she argues that it is decidedly not a piece of cloth that will guarantee women's chastity. Her book came out at a time of bitter polemics raging in Syria between

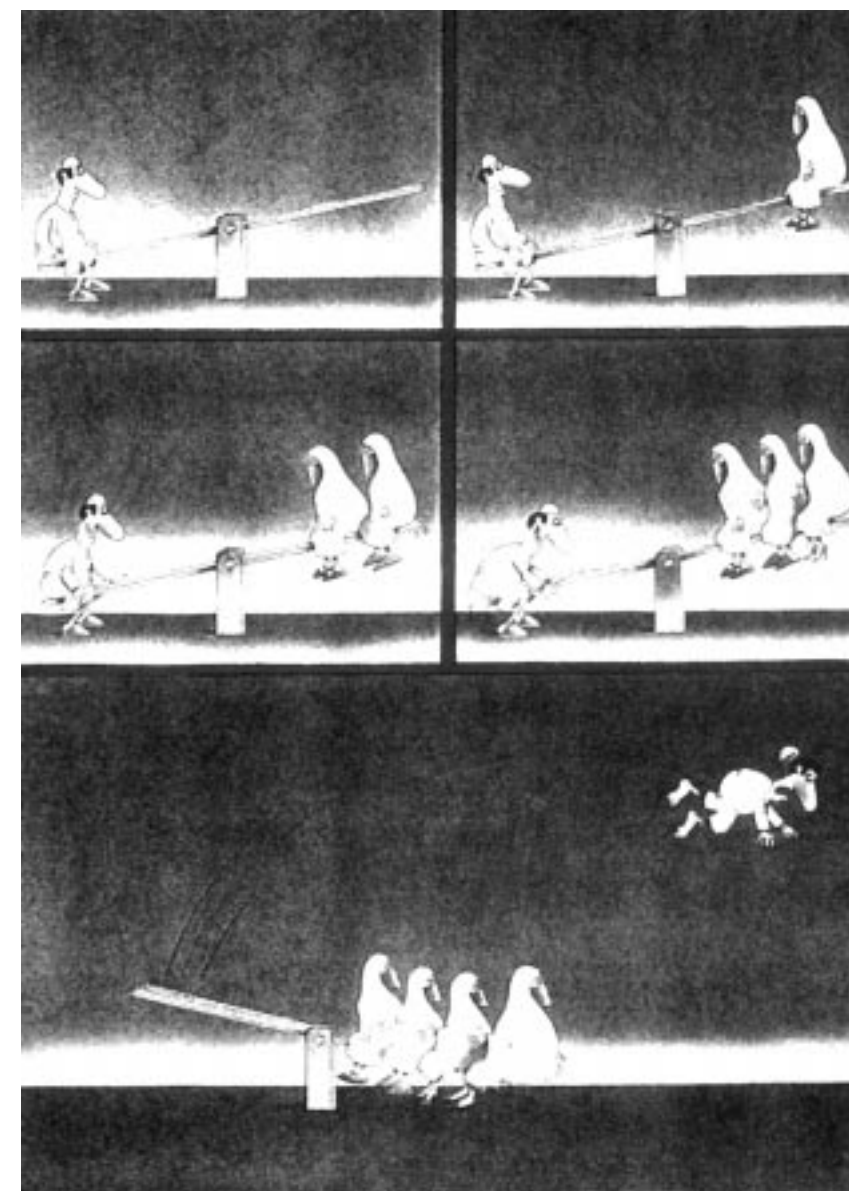
*Hijabiyyin* and *Sufuriyyin*, and it added fuel to the fire. A whole group of women pioneers rallied to her defence: Hafni Nasif, Nazik al-'Abid, Huda Sha'rawi, Laure Thabit, Julia Tu'mah Dimashqiyah, Marie 'Ajami, May Ziadeh, Ibtihaj Qaddura, Mariana Marrash, Labibah al-Hashim, Salma Sayigh, Habbuba Haddad, Hind Nawfal, and others. Many men also defended Nazirah: sheikhs 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq, Tahir al-Nafsani, Abi Yusuf 'Abd al-Quddus, as well as laymen such as historians Muhammad Kurd 'Ali, the Belgian Jesuit Père Henri Lammens and Muhammad Jamil Bayhum, the poet Khalil Mutran, the writer Amin al-Rihani, the philosopher Felix Faris, and others.

This period was also one of remarkable women in their own right. May Ziadeh, writer, animated a famous literary salon in Cairo during the years 1915-1916. She carried on an unhappy love affair with the famous writer 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad, that ultimately broke up due to al-'Aqqad's conservative position on women. Back in her native Lebanon, this rebellious, eccentric woman was unjustly accused of madness by relatives eager to put their hands on her property, and was confined to an asylum. Released after a number of years, she died alone in Egypt. Her only refuge was an obsessive correspondence and platonic love affair with Jibran Khalil Jibran, author of *The Prophet*.

Huda Sha'rawi (1879-1947) was one of the first women to unveil in Egypt, but she is mainly remembered for her work in organizing women. In 1923, she created the first woman's organization in Egypt, the Egyptian Woman's Union, which defended Arab and Muslim women's rights in international congresses. In 1940, Huda Sha'rawi created the first pan-Arab women's organization.

### Arab Feminism After World War II

During this period a curious dialectic emerged between women's liberation and national liberation movements. Many women had participated in the struggle for independence from their early days. In Egypt in 1919 women



Credit: Cover of Dossier 21, Women Living Under Muslim Laws

shed the veil as they joined mass demonstrations against the colonial power. In the 1930s the women of Jaffa (Palestine) appealed to the General Islamic Congress asking for the right to fight alongside men against Zionism and imperialism. After independence, many women shed the veil, now that the colonizer was gone and "we are among ourselves." Nevertheless, national liberation could not easily be harnessed to serve women's liberation; after independence priority was given to 'national goals' at women's expense. They were asked to return home and bring up their children, as in a current expression used in the Algerian case. Yet, the modernizing post-independence regimes accounted for much of the achievements for women.

### Transformations and Reforms

Large-scale progress was achieved in the access of women to education through policies designed to provide free schooling for all. At the same time, severe restrictions were imposed on the most flagrant forms of discrimination against women. Egypt which had abolished polygamy, forced marriages and repudiation as early as 1925, banned clitoridectomy in 1956. Large reforms were enacted in the personal status of women. In Algeria, the minimum age for marriage was fixed at 16 for girls and 18 for boys (1963). Iraq adopted the Ja'fari (Shi'ite) code establishing equality in inheritance between men and women. Elsewhere, courts tried to dissuade men from taking a second wife, and women frequently obtained the right of guardianship over children in cases of divorce.

Advanced secular family codes were adopted, especially in Tunisia and Democratic Yemen. In Yemen, the Family Code of 1973 abolished the financially exorbitant dowry, established monogamy, and granted women equal right to divorce.

Starting with Lebanon in 1952 and Egypt in 1956, women were granted minimum political rights, such as the right to vote and be elected to legislative bodies.

### The New Feminists

A new breed of feminists grew out of the limits of post-independence achievements, and from women's disappointments with the Arab liberation movements as far as women's rights were concerned, especially after the 1967 war with Israel. New approaches now cover all aspects of the 'woman question', based on research (in medicine, psychology, law, sociology, history, anthropology...), and including topics such as clitoridectomy, prostitution, sexual aggression, the problems of 'ayb (shame), honor and dishonor, pre-marital sex, contraception, marriage, divorce, problems of women at work, discrimination in law, domestic work, etc.

In a way, these new feminists revived al-Shidyayq's problematic of the repression of women's sexuality as the basis of man's control over women. For example, Nawal Saadawi, Egyptian medical doctor, feminist and political activist, locates the 'woman question' in what she calls the patriarchal class structure. Though she relates women's liberation to the wider movement for national and social liberation, she does not believe that the victory of the latter would be a sufficient condition for women to win equal rights and equality of status. For this, she calls upon women to become a strong political force and impose their rights by themselves. In her early writings, Saadawi distinguished between the priorities of Western

feminism and those of Arab feminism, but she moved later to a radical Westernized feminist position which pitted women against men.

Fatima Mernissi, sociologist (Morocco) and well-known author<sup>1</sup> feminized the argument that the manipulation of the past is a means of political control, and applied it to the control exercised by men over women. She provides a feminist reading of the Islam of the Prophet Muhammad in which she reveals a struggle between God's new message of equality between all believers (including equality between men and women) and the ancient norms of tribal society based on abduction, raids and slavery. At the same time, she evokes fear of the modern world as the basis for male domination in the Arab/Muslim world, and relates the liberation of women to the problematic of democracy versus authoritarianism

### A Literature of Freedom

Alongside the new feminists in the medical and social sciences, a new generation of Arab feminist writers emerged. Layla Baalbaki and Etel Adnan (Lebanon), Ghadah al-Samman (Syria), Nazik al-Mala'ikah and Daisy al-Amir (Iraq), Samirah Azzam and Fadwa Tuqan (Palestine) to name but a few. Their writings expressed not only freedom and rebellion against the old modes of literary expression, but also freedom and rebellion as an outlook on life.

Baalbaki's *Ana Ahya (I Live)*, though little talked of today, still stands as a courageous novel on the emergence of woman-as-an-individual in the Beirut of the 'golden sixties'. Ghadah al-Samman, describing the unbearable condition of Arab women and the uncertain fate she faces, transcends national boundaries to join all the oppressed of the world:

Despite my white flesh, I am a negro woman, because I am an Arab woman. Victim of the *wa'd* [buried alive] under the sands of the *jahiliyyah* desert, I am now the victim of the new *wa'd*, buried under inherited disdain. I am not looking for love, I am only looking for a lonely and suffering woman like myself, to hold her hand while both of us deliver among the thorns of the field, begetting children for the tribe, children who will soon be taught to hate us.

Etel Adnan's unique rage in *The Arab Apocalypse* (1980) announces catastrophes to come. Not surprisingly she was to be one of the first writers to take the Lebanese civil war as a literary subject (*Sitt Marie Rose*, 1978 and 1982). But, more importantly, Adnan would soon develop a style in which the act of writing itself becomes fem-

inine.<sup>2</sup> With Etel Adnan, women writers have liberated themselves of the burden of proving themselves capable of producing literature.

### The Backlash

The 'eighties brought the 'woman question' back to 'square one'. Women's rights were at the center of the fundamentalist backlash against the distorted modernism of the last quarter century. The same topics evoked by the pioneers are again on the agenda: the veil, segregation, banning women from work (what a tragically absurd solution to the problem of unemployment!), the political and legal equality of women, polygamy, etc.

Tragically, women's rights were, and still are, the first concessions Arab regimes are willing to make to fundamentalist pressures. Jacques Berque said it so well when he spoke of "woman as the last vestige of man's sovereignty" in the Arab-Muslim world. This is what made them ideal scapegoats for the frustrations and problems of society. Alienated, repressed and frustrated in their national and social aspirations, troubled in their identity, facing an unknown future in an increasingly globalized world, how easy it has become for male society to take it out on women in order to reaffirm male superiority. How futile and misplaced are these symbolic acts, hopelessly designed to cover up our incapacity



to face up to the real challenges, changes and problems of the post-modern world.

More than six decades ago, Nazirah Zayn al-Din, addressed this same issue of scapegoating in her reply to her male critics:

You have not developed with time. Time has folded your flags and you have squandered your ancestors' heritage. Do you want, now, to unfurl your flags over your women's faces, taking your women as a substitute kingdom for the kingdoms you have lost?<sup>3</sup>

### ENDNOTES

1. *Sex, Ideology and Islam* (1983), *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (1987), *The Political Harem* (1987), *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (1991), *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World* (1994).
2. *The Spring Flowers Own: and The Manifestations of the Voyage* (1990), *Of Cities and Women* (1993), *Paris, When It's Naked* (1993).
3. *Al-Fatât wa-l-Shuyûkh*, 1929, vol. 1, p. 40).