

Reading Arab Feminist Discourses: A Postcolonial Challenge to Israeli Feminism

PNINA MOTZAFI-HALLER
Ben Gurion University

ABSTRACT: *This essay offers a reading of feminist discourses articulated in the Arab Middle East by a Mizrahi Israeli feminist scholar. Key debates that have animated Arab feminist scholarly work for more than a hundred years are explored and discussed with an eye for their relevance to contemporary debates within Israeli feminism. These include: the question of the value of "Western" feminist models vis-a-vis locally constructed feminist concepts and theories, the relationship between feminism and nationalism, and the social and epistemic significance of exploring divisions along gender lines as constituted and experienced through ethnic, religious, and class lines. From her position as a Mizrahi feminist who reflects on the closely linked analytical and socio-political question of diversity among women, the author proposes to look at the Arab feminist experience and the scholarly body of work that has described and theorized it as an insightful space where these questions were debated long and hard. The essay closes with some reflections about the postcolonial challenge such reading poses for contemporary feminist scholarship and activism in Israel.*

There is not enough self-examination of the modernist assumptions and attitudes of superiority of feminists, whether Middle-Eastern or Western.

Lila Abu Lughod 1998

Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be formed in concrete, historical and political practice and analysis.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty 1991

Is feminism, as understood in Western societies, women's only avenue toward social change?

Marnia Lazreg 1988

Prologue

It was early November 1998 in Cairo. Women from four Middle Eastern countries—Egypt, Jordan, The Palestinian Authority, and Israel—were gathered in the luxurious Helnan-Shepard Hotel in the center of Cairo for a three day conference to promote the place of women in a multi-million dollar, post-peace, regional rural development project. The Danes, who contributed most of the financing and organization for the regional project, acted as benevolent hosts. There was the expected all-smiles, long opening ceremony, complete with officials speeches, congratulations, and a film showing smiling Egyptian girls dressed in “traditional” garb waving bunches of flowers, handsome young men driving combines, and President Mubarak visiting the rural areas. But when the TV cameras and the Press left, we all played our predefined, “pre-peace” roles. “We must all make our presentations in Arabic” insisted one of the Jordanians, a well-dressed woman in her mid forties. “Here we go again, I am packing my suitcases and leaving right away”, retorted one of the Israeli delegates, an official from the Israeli Ministry of Agriculture, in Hebrew. But this was just the opening shot. After it was agreed that we present our papers in English, the Jordanian woman, who read a series of lifeless facts about agriculture in Jordan and about the need “to increase technology transfer from developed countries to the less developed,” came to life only when she had finished reading her prepared essay. She turned to the Israeli delegation, passionately calling on Israel to end its occupation and “return the land it stole”. The Israeli side was aroused, “Forget politics,” snapped the next speaker from Israel, “we are here to speak about women, not about politics.”

The next three presentations, given by Israeli women, painted an idealized picture of gender relations in Israel. One of the presenters insisted, “We are almost equal to men... Our complaints are on minor matters...There are pockets of distress.” But the audience was better informed, “And what about non-Jewish women in Israel?” challenged the women from the Palestinian Authority, and “How many women do you have in the Knesset?” asked the Egyptian woman. I was deeply disturbed not only by the paternalism and reductionist view of gender relations the Israeli women exhibited, but mainly by our mutual ignorance and obvious inability to communicate on gender issues that this encounter revealed.

Before leaving Cairo, I was invited to a forum of feminist Egyptian women at the home of an employee of the Israeli Academic Center, an institution designed to promote mutual understanding and knowledge between Egyptians and Israelis—one of the celebrated fruits of the high days of the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement. Passing the three Israeli security men at the entrance, about a dozen elegant middle and upper-middle class Egyptian women (lawyers, psychologists, journalists, and one member of Parliament) came to participate in what I insisted was a workshop, not a lecture about feminism. During the course of the evening, it became clear to me that these women knew much more about Israeli feminism than I knew about Egyptian feminism. Did I know about Nawal El Saadawi? Had I not heard about Huda Sha’rawi’s work in the 1930s? Was I

aware of Qassim Amin's 1899 treatise *Tahrir al-mar'a - The Liberation of Women*? Was I aware of the number of women in the Egyptian parliament today?

I was not.

"Why not?" I asked myself. After all, in the course of the past three years, and while seeking to understand and shape my ideas on Mizrahi feminism, (a feminism stemming from the needs and activism of Jewish women and their daughters¹ who emigrated from Arab countries). I made it my business to explore Black feminist scholarship emanating from the United States. I had also explored and integrated into my work, ideas and concepts developed by postcolonial feminist theorists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Trinh Minh-Ha, Teresa de Lauretis, among others. Was I too under the Orientalist spell whereby, as Marnia Lazreg (1988: 88) the Algerian feminist scholar expressed, "Arab women are represented as being so different that they are deemed unable to understand or develop any form of feminism"? I also realized that it was not simply a question of my own individual ignorance. I had rarely encountered any reference to Arab feminist scholarship in the feminist and non-feminist literature I had read in Israel.

My initial forays into scholarship produced by Arab Middle-Eastern feminists began in defiance of this ignorance, and the politics of knowledge it signaled. My reading into this rich literature was exciting, not only because it offered an exploration of a feminist discourse and experiences quite different from those I was familiar with in the West and in Israel. Arab feminist scholarship was particularly interesting because it enabled me to see how issues that I had only begun to explore and articulate for myself as a critical Mizrahi feminist scholar had been debated and experienced throughout a long and dynamic history of feminist activism and theorizing in the Arab Middle East. The issues I am most concerned with include: the relevance of "western" feminist models and theories in non-western social settings, the importance of other lines of social divisions, such as class and ethnicity, to any formulation of a feminist analysis and praxis, and the question of representation, of "giving voice" to women who have no access to public discourse and writing. My reading into Arab feminist literature is defined, as all scholarly work of this nature must be, through "double vision". I explore Arab feminist discourses keeping a constant eye on how they might illuminate issues I want to understand and develop within Israeli feminist thought. In the pages that follow, I shall describe some of the key debates and questions that have shaped Arab feminism and suggest some of the ways in which my reading of these works has made its impact on my thinking. I shall also discuss the need for a reevaluation of the Israeli feminist project within a more inclusive, postcolonial feminist framework.

¹ For recently published work about Mizrahi feminism see Dahan-Kalev's Hebrew essay 1999 and Motzafi-Haller 1999 and forthcoming

Arab Middle-Eastern Feminism – What is in the Term?

In 1997, Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, an American feminist scholar who had lived and worked for many years in several Arab countries, commenced on a grand tour throughout Central Asia, North Africa and the Middle-East, as well as Islamic communities in the United States. Her book documenting the odyssey is titled *In Search of Islamic Feminism* (Doubleday, 1998). “Islamic feminism”, the book’s dust-jacket proclaims, “would seem a contradiction in terms to most Americans. We are taught to think of Islam as a culture wherein social code and religious law alike force women to accept male authority and surrender to the veil. How can feminism emerge under such a code, let alone flourish?”

The scope of the book and Fernea’s travels, were obviously defined by, and catered to, American public discursive categories. Both popular and scholarly discourses share the assumption that Islam is a unifying “culture” that imposes a particular form of gender relations across vast geographical and temporal spaces. In Egypt, Fernea was confronted by Hale Shakrallah who is introduced to the readers as “an Egyptian feminist” (1998: 422). Shakrallah objected to the use of the term “Islamic feminism”. “Why?” asked Fernea. “Because I’m a Christian,” Shakrallah responded. “Is there something special that applies only to Islam?” she inquired.

“Islamic feminism”, as Fernea herself came to learn in her travels, is used as a self referent only by a small group of Muslim women, who define their feminism as stemming from their Islamic beliefs. Most of the secular feminists in the Arab world, many of whom are non-Muslims, do not share this religious common ground and prefer to speak about feminism in the Arab Middle East or about Arab feminism (see Mervat Hatem, 1993; Margot Badran, 1993). The following statement opened an Arab Regional Women’s Studies Workshop held in 1997 at the American University of Cairo:

In terms of the impact of economic and technological change on gender questions and societal development, Middle Eastern societies probably share more in common with those in Africa, Latin America and Asia than they do with the highly industrialized societies of Western Europe and North America (Nelson and Altorki, 1998: 2).

The unifying criterion is a geographical region—the Middle East—and the underlying assumption is that there is a shared experience with regard to gender questions that links the varied feminist struggles of the twenty-one countries included in this region and sets them apart from parallel feminist experiences in other world regions. One of the goals of the Cairo 1997 Arab Regional Women’s Studies Workshop was to promote a dialogue among feminist scholars within the region. Nelson and Altorki explain:

For over 100 years, despite the widespread Western perception to the contrary, the historical record in the Arab world and Egypt in particular

bears witness to women's struggles to change traditional attitudes and institutions which have often prevented women's enjoyment of equal human rights including full participation along with men in all society's functions. (Nelson and Altorki 1998: 1)

Feminism in the Arab world, according to this definition, is the long history of Arab women's struggles to achieve equality between the genders. But all those who define themselves as "feminists" in the Arab world have not shared this definition. Nor do all the self-identified "feminists" agree to be called "Arab feminists." In fact, the inclusive label "Arab feminism," as distinct from feminism existing in individual Arab countries, was first used in the late 1930s to refer to an organizing institutional frame that brought together feminists from a range of Arab nations. An ambitious pan-Arab feminism, as Margot Badran argues in her 1995 book *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, was created in the late 1930s in Egypt. The impetus for organizing this early pan-Arab feminist association was linked to nationalistic and international political activism and had rather little to do with women-centered causes.

The first Arab Feminist Conference was convened in 1938 at the request of Palestinian women who wished to articulate their concerns regarding the Zionist threat to Palestine. Wadi'ah Khartabil, one of the Palestinian women delegates at the conference asserted,² "While Arab women begin to struggle to enter political life, Palestinian women continue to struggle for life itself." The national struggle, and not women's issues, stood at the center of this first Arab feminist conference. Huda Sha'rawi, acting as the conference president, wrote in a telegram she sent President Roosevelt:³

The Arab Feminist Conference convening in Cairo and representing the women of Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and trans-Jordan protests all American propaganda in favor of Zionism.

In the summer of 1944, Huda Sha'rawi and other Egyptian feminists took the lead in creating and consolidating a pan-Arab feminist union. The first pan-Arab Congress was convened in Cairo in December 1944 (Badran 1995: 239 ff.). It included women from countries of the Arab East emerging at the time from colonial rule. Women from the Maghreb (North Africa), still under colonial domination, were invited but unable to attend, while women from the Arabian Peninsula were never invited. The first Arab feminist Congress presented a comprehensive feminist program to be implemented in the delegates' respective countries. "At the top of the list of fifty one resolutions," notes Badran (1995: 242) "was the demand for women's rights to vote and to be elected." At the close

² Cited in Badran 1995: 241.

³ Cited in Badran 1995: 241.

of the first Arab feminist Congress an Arab Feminist Union (AFU) was founded and Huda Sha'rawi, president of the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU), was elected its president.

Yet, the optimism of the women who had founded the AFU and their hopes for consolidating an overarching Arab feminist organization, was short lived. The highly controlling centralized regimes that emerged in Arab countries during the 1950s and 1960s put an end to independent feminist activism within the rising new nations and to the international pan-Arab scope of the AFU. Women's organizations in the various Arab countries became branches of the states' political organizations (Ghoussoub 1988: 10-12). Women were not allowed to leave their countries to participate in international activism called for by such a regional organization. By the early 1950s, the AFU, as an institutional phenomenon, had ceased to exist. In 1985, there were fledgling attempts to revive the pan-Arab feminist framework by creating the Arab Women Solidarity Association (AWSA) in Egypt. However this effort, together with other more recent efforts to revive feminist activism in Egypt, have been quite limited and been forced into a defensive position under the rising power of Islamic forces (see Al-Ali, 1997).

Still, the reference to an overarching meaningful category of "Arab feminism" cannot be confined to the institutionalized existence of a pan-Arab organization. If we are to accept the basic premise that stood at the center of the Cairo 1997 Arab Women's Studies Workshop mentioned above, and agree that there are shared societal and historical experiences that have produced a common region-wide discursive frame labeled "Arab Feminism," then we must proceed to answer two further questions. The first being: what are the shared themes, conceptual frameworks, and experiences that link and define an Arab feminist project? The second question relates to the meaning of the term "feminism." How different is "Arab feminism" from its "Western" counterpart?

Feminism or Feminisms?

The way people view feminism is a function of their histories, agendas, and politics.

Margot Badran (1995: 20)

There is no word in Arabic that translates the term "feminism" (the same case pertains in Hebrew). The label "feminist" (in fact, "feministe" in its French derivative⁴) was first used by Egyptian women in 1923 as a self-definition, a

⁴ The women's organization known in Arabic as al-Ittihad al-Nisa'I al-Misri called itself l'Union Feministe Egyptienne in French.

decade after it first appeared in the United States.⁵ The Egyptian experience has been the longest in terms of its explicit affiliation with the label “feminism” and with regard to the public visibility of its organizational body, the Egyptian Feminist Union, in national and international settings. Led by the charismatic, western-educated Huda Sha’rawi, Egyptian feminist activism of the early decades of the twentieth century played an important role in bringing women’s struggles for gender equality to the surface in other Arab settings.

In most Arab countries, the feminist struggle and activism stemmed from and was largely defined within the nationalist project of decolonization and political independence. Despite internal variations among regions and specific histories of feminist activism in a range of Arab countries, feminism in the Arab world, like Third World feminism in general, arose and was made publicly visible in the course of struggles for national independence. Feminist women in the Arab world were forced to juggle between the feminist agenda and anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist struggles. This dual battle often meant that Arab feminists had to endure the condemnation of being irrelevant by their own national patriarchies and this often caused their feminist agenda to include religious and nationalist ideas.

The challenge of the women getting organized within self-defined “feminist” movements in many Arab countries during the early years of the 20th century, was to push for the rights of female citizens and participate in the shaping of the new states emerging from colonial domination. The early feminist discourses in most young Middle Eastern states were, therefore, explicitly modernist and nationalist. Like the western modernist models which inspired them, these modernist-nationalist discourses advocated the increased women’s participation in education and employment in public. However, these early feminist struggles never challenged the asymmetrical definition of gender roles and relations within the family. Personal status laws, such as polygamy, or the treatment of custody matters, went unchallenged in Egypt, the country with the longest history of public feminist activism, and were quite limited within the Tunisian legal code, the country considered the most modernist in the region.

In evaluating the contributions the modernist-nationalist feminists have made in their respective societies, it would be a grave mistake to compare their gains to the litmus test of Western, mainly liberal feminism. A reductive definition of feminism, imprisoned within the frame story of Western liberal feminism, might discredit these Arab modernist-nationalist discourses and diminish their social significance. More critically, by limiting its definition to western-inspired and self-proclaimed feminist activism, a reductive, decontextualized evaluation of Arab feminism excludes all discussion of feminist activism that emerged in the Arab world prior to the 1930s (when the label

⁵ The term “feminisme”, Badran informs her readers (1995: 19), was first coined in France in the 1880s. The English began to use the label only in the 1890s. “Feminism” first appeared in the United States in 1910. The Egyptians’ use of the term in 1923 was, therefore, relatively early.

“feminist” was first introduced in Egypt) and ignores women’s struggles that opted not to define themselves as “feminist.”

There were, in fact, many Arab women who did not use the label “feminist” to define themselves, but who strongly advocated women’s rights and fought against gender inequality in their societies. These women and their activism are considered “feminist” in recent scholarly reviews of Arab feminist history (cf. Badran, 1995; Al-Ali, 1997; Ahmed, 1998), not because they adopted this explicit identity—in fact they were often ambivalent and at times even hostile towards what they viewed as “imported western feminism” —but because their actions, ideas, and agendas were directed at redefining gender roles in their respective societies. A more inclusive and fluid definition of feminism stands at the center of Margot Badran’s feminist history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Egypt and lies at the core of Liela Ahmed’s historical analysis of the links between Islam and gender relations in the Arab world since the pre-Islamic era. This broader definition of feminism places women’s independent agency at the center. Badran (1995: 17-18) writes that her wide, fluid definition of feminism and feminist activism in Egypt includes “the awareness of constraints placed upon women because of their gender and attempts to remove these constraints and to evolve a more equitable gender system”. Any attempt to narrow the definition of Egyptian feminist experience, claims Badran, is bound to result in the distortion and diminishing of such experience.

A good example of the kind of analytic distortion that a reductive, narrow, western-centered assessment of the Arab feminist experience and history might create can be found in Mai Ghoussoub’s controversial essay, “Feminism—or the Eternal Masculine—in the Arab World,” published in the *New Left Review* in 1988. Adopting a narrow, western-inspired definition of feminism, which posits feminism as “a struggle against every inherited tradition...informing the relations between men and women” (Ghoussoub 1988: 18), Ghoussoub arrives at the inevitable conclusion that “Arab feminism has yet to emerge into the light of day”. For indeed, if one accepts the premise that “Islam and feminism are naturally incompatible”,⁶ and that Arab activism, which is not directed at tearing apart “Islamic tradition,” works against and fails to bring about, “female emancipation”, then one is bound to conclude, as did Ghoussoub, that no kind of Arab feminism is possible. Hammami and Rieker (1988), who criticize Ghoussoub’s perspective, note that in addition to the narrow definition of feminism specific to the lives of western bourgeois women adopted by Ghoussoub, the approach reveals a deeply orientalist idea of Islam.

This tendency to link an orientalist idea of Islam with a limited definition of feminism has been quite prevalent in discourses on women in the Arab world. Scholarly feminist work in the Arab world has had to deal with a double burden—the need to define itself against both orientalist and androcentrist

⁶ Here Ghoussoub cites Leila Ahmed whom she portrays as a person who had it originally right and then changed her mind.

paradigms. A more complete and 'less distorting understanding of Arab feminist discourses is possible, only after taking into consideration the way in which Arab feminist discourses were caught up and defined by how they dealt with these two framing discourses.

A Double Burden: Working Against Orientalism and Androcentrism

When analyzing the nature of gender relations in their respective societies, Arab feminist scholars are forced to untangle two overlapping, academic discourses. One is concerned with gender differences within society, the other is related to the way social science discourses on Arab and Islamic societies in general and on Arab women in particular, are constructed. Lazreg puts it this way:

Because the North African and Middle Eastern cultures have long been stereotyped...women from these cultures cannot satisfy themselves with a mere act of negation when they write about themselves. They must shoulder a double burden, namely, to work toward an epistemological break with the prevailing paradigm and to reevaluate the structure of gender relations in their own societies. (1988: 101).

Discourses about women in the Arab world—whether radically critical of the West (Marxists such as Fanon, Samir Amin, or El-Saadawi), the liberal intellectual (such as Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi, women studies scholars Liela Ahmed, Lila Abu Lughod, Margot Badran), or the militant Islamists who reject the West (see Haley Afshar, 1996, 1997; Afshari, 1994; Berkovitch and Moghadam, 1999: 285) - are all implicated in dominant western discourses. Their attempts to understand their societies and gender relations within these societies unfold within an external dominant conceptual frame of reference. Until the publication of Edward Said's classical work on "Orientalism" in the late 1970s, most external scholarship written about the Arab world was deeply and explicitly "orientalist".

From an orientalist perspective, Islam is viewed as a self-contained, flawed belief system that permeates all aspects of life. An unproblematic, monolithic "Islam" is portrayed as an unchanging worldview that defines all social and private behavior and thought patterns. In its jural, philosophical and social forms, Islam is said to be the sole cause of Arab women's oppression. "Progress" and "civilization" in Islamic societies can be achieved only when the population of Muslim societies are "persuaded or forced" to imitate the "true spirit of Western civilization" (Ahmed 1998: 243). According to such logic, colonial intervention is necessary if native Muslim women are to be rescued from the men who degrade them. Arab traditions and Muslim religion must be abandoned if these women are to become like western women.

Many scholars—be they "western" scholars who write about the Middle East, or "Middle Eastern" scholars who write about their own societies—become

complicit with this interpretive orientalist framework. The weight of dealing with this orientalist thesis has created two main camps within Arab feminist discourse. On one end stand those who adopted the orientalist perspective and internalized it to an extent that it crippled their ability to analyze other historical factors (such as economic or social processes that have unfolded outside the religious domain) as structuring gender relations in society. Islam and "Islamic traditions" are viewed as impediments to social progress and women's emancipation. On the other end we find those who sought to escape the "western" hegemonic gaze by turning to what they call "authentic" feminism. Islam is seen as the source of a "pure", "traditional" way of life that allows Arab women their dignity denied them by western colonialists. A common counterattack on mostly secular feminists of the first camp is to brand them agents of colonialism and discredit their feminist ideas as derivative feminism. (Abu-Lughod, 1997). "Secular Arab feminists," Abdo contends (1997: 33ff.), are under direct criticism by the "traditionalist" Islamic feminists who brand every feminist issue "including democracy, human rights" as "imports of cultural imperialism". "Islamicisms or Muslim fundamentalism," writes Nahla Abdo (1997: 30) "have gained special momentum as they vie to be the region's alternative voice in the face of what they perceive is a hegemonic Western cultural penetration".

Ironically, liberal secular feminist scholars are often deeply implicated in this orientalist perspective themselves despite their explicit awareness of its limitations. For example, liberal Arab feminist scholar Leila Ahmed was caught in this debilitating discursive trap when she succumbed to a romantic portrayal of the harem she presented to American readers in 1982. Reflecting on her early work, Ahmed observed that she was conscious of the conceptual limitations of her thesis, but felt a need to "defend" the customs and relations prevalent in her society, in the face of the contemptuous anti-Arab racism of American society. By "defending" Arab institutions and portraying them in positive terms, Ahmed, like many other liberal Arab feminists, was reacting against the orientalist negative image of her society. But these early reactions never broke away from colonialist and orientalist terms, they simply inverted their interpretation. Almost two decades after her "defense" of the harem, Ahmed resolved that:

What is needed now, is not a response [to dominant western discourses]...which merely invert[s] the terms of the colonial thesis to affirm the opposite, but a move beyond the confinement within those terms (1998: 237).

How successful were Middle Eastern feminists in moving beyond the confinement of western terms and concepts? Can we identify signs of a new, innovative discourse that transcends the "western" dominant gaze and proceeds to develop an alternative discursive frame more suitable for understanding the realities of gender and power relations in Arab societies and beyond? The remainder of this essay attempts to answer this question.

A good starting place for such a discussion is provided by three bold points made by Rosemary Sayigh (1993: 175) in the opening of one of her essays on Palestinian women in Lebanon. Sayigh lists three critical axes central in what she views as her unique Middle Eastern feminist perspective:

...that western women's experiences do not provide a universal framework for analyzing gender oppression;
that we must provide historically and culturally specific analyses of non-western women's situations and political action;
and that we must listen to women telling their own struggles.

These three analytical and conceptual themes have been central in the production of Arab feminist knowledge since its inception. I wish to argue that the relative merit of the body of Arab feminist scholarly work, and its theoretical import, lies in the sustained effort to deal systematically with these three key issues.

Western Feminism is not Universal

Unlike feminist discourses in Israel, which have only recently begun to question the applicability of western feminist models to Israeli reality,⁷ there has been a profound ambivalence toward western feminist ideas and practices within Arab feminism since its inception. Qassim Amin's 1992[1899] *Tahrir al-mar'a—The Liberation of Women*,⁸ a publication which marked for many the onset of Egyptian feminism,⁸ gives voice to the ingrained ambivalence toward western feminist ideas and practices, despite its essentially modernist tone. Qassim Amin, an educated, Westernized upper-middle-class Egyptian lawyer, was a strong advocate for European civilization and the way it defined relations between the genders. He called for the "liberation of the Egyptian woman" and advocated the discontinuation of the practice of veiling which in his eyes epitomized women's exclusion and subordination. Yet, despite his explicit adoration of things "Western", Amin insisted,

I am not in any way requesting this change because we wish to imitate for the sake of imitation western nations and their traditions and conditions, nor simply because it is a new idea worth consideration. I believe that the Islamic legal tradition reflects the temperament and feelings that bind the members of our society. (1992 [1899]: 35)

⁷ Uri Ram, who in 1993 reviewed the state of the art of Israeli feminist scholarship, asked the three leading Israeli feminist academics representing the liberal, socialist and radical feminism what makes their work different from the work produced by their American counterparts. Deborah Bernstein, the most original and articulate feminist scholar responded candidly "I am not sure..."

⁸ Most Arab feminists I have read hold this position and devote much time and attention to Amin's thesis. An interesting exception is the discussion offered by Hammami and Rieker (1988: 98). From their explicit Marxist perspective Amin is not the "unproblematic promoter of women's rights" but essentially an ideologue of bourgeois domestic economy.

For Amin, as well as for several “proto-feminist” Arab male intellectuals who preceded him,⁹ the position of women in society could be changed through modernist reforms, (mainly through the extension of education and employment to women), as long as this change occurred within the confines of Islamic societal regulations. Amin, like several early Arab writers who worked and published in the second half of the nineteenth century, never questioned the role of Islam within society. The early modernists called for reforms of selected elements in Islamic ideas that they interpreted as adverse to social progress. Western ideas about women’s position in society were weighed against “Islamic legal traditions” and the “feelings” and “temperaments” of members of their society.

Modernist thinkers, like Qassim Amin in Egypt or Taher al-Haddad in Tunisia, and feminist women such as Malak Hifni Nassif of Egypt, Bechira Mrad of Tunisia, or Nazirah Zein Ed-Din of Lebanon, offered new interpretations of Islamic practices which supported some western assumptions about the modern roles of women in society. They sought, in their own way and from within their particular place in society, to temper western ideas and introduce them only in places they could “fit into” existing patterns of thought and behavior. In face of the attack on Islam by European orientalist scholars and colonial administrators, this discourse offered a nationalist defense of Islam along with the desire to define new rights for women.

Yet, despite their ambivalence towards “things western” and their strong urge to legitimize their views through explicit accommodation to Islamic traditions and values, Westernized modernists since Qassim Amin have had to face the more conservative religious opposition of people like Rashid Rida and Hasan al-Banna (see Hatem 1993: 41). In the 1920s and 1930s, secular modernist Huda Sha’rawi faced a bitter opposition from conservative women like Malak Hifni Nassef and Zienab al-Ghazali, who reacted against what they viewed as the valorization of the “western” over the “indigenous.” Often refusing to define themselves as “feminists”—a term they viewed as a derivative of Western cultural imperialism—these women sought to develop women’s subjectivity within Islam. They directed their activism towards the enhancement of women’s power and position in life, but they insisted that such reformulation be carried out within existing Islamic definitions of gender and in culturally unthreatening ways.

Since the 1970s and the rise of conservative politics and Muslim fundamentalism in many Arab countries, the debate between conservative/

⁹ Another male Arab intellectual named Al-Afghani, who wrote and taught in Egypt in the 1870s and 1880s, was influential beyond Egypt and had many followers in Turkey, Iran and other parts of the world. Al-Afghani called to reform and revive Islam from conditions of “ignorance and helplessness” and adapt it to the demands of the modern world as a way of freeing Arab lands from foreign domination. Deeply influenced by Al-Afghani’s teachings, Muslim intellectuals such as Al-Tahtawi, Muhammad Abdu, and Namik Kemal, all emphasized the importance of women’s education and called for reforms in family laws (Ahmed 1998: 137-140).

religious feminists and those advocating a secular feminist view reemerged with greater force and vitality. Rejecting “western feminism” as an imperialist import, self-identified, contemporary “Islamist feminists” claim that their feminism is “authentic” because it is rooted in Islamic traditions and therefore more appropriate for the needs of women in the Arab world today. For example, they note that, unlike Western feminist discourse, the Qur’an recognizes the importance of women’s life cycle and thus offers women an honored space where they can choose to become mothers, wives and home makers. Islamic legal and social code, they claim, advocate gender complementarity rather than equality. Islam is a truly liberating force for women because it enables women to live fulfilling lives by being educated, gainfully employed **and** serving their faith.

Aware of the fact that contemporary reality in the Arab world is often oppressive for women, some Islamist feminists argue that this is a result of the failure to live up to the original ideas of Islam. Thus, their role, as Islamist feminist scholars, is to fight misinterpretation of the sacred text in order to recapture the vitality of Islam and delineate an alternative path to benefit women (Afshar, 1997; Hoffman, 1985). Islamic feminists vary in the extent of their support of Islamic organizations such as the *al Jama’at al-Islamiya* in Egypt, the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria, the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, and the *al Da’wa* in Iraq and Kuwait. Secular feminists who observe with great alarm the growing support of many middle-class women of these Islamist organizations argue that Islamist feminism has actively crippled women and their cause in many contemporary Arab settings. Several secular, leftist, feminist intellectuals pointed to the reactionary nature of some Islamic feminist discourses during the 1990s and questioned the legitimacy of the label “feminist” when applied to Islamist women’s activism. They argued that even in its less reactionary mode, such activism impedes the emergence of egalitarian feminism in Arab societies.

For more than two decades, Middle Eastern feminist scholars were caught up in the crippling binarism of this secular-religious debate. By the early 1990s, however, there was a growing realization that a debate defined in terms of “the authentic” vs. “the outsider” had been misguided and that it had, as Liela Ahmed rightly notes,

trapped the struggle for women's rights with struggles over culture. It has meant that an argument for women's rights is often perceived and represented by the opposing side as an argument about the innate merits of Islam and Arab culture comprehensively (1998: 167).

From this perspective, Arab Feminism in the Middle East and in other parts of the Arab world, is neither a “western import” nor a “native authentic” concept embedded in Islamic customs and traditions, but rather a historically specific discourse that acknowledges the unequal and oppressed position of women in Arab societies. “The issue,” Ahmed writes convincingly, “is simply

the humane and just treatment of women, nothing less, and nothing more—not the intrinsic merit of Islam, Arab culture, or the West” (1998: 168). Arab feminists must invest their energies in fighting misogynic practices within their societies and not into judging whole “cultures” as representing an essentialized “East”, distinct from a similarly essentialized “West”. The analytical and deeply political task facing Arab feminists, according to this view, is to explore and analyze the specific historical circumstances and processes which have given rise to misogyny and to structures of inequality between the genders. Ahmed’s critical work has been recently followed up by several younger scholars, both male and female, who took up the challenge of working beyond and outside of the hardened, polarized camps of religious vs. secular. Inspired by Samir Amin’s (1990) notion of a culturally “polycentric” world, Anouar Majid recently explored the potential of what he terms “a progressive Islam, empowered by the equal status and dynamic contributions of women and extending full rights to minorities” (1998: 325). He argues that only such progressive, non-Western, newly articulated paradigm will be able to break away from Eurocentric knowledge structures. “It is rather tragic that the emergence of the status of women as an issue of major social concern,” Majid argues convincingly, “would be ensnared by the reigning discourses of modernity and its antithetical defensive Islamic response” (1998: 337). Majid’s effort to chart a third way, one that goes beyond the flawed clerical Islamic and modernist ideologies leads him to the work of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha. Taha’s work, according to Majid, is both indigenous and progressive. It offers an “Islamically derived critique of both the stagnation of Islamic scholarship and the failures of the industrialized Western civilization to reconcile the needs of the individual with the needs of the community” (1998: 352). A “thoroughly revised Islam” is seen as the only viable alternative to both fundamentalist interpretations and unrelenting Westernization (1998: 353). Yet, as insightful and courageous Majid’s thesis is, it remains, as Suad Joseph points out (1998), undeveloped and largely programatic. The issue, contends Joseph (1998: 367), is still “Who gets to say what the ‘true Islam’ is?” The shape of the indigenous, liberatory, progressive, Islamic feminism Majid advocates is yet uncharted.

Mervat Hatem is less optimistic, in regard to the prospects of resolving the secular/religious divide within Arab feminist discourses and the potential of developing a new, critical, independent Arab feminist discourse. “The present ideological struggles between the discredited modernists (who have failed to deliver development to younger generations of men and women and the lower middle classes) and the ascendant Islamists (who claim that there is an Islamic solution to these problems), insists Hatem (1993: 45), “make it difficult to develop an independent discourse.” The question, for Hatem, is not how to resolve the religious-secular deadlock, but how to break away from what she views as existing “old and tired concepts and roles” (1993:45) shared by both camps, and to develop a new post-Islamist and post-nationalist discourse.

I do not share Hatem's pessimism. In fact, my reading of recent feminist scholarship by Arab feminists suggests that it has already begun developing critical post-Islamist and post-nationalist discourses and is courageously experimenting with innovative conceptual and epistemic frameworks. In the following two sections I will explore two key methodological and epistemic tools that have been used in a range of Arab feminist scholarly work. The first is a turn to social history, and the second involves a vigorous experimentation and theorization linked with the writing of narratives.

Working Towards Historically and Culturally-specific Analyses of Gender Relations in Society

[T]he focus [must be] on uncovering the material and ideological specificities that constitute a particular group of women as 'powerless' in a particular context. [and not the universalizing feminist discourse that searches for] a variety of cases of 'powerless' groups of women to prove the general point that women as a group are powerless.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty 1991(1987): 262

There are two main trends in the historiographical work carried out by Arab feminist scholars. The first, and earlier, trend can be characterized as apologetic; the second, more recent, trend is a turn to women-centered counter-history. The movement from an apologetic scholarship to critical social historical work centered on women's place in society is quite recent, it has begun unfolding during the past decade.

The apologetic trend is shared by feminist scholars of various convictions: conservative and liberal, secular, and deeply religious. As noted in the discussion presented above, early Arab feminist discourses were all implicated in the dominant orientalist discourse and were formed mainly as a reaction, from their varied social and ideological positions, to the premises of colonial orientalists. I wish to identify two main narratives within this apologetic trend. The first narrative is concerned with the historical analysis of early Islamic and pre-Islamic eras and is directed at problematizing the direct link made in literature between Islam and oppressive gender relations. The second narrative responds to charges that all feminist activism in the Arab world is a derivative of Western influence. A good example of the first apologetic narrative is Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi's historical discussion of gender relations during Islam's early years (1991, 1992). Using classical Islamic sources—including a critical reading of the Qur'an—Mernissi argues that women fared well in pre-Islamic tribal society and that the Prophet wanted to create an egalitarian society based on these principles, but was subverted by the male elite. Mernissi argues that the political and economic interests of the male elite of that time, and not the dictates of religion, are responsible for the denial of rights to women. Liela Ahmed's

extensive historical research first published in 1992,¹⁰ *Women and Gender in Islam*, is another powerful illustration of the apologetic nature of such historical feminist scholarship. Subtitled *Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, the book traces shifts in discourses on women and gender relations in several locations in the Arab World since pre-Islamic times. Through a detailed historical analysis of specific material and political conditions that have defined women's position in these changing circumstances, Ahmed aims to subvert the orientalist, ahistorical bias which posited Islamic societies as inherently oppressive to women. Ahmed and Mernissi, it is important to note, used their intensive investigations of women's heritage and gender in the Arab World not only to undermine reductive orientalist claims, but to counter the increasingly more powerful arguments made by Islamist activists who urged the reinstitution of Islamic laws and practices. Detailed historical work, like that of Ahmed's and Mernissi's, reveals that what are presented by the Islamists as God-given, prescriptive Islamic rules and practices, are the product of specific institutional and political processes, and that alternative practices regarding women and their place in society existed in certain moments in history. Contemporary practices towards women are thus presented as part of a larger historical process of transformation and struggle around the meaning of gender in Arab societies, and not as unique, intrinsic, or specific to Islam. Dominant religious Islamic formulations of gender are thus problematized and alternative gender relations are legitimized within Islamic discourse.

A second direction apologetic historical research has taken has been in response to two more specific claims: 1) Feminist activism in the Arab world has been a foreign phenomenon, and the domain of Westernized, upper-class, secular women, and 2) The "failure" of feminism in Arab countries is due to prevalent patriarchal regimes in these societies. Margot Badran (1993) provides one excellent example for a historically specific analysis (of Egyptian feminism) that works to counter these two claims. Most of the gains made by Egyptian feminists, observes Badran, were in the public sphere while family patriarchy was never weakened. Badran links this particular feminist trajectory to the development of the modern state in Egypt and not to some unchanging Islamic traditions. "In building a modern state and society," she argues (1993: 144), "the patriarchal state required the labor of all citizens...therefore, the state granted some of the feminists' demands over the century." Thus, for example, when the new socialist state, under Nasser, found it expedient to grant women the vote, it was responding to feminist demands that had failed throughout the twenties, thirties, and forties.

By taking into account political and economic formations as well as the broader context of imperialist penetrations, Badran is able to explain the most resounding failure of Egyptian feminism —family laws. Rejecting the Orientalist explanation that has blamed Islam for the persistent oppression of women,

¹⁰ The book was first published by Yale University press in 1992. In this essay I used the 1998 edition published by the American University of Cairo.

Badran directs her attention to historical conditions that have enabled the continued hold of patriarchy in Egypt. She shows that personal status laws remained unchanged throughout the entire century of feminist activism, due to specific historical reasons. The state, Badran's analysis clarifies, reinforced patriarchal domination in the private sphere and refused to change any of the personal status laws at the very point at which the grip of family patriarchy was weakening by processes the state had initiated.

Taken together, these historical analyses open up a space for understanding gender relations in the Arab world as emerging from specific historical conditions. Patriarchic systems, according to this logic, are not inherent to Islam or to an unchanging "Islamic culture", but were produced and reproduced when specific local social structures interacted with larger forces. Alternative, non-patriarchal gender relations existed in the Arab past and can be recreated if and when circumstances change. Specific historical studies can thus question the all-embracing paradigm that centers on patriarchy as a critical force that has shaped gender relations and propose instead to examine other lines of social hierarchies, class and state for example, as alternative frames of reference (cf. Mervat Hatem, 1987). One of the critical ramifications of this historical logic is that misogyny can and should be fought within Islam without undermining Islam or Arab cultural frames as desired ways of life.

The second, more recent trend in historical analysis performed by Arab feminist scholars is the writing of counter-histories from a feminist or gendered perspective. The idea of writing histories that do not reflect the dominant group version of national struggles has been advocated by postcolonial scholars and feminists who argue that such histories often ignore or exclude non-elite men and women. The sustained effort to focus on women's role in history has emerged in Arab feminist scholarship as part of the writing of national liberation historical accounts. The intellectual roots of national liberation discourses in the Arab world lie in the classical writing of postcolonial theorist Franz Fanon's. In his book, *A Dying Colonialism*, (1965) Fanon analyzed the role of women in the economic and political struggle of Algeria's decolonization. Fanon argued that the anti-colonial struggle had enabled Algerian women to claim their powers in ways that had not been possible during the colonial era that supported local patriarchal structures. Although several Arab feminists have been critical of Fanon's ambivalent position with regard to women's changing role during colonial struggles (see Mervat Hatem, 1993; Marnia Lazreg, 1994; Boutihaina Shaaban, 1988), they all credit Fanon for turning the gender issue into a critical question in the analysis of such struggles.

One of the key questions in a feminist analysis of national liberation processes, both in Algeria and in Palestine, is whether or not women who took part in such struggles were autonomous actors. In a recent collection of essays edited by Suha Sabbagh, *Palestinian Women of Gaza and the West Bank* (1998), several contributors point to the fact that while women became increasingly involved in the resistance struggle, the type of activity they

undertook was always conservative and did not collide with social roles traditionally associated with women. Although women were brought into the public sphere through their contribution to the liberation struggle, the value system that kept them in the private sphere went unchallenged (see Souad Dajani, 1993; Suha Sabbagh, 1998; Sondra Hale, 1993).

Writing from a strong woman-centered perspective, these historical accounts of national liberation struggles were able to highlight the contradictions embedded in postcolonial situations which find the mobilization of women both desirable and fearful. They also highlight political struggles as deeply gendered processes, thus working against women's perception as passive.

Oral testimony and personal narration take center stage in such gender-sensitive historiographical accounts.

Narratives: Listening to Women Tell about Their Lived Experience

Oral testimony and personal narrative are commonly used in Arab feminist scholarship for several reasons. Knowledge about women's lives and experiences in the Arab World had to be culled from oral data because the majority of Arab women could neither read nor write in Arabic or any other language and therefore had not produced any coherent written knowledge about their lives and worlds. Their absence from what was said or written about them resulted in distorted misrepresentations. The little that was written about Arab women by colonial men and women was stereotypical and seemed to speak more about European superiority that depicted the miserable lives of Arab women and the maltreatment of these women by their men, than about the women themselves. Turning to women's narratives was therefore intended not only as a supplement to the limited existing knowledge about Arab women, but also as a way of avoiding the misconceptions and distortions built into external representations of these women's lives. One prominent example is the extensive discussion of 'the veil' in the literature that deals with Arab women's lives. The veil became the sign that epitomized Islamic inferiority. The veil remained at the center of the resistance discourse (Fanon, 1965) that sought to contest the colonial narrative. Yet, this very concern with the veil, in the colonial narratives and the resistance discourse that had inverted it, excluded any serious discussion of more pressing issues relevant to most Arab women's lives. Turning to women's narratives enabled a discussion of questions regarding access to land, work, and misogynic practices. The veil, like the harem, is an issue that emerges from the colonialist gaze (see Malek Alloula, 1986; Ahmed, 1998: 163 ff.) and excludes any serious discussion of questions central to the lived experience of most Arab women.

However the effort to write about women (especially illiterate Arab women) by Arab feminist scholars has not been simple. "The most painful struggle" wrote Marnia Lazreg, author of *The Eloquence of Silence*, (1994: 17) "was against the temptation to speak in the name" of these women. One of the earliest systematic attempts to "break the silence" of illiterate Arab women by letting them speak directly from the written text was carried out by Fatima

Mernissi in her controversial book *Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan Women* (1989, originally published in French in Morocco in 1984). The book is an anthology of interviews and discussions Mernissi carried out with a dozen illiterate Moroccan women. The women talked about their daily lives in a relatively unstructured narrative style. Mernissi presented the interchanges that transpired throughout the interviews and allowed the reader to get a sense of the interviewing process by providing a text with minimal editing. The result is an untidy text that reflects the manner in which these women articulated their view of their world, but at the same time, the role played by Mernissi in directing, shaping, and interpreting the women's narratives is transparent. We learn a great deal about socioeconomic changes and how they had an impact on women's lives. We learn about women's attitudes towards sex roles, conjugality, and about their desire for greater access to the public realm via employment and education. But the lightly transcribed texts also enable a closer and sometimes brutally honest view of the encounter between an educated privileged scholar and her quite different, illiterate subjects. Mernissi's unconventional methodology opened for discussion several illusionary myths regarding "native scholars" working within their own communities. It raised critical questions about the politics and practice of the act of representation. These questions, it must be added, remained unresolved in Mernissi's work.

Many of these questions of representation and voice were taken up by Marnia Lazreg, an Algerian feminist scholar. Lazreg has articulated several theoretical and analytical traps of this process of representation. She wrote:

The point is neither to subsume other women under one's own experience nor to uphold a separate truth for them. Rather, it is to allow them to *be* while recognizing that what they are is just as meaningful, valid, and comprehensible as what "we" are. (1988: 99).

"Native Scholars" are not different from "outsiders" in this view, both need to deal with the question of representing the "other". Lazreg problematizes the seemingly neutral project through which a female intellectual, even if of the same national identity and not an alien western feminist, represents the muted illiterate woman. The problem for Lazreg, who turns to explore the lived experience of Algerian women before and after the national struggle for independence, is not merely methodological but a deeply theoretical and epistemological issue. Prevailing paradigms of Arab women have defined their subjects and objectified women's lives to such an extent that merely interviewing these women to elicit from them information about their lives will simply confirm *our* conceptions of *them*, insists Lazreg (1988: 95). She proposes a "phenomenology of women's lived experience" as a critical methodology that will aim to explode the constraining power of existing categories of knowledge. Interviewing women is not an act of recording their lives and fitting these narratives into our preconceived categories of knowledge, explains Lazreg,

Such a phenomenology would not be a mere description of the subjective meaning of women's experience. Rather, it would be the search for the organizing principles of women's lived reality as it intersects with men's. (1988: 95).

The intention is to provide a rhetorical space where the experiences of marginalized women can be legitimated and taken seriously. The important categories of knowledge will emerge from the body of knowledge produced by the women. Their knowledge is thus granted epistemic authority.

Lazreg is not alone in granting women's narratives, considered in such manner, an epistemic authority. Other postcolonial and radical feminist theorists (cf. Patricia Hill-Collins, 1990, 1998; Beverly Skeggs, 1997; McClintock, Mufti and Shohat, 1997) have been working along similar lines. The significance of Lazreg's work is its ability to engage with this body of emerging theory and contribute to it from the Algerian and more generally Arab feminist discourse and realities.

Some Lessons for Israeli Feminism

Several general insights and more specific implications emerge from this reading of Arab feminist discourses. In this closing section, I would like to explore these as they pertain to contemporary Israeli feminist discourse and practice.

In Israel, and due to specific historical and political circumstances, the dominant feminist discourse is largely secular, middle class, and Jewish Euro Centric (Ashkenazi). Within this canonical Israeli feminist discourse, liberal feminists take center stage, while socialist and radical feminist discourses have been effectively marginalized.¹¹ Feminisms that sprung out of the needs of non-western women in Israel—both Jewish and non-Jewish—have only recently begun to articulate their alternative feminist agenda. Feminist discourses articulated by religious Jewish women, although more common in the U.S. (see Umansky, 1988), have had relatively little resonance among Israeli secular feminists (see Shakdiel, 2000).¹² Lesbian feminists continue to argue that their interests and concerns are systematically ignored by mainstream Israeli feminists (Shadmi, 2000). In February 2000, the voices of these previously excluded and muted Israeli feminists (Mizrahi, Radical, Palestinian, and Lesbian) demanded to

¹¹ This material relies on my 1999 essay where all supportive references are cited.

¹² The controversial attempt by religious feminists to participate in the discussions that took place at the 1995 Israeli annual feminist conference held in Givat Habiba dramatically failed. The secular feminists made their objection to the rightist politics of the religious women who were, by and large, settlers in the Occupied Territories, explicit and disclaimed their feminist agenda by arguing that feminism can not co-exist with the blatant oppression of other people. The religious feminists were asked to leave the conference. (Shlomo Fisher, personal communication, July 2, 2000, Van Leer Institute, Jerusalem).

be heard and taken seriously at the annual conference of the Israeli Association for Feminist and Gender Studies (IAFGS). The question of “Difference among women” was posited for the first time in the Israeli academe as an important question at this most recent conference.¹³ It seems to me that the body of feminist scholarship that has developed in the Arab Middle East and North Africa, and the way in which it has dealt with critical questions of identity and difference, has much to offer towards what I see as an urgent need to broaden the scope of Israeli feminist thought in ways that will enable us to think of pluralities and diversities rather than uniformity and “universals”.

One of the most interesting observations of the Arab feminist discourses I reviewed is their keen awareness of the dangers of mimicking western feminism. The question of making feminism relevant to one’s society does not only mean that cultural sensibilities and world views of diverse groups in society must be integrated into the evolving feminist agenda. It also means that the issues to be selected for feminist struggle must be defined according to local needs and not according to alien, in most cases dominant, western articulations. When Arab women were left to define their struggles against gender inequality and oppression, they articulated a feminist agenda that placed issues of access to education, employment, and changes in family laws at the center. A similar process has been taking place in Israeli feminist discourses during the past five years or more. Mizrahi feminists have been articulating an alternative feminist agenda that criticizes the narrow, elitist Israeli feminist liberal agenda. For example, liberal Israeli feminist activists boasted pursuing issues such as women’s equal rights to become pilots and fill positions of battle in the Israeli army. Yet such issues are relevant to a very small segment of the Jewish population. For the majority, lower-class Mizrahi women, such issues are irrelevant; for Palestinian women in Israel, such goals work to uphold and work within the most oppressive, male-centered institution—the army. Mizrahi feminists have sought to redefine the feminist agenda and posited instead feminist struggles that stem from the needs of poor marginalized Mizrahi women (see Motzafi-Haller, 2000). Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, a Palestinian feminist scholar who teaches law at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, makes a powerful argument on the limited use of western models for the interpretation of and intervention in, the most extreme situation of patriarchal oppression — rape. She shows that what are considered “universal” ways of dealing with crimes perpetrated against women, often prove to be counterproductive in Palestinian

¹³ The conference was held at Bet Berl college on February 16, 2000. It was organized by Dr. Nadera Shalhoub Kevorkian, Dr. Erella Shadmi and myself. I wrote a brief review of the conference (published in the IAFGS newsletter) which describes how other aspects of the discussions held that day were intended to open the question of difference among Israeli women for public debate. At the time of this writing (July 2000) no further discussion of the issues raised at the conference had ensued in Israel. The papers presented at the conference have not yet been published.

Arab society and are not successful in reducing the pain inflicted on women. Shalhoub-Kevorkian proposes a culturally-sensitive model of intervention that works with the victim and towards social reform pursued within culturally and socially acceptable values (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 1999). These incipient voices of Palestinian and Mizrahi feminists in Israel move beyond the existing unified feminist narrative to present a “relational” feminism (Shohat, 2000) — a feminism of diverse communities, affiliations, and practices.

The need to redefine feminism and enable several definitions of the term has emerged in powerful ways in the Arab feminist discourse reviewed here. Lazreg puts it succinctly: “To think of feminism in the singular is sociologically inappropriate.” The exclusion of other definitions of feminism is what Lazreg terms “gynocentrism” which she aptly defines as a “situation whereby some women as a group exercise discursive power over other women whom they exclude from their frame of reference.” (Lazreg 1988: f.n. 37: 105).

Yet, there are other, more specific analytical and theoretical bonuses to reading Arab feminist scholarship. I have traced three major themes that run through this body of scholarly work. My reading of this body of scholarship suggests that the debate among secular and religious feminists has prevailed throughout the region; that historical analyses of changing gender relations have not only effectively dispelled stereotypes and misconceptions held by many Western observers about the region, but have also contributed to a more sophisticated understanding of women’s position and feminist activism in the Arab world; and that listening to women tell about their lives and worlds might lead—when carried out systematically and in a theoretically informed manner—to an alternative understanding of society and culture in the region.

I do not want to argue that these three critical theoretical and scholarly strategies are by any means unique to Arab feminist scholarship, or that similar ideas and positions can not be found in the literature produced in other world regions. I did find that exploring the particular ways in which Arab feminists have argued over and experimented with these key questions of theory and praxis provided me with important insights and clarification of questions and issues I was concerned with.

I have learned, for example, that I, and other “non-European” Israeli women¹⁴ do not need to dissociate ourselves from the culture that we are a part of in order to be feminists (see Nagar-Ron, 2000). As Leila Ahmed asserted, to be a feminist means to fight misogyny not one’s culture. Patriarchy, and not a whole cultural frame, is to be dismantled. Adopting this perspective also means that all forms of struggle against oppression and misogynic practices are feminist,

¹⁴ I feel awkward using this negative designation to speak about Mizrahi and Palestinian Israeli women. I could have used the term “Arab” women to include both Muslim and Christian Arab women and “Arab-Jews”, a designation used by several radical Mizrahi women (Ella Shohat, for example) in defiance of Zionist ideologies. My discomfort in using “non-European” or “non-western” also stems from the fact that by making such a binary distinction I am reproducing the terms of the dominant orientalist discourse.

whether they explicitly define themselves as such, or not. Indeed, women's struggles are not limited to organized forms of activism—feminist conferences, membership in organizations, women's studies centers—all familiar western forms of feminism. There are other forms of women's feminist practices that work against their subordination. Israeli feminist activists have just begun to explore these multiple forms of feminist activism and Israeli feminist scholarship has not yet begun to examine the meaning of expanding its narrow focus and the theoretical implications of enabling the voices of diverse feminisms to be heard.

Reading Arab feminist discourses has also helped me clarify my thinking about both the conceptual and practical meaning of the question of difference among women. A common misapprehension of difference, borne out of an old-fashioned anthropological relativism, often leads to a moral dilemma for the dominant. In Israel, for example, such a dilemma has been whether Bedouin or Druz men in Israel should be allowed to kill their sisters or daughters "because this is their custom" (in cases of family honor), or must the state intervene and punish these men in the name of a "universal" moral code. The debate raged along these very lines, when a Jewish male anthropologist (Danny Rabinowitz) was accused of taking the relativist stand by Israeli feminist women who insisted that such criminals must be punished by the Israeli state on universalist moral grounds. The focus on the victimized women of the Other, without a serious analysis of the political and social frames that shape gender relations and produce such crimes, obscures the fact that both debating sides—the relativist anthropologist and the moral feminists—are part of the very dominant power structure that reproduces these gender relations.¹⁵ Arab feminist scholars have dealt with a sensational representation of Arab women for more than a hundred years. They have sought to transcend colonialist epistemologies which used the idea of "cultural difference" as justification for their oppressive intervention in Arab societies in ways that can be illuminating for contemporary debates within Israeli feminist scholarship and practice. Arab feminist scholars have demonstrated that instead of objectifying the idea of Otherness, one needs to historicize cultural practice and analyze it within larger frames of power and political economy. Such analyses transcend the objectifying categories that posit "modern" vs. "traditional" models of gender relations by placing women's agency at the center of a sound analysis of politics and historical transformations. A sophisticated social analysis - one that explodes the limited hold of conceptualization of "Mizrahi traditionalists" vs. "Ashkenazi modernists" and begins to explore the intersections of ethnicity, gender and class—is sorely needed in Israel.

Finally, Arab feminist scholarship has raised critical questions regarding the practice of using women's narrations of their lives and experiences as a basis for feminist analysis and theory. Lazreg has been most articulate in exploring the

¹⁵ A recent essay by a young Palestinian sociologist, Manar Hasan, begins to develop an analysis of "honor crimes" along the same lines. See Manar Hasan 1999.

complex challenge of writing such narratives outside the categories of knowledge created by western feminism. Arab feminist experimentation with women's narration and the complex question of representation might enrich our very initial Israeli attempts at probing the theoretical, not merely methodological, critical potential of this feminist epistemology.¹⁶

Just before closing, I wish to return to the opening scene at the Helnan-Shepard Hotel in Cairo and the encounter between the Israeli and Arab women and reflect on my position in that encounter and the larger scene it signals. "Go back to that same hotel in Cairo," suggested Tamar El-Or, an Israeli feminist colleague who read my essay, "clarify if you belong, or what caused you to feel you do not belong, or what the 'bad Israeli women' did to make you feel ashamed/guilty." I decided to take on the challenge, and explore these questions that might invoke further, yet unexplored insights. I focused my discussion above mainly on the theoretical and methodological lessons my reading into "Arab feminist discourses" might yield for "Israeli feminism". I did not speak much of the similarities that may pertain to these two postulated categories, although I made it amply clear that both "Israeli feminism" and certainly "Arab feminism" are internally diverse and that neither can be characterized as a uniform, single discourse. In fact, I directed my lessons towards one segment of Israeli feminist scholarship and activism - the dominant Eurocentric, liberal segment - and proposed that it should incorporate some of the insights and tools I culled from reading Arab feminist discourses. The "bad Israeli women", to use El-Or's words, were blinded by their orientalism and nationalism and therefore missed an important moment in which a real exchange of ideas and perhaps feminist collaboration could have emerged in the region. I felt that I was part of this orientalist gaze, I felt ashamed of my ignorance in regard to feminist movement and scholarship in the Middle East and undertook writing this essay as a step towards correcting my own, and perhaps others', limited horizons. In the process I discovered, as this essay reveals, that critical questions regarding the definitions of feminist activism, the struggle to develop a local feminist thought, and the complexities of representation—issues that stand at the center of my own work—were debated and experimented with by Arab feminist scholars in ways that I found stimulating and thought-provoking. I noted that diverging, non-hegemonic voices of radical, lesbian, Palestinian, and Mizrahi women have only recently been emerging into the forefront of Israeli feminist discourses, but they have not yet made an impact. The "bad Israeli women" on the one hand, and the middle-class Egyptian feminists I met in Cairo in November 1998 on the other, moved me to rethink the issue of Israeli feminism and work on revising it into a more inclusive, reflexive, diverse frame of thought and action.

16 I was recently invited to take part in a discussion group about the use of narratives and life histories organized by Prof. Debbie Bernstein of Haifa University. The group is still in the process of being formed.

References

- Abdo, N. (1997) Women Studies programs: The Middle East in Context. In Nelson, C. and Altorki, S. (eds.) *Arab Regional Women's Studies Workshop*, The American University in Cairo Press: Cairo, Egypt, pp. 20-41.
- Abu-Lughod, L. (1997) Assessing Gender/Women's Studies: A Comparative Perspective--Discussion. In Nelson, C. and Altorki, S. (eds.) *Arab Regional Women's Studies Workshop*, The American University in Cairo Press: Cairo, Egypt, pp. 63-68.
- (1998) *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*. Princeton University Press: Princeton.
- Afshar, H. (1996) Women and the Politics of Fundamentalism in Iran. In Afshar, H. (ed.) *Women and Politics in the Third World*. Routledge: New York.
- (1997) Women Studies in the Middle East: Some Problems and Prospects In Nelson, C. and Altorki, S. (eds.) *Arab Regional Women's Studies Workshop*. The American University in Cairo Press: Cairo, Egypt, pp. 41-63.
- Afshari, R. (1994) Egalitarian Islam and Misogynist Islamic Tradition: A Critique of the Feminist Reinterpretation of Islamic History and Heritage. *Critique*, Spring.
- Ahmed, L. (1998) *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. The American University of Cairo Press: Cairo, Egypt.
- Al-Ali, N. S. (1997) Feminism and Contemporary Debates in Egypt. In Chatty, D. and Rabo, A. (eds.) *Organizing Women: Formal and Informal Groups in the Middle East*. Berg: Oxford, pp 173-94.
- Alloula, M. (1986) *The Colonial Harem*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis.
- Amin, Q. (1992, [1899]) Women and the Veil. Extract from *The Liberation of Women (tahrir al-mar'a)* The American University of Cairo: Cairo, Egypt. (translated by Samiha Sidhom Peterson).
- Amin, S. (1990) *Delinking: Towards a Polycentric World*. Zed: London and Atlantic Highland.
- Badran, M. (1995) *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*. Princeton University Press: Princeton.
- (1993) More than a Century of Feminism in Egypt. In Tucker, J. (ed.) *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, pp 129-149.
- Berkovitch, N. and Moghadam, V. M. (1999) Middle East Politics and Women's Collective Action: Challenging the Status Quo. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State, and Society* 6: 273-291.
- Dahan-Kalev, H. (1999) Feminism: East and West. In Izraeli et al (eds.) *Sex, Gender, Politics: Women in Israel*, Hakibbutz Hameuchad: Tel Aviv, pp 217-267.
- Dajani, S. (1993) Palestinian Women under Israeli occupation. In Tucker, J. (ed.) *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington, pp. 102-128.
- Fanon, F. (1965) *A Dying Colonialism*, Grove Press: New York.
- Ferneau Warnock, E. (1998) *In Search of Islamic Feminism*. Doubleday: New York.
- Ghoussoub, M. (1988) Feminism—or the Eternal Masculine—in the Arab World. *New Left Review* 161: 3-18.
- Hale, S. (1993) Transforming culture or fostering second-hand consciousness? Women's front organizations and revolutionary parties - The Sudan case. In Tucker, J. (ed.) *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, pp 149-174.
- Hammami, R. and Rieker, M. (1988) Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Marxism. *New Left Review* 170: 93-106.
- Hasan, M. (1999) The politics of honor: Patriarchy, the state, and the homicide of women in the name of the family's honor. In Izraeli, D. et al (eds.) *Sex, Gender, Politics: Women in Israel*. Hakibbutz Hameuchad: Tel Aviv. pp. 267-307.
- Hatem, M. (1987) Class and patriarchy as competing paradigms for the study of Middle Eastern women. *Contemporary Studies in Society and History* 29(4): 811-818.

- (1993) Toward the development of post-Islamist and post-Nationalist feminist discourses in the Middle East. In Tucker, J. (ed.) *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, pp. 29-49.
- Hill-Collins, P. (1990) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Routledge: New York.
- (1998) *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis and New York.
- Hoffman, V. (1985) An Islamic activist: Zienab al-Ghazali. In Warnock Fernea, E. (ed.) *Women and Family in Islam*, University of Texas Press: Austin.
- Joseph, S. (1998) Comments on Majid's "The Politics of Feminism in Islam": Critique of politics and the politics of critique. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 23(2): 363-369.
- Lazreg, M. (1988) Feminism and difference: The perils of writing as a woman on women in Algeria. *Feminist Studies* 14 (1): 81-107.
- (1994) *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question*. Routledge: New York and London.
- Majid, A. (1998) The Politics of Feminism in Islam. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 23 (2): 321-363.
- McClintock A., Mufti, A., and Shohat, E. (1997) *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis.
- Mernissi, F. (1989) *Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan Women*, Routledge: New York.
- (1991) *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*. Blackwell: Oxford.
- (1992) *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*. Longman: London.
- Mohanty, C. T. (1991) Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. In Mohanty, C. T., Russo, A., and Torres, L. (eds.) *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington.
- Motzafi-Haller, P. (1999) Mizrahi women in Israel: The double erasure. In Epstein, H. (ed.) *Jewish Women 2000*. Research Institute on Jewish Women, Brandeis University: Waltham, MA, pp. 79-97.
- (2000) Negotiating difference in Israeli scholarship: Towards a new feminist discourse. In Kemp, A., Ram, U., and Newman, D., (eds.) *Israelis in Conflict*. Sage: New York.
- (forthcoming) Scholarship, identity and power: Mizrahi women in Israel. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*.
- Nagar-Ron, S. (2000) From Exclusion to Inclusion: A Narrative Analysis of Life Stories of Mizrahi Feminists in Israel. MA Thesis, Department of Behavioral Studies: Ben Gurion University, Beer-Sheva.
- Nelson, C. and Altorki, S. (1998) Introduction. *Arab Regional Women's Workshop*. American University in Cairo Press: Cairo, pp. 1-5.
- Ram, U. (1993) Emerging modalities of feminist sociology in Israel. *Israel Social Science Research* 8(2): 51-76.
- Sabbagh, S. (1998) Introduction In Sabbagh, S. (ed.) *Palestinian Women of Gaza and the West Bank*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington, Indiana. pp 1-41.
- Sayigh, R. (1993) Palestinian women and politics in Lebanon. In Tucker, J. (ed.) *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis: pp. 175-195.
- Shaaban, B. (1988) *Both Right and Left Handed: Arab Women Talk about Their Lives*. Women's Press: London.
- Shadmi, E. (2000) The Silencing of Lesbian Feminist Discourse. A paper presented at the second annual conference of the Israeli Association for Feminist and gender Studies, Bet Berl. (Hebrew).

- Shakdiel, L. (2000) Feminism as Repair of the World (*Feminism ke Tikkun Olam*) Ravgoni no. 3. Van Leer Institute: Jerusalem. (Hebrew)
- Shalhoub-Kevorkian, N. (1999) Towards a cultural definition of rape: Dilemmas in dealing with rape victims in Palestinian society. *Women's Studies International Forum* 22(2): 157-173.
- Shohat, E. (2000) *Talking Visions: Multicultural feminism in a Transnational Age*. MIT Press: Boston.
- Skeggs, B. (1997) *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*. Sage Publications: London.
- Umansky, E. (1988) Females, feminists, and feminism: A review of recent literature on Jewish feminism and the creation of a feminist Judaism. *Feminist Studies* 14(2): 349-365.