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Encountering Feminism: Freeing Borders in a Conservative Society

By Bassmah B. AlTaher¹

Abstract

What made Feminism the core of my academic and spiritual journey was the multiple questions that yearned for answers. I craved to feel the warmth of echoes created by various women with their tales. I needed assurance that women were not left powerless, and that they did have a silenced voice suppressed somehow, and somewhere, which was emerging gradually in time with a sense of pride and achievement. Above all, I wanted to know if that was all there was for me? I asked myself: As an Arab woman, is yielding to the norms and laws of a patriarchal society that suppressed my individuality the only path I could follow? This paper stems from an experience in the doctoral program at the University of Jordan when studying a Feminism course in the fall of 2012, when I was first introduced to the role of media in shaping women's voices in various contexts.

Keywords: Communication, Anglophone western world, University of Jordan, Feminist theory, English Literature, Personal narrative

Introduction

My first time embarking on feminism felt like a roller coaster ride back in 2014. Choosing the elective course during my PhD graduate program studies has made a positive impact like no other as it was taught by a lively, inquisitive professor, who did not take "I don't know" for an answer. She introduced us to the theory feminism blended in the Anglophone canon of literature and media. Day by day, I flipped the pages of time, and saw images of tears, felt the pain, and touched the souls of researchers, novelists, and directors who created a powerful movement that moved the very depths of my heart. The first step I took in my quest was to find the true meaning of Feminism. I realized it was a movement that created sense and knowledge, and that Feminism was not a completely new genre, it had started from the time of Adam's creation, and Eve was the first woman to celebrate it. Removing Eve from the religious context and viewing her as a human being for the first time, made me realize how Eve represents all women, and this plurality is only the first step.

For that reason, I searched for its meaning instead, because in theory, one learns to understand and make sense out of the confusion. I found not one, or two, but numerous definitions that could not encapsulate various ideas in one pill to swallow easily. As I read more essays on Betty Friedan, Audre Lorde, and Bell Hooks, I saw the movement become more profound due to

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the fact that women were also marginalized and stereotyped in the West, they were voices of women who came from all walks of life. They represented a history, an intellectual scope, and a theoretical diversity in their feminist writings.

Theoretical Framework

Charlotte Bunch said it best when she described Feminism as “a way of viewing the world” (Bunch 1983, 250). However, black feminism is what attracted me the most. Despite it flourishing in African diaspora, the United States witnessed the most prominent forms of black feminism. I was able to relate to Bell Hooks who stated that feminism is not only a way to view the world surrounding you, but also to “grasp what [is] happening around and within” you (cited in Kolmar & Bartkowski 2005, 59). By taking into account these two perspectives, I realized that women are surrounded by oppression in various fields, like gender, race, class, age, sex, nationality, psychology, politics, economy, and history.

Intersectionality is what attracted me the most, as it explained how the double jeopardy of being black, and a woman can face the dangers of oppression and racism at the same time. Intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989, explains how discrimination and prejudice happen. The experiences of women in color were added to the movement, as they clarify how further injustices are inflicted upon them (Crenshaw 1989).

Historical revisionism is another important aspect in black feminism, as it focuses on the reinterpretation of historical records. By doing so, new facts and evidence surface as the injustices done to black people by white supremacists begin to emerge. As I read more about the Civil Rights Movement during the 60s and 70s, and I understood how women were subordinated, some couldn't get proper jobs because of the simplest of things, like their beautiful curly hair had to be straightened properly in order to be at least accepted to an interview.

Many black feminists detached themselves from the Black Arts and Black power that was dominated by the black patriarchy, and established “a sense of continuity between black women's struggles and critical approaches to literature and culture in previous eras and the present” (Keizer 2007, 158).

By connecting black feminism to Arab women and their plights, I begin to gradually understand how minorities can connect in many ways and show solidarity globally.

Literature Review

Bearing in mind the struggle of Arab women, I found a deep connection to the plight of African-American women. They had to fight the bitterness of oppression in two forms: sexism and racism, and when it came to deconstructing their bitter reality, and constructing a new way of life, they had to find their own set of tools dug up from the spirit of nature. For example, Audre Lorde finds refuge in poetry, and in her verses could heal her pain, and find the “vital necessity of...existence [, for] poetry helps give name to the nameless” (Kolmer and Bartkowski, 15). The nameless is simply a woman's voice, in which Lorde emphasizes the power of self and the power found within, “I feel, therefore I can be free.” By reading this, Feminism is not only about the way of thinking, but also about how feelings are represented in a woman's voice. This explains to me why Feminism is universal, and is never tied down to one woman.

With the words of African-American essayists and activists, I felt blood boil in their faces, such as Sojourner Truth who cried out in anger “Ain't I a woman?” in her famous speech that was

delivered at the Women's Rights Convention in 1851. Truth was able to challenge white men and women by calling herself a womanist who would never rely on man nor woman. A black woman is tough, strong, and a survivor. Alice Walker's "Womanist" added to Truth's anger by reshaping the image of a black woman perceived by white men and women that black women are unintelligent, useless, and inhuman. Walker portrays a black woman as strong and independent, who is peaceful and in tune with nature and with herself. A Womanist "Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* herself. *Regardless*" (Kolmar & Bartkowski 11). In the end of Walker's essay, she brought the Womanist's love close to the color "purple" and to "lavender," and in nature, a black woman can find her peace. Since African-Americans were to me the first ones to impose the heavy question of why they were treated with inequality and injustice, they were able to vision how the future should be, and so they began to strategize, trying to find a remedy for their malady.

Then I asked myself, since Feminism as a movement can be applied to all women of different races from different nations, does that mean they can be combined as one voice, one heart, one cause?

Mary Church Terrell (cited in Kolmar & Bartkowski 2005) has partially answered this question for me in her essay "The Progress of Colored Women." She shows the struggle of black women since they were emancipated, how they developed gradually into independent and sophisticated women. These women parallel their strength with white feminists, and baffle the "white people who...[thought] they...[knew] all about colored people" (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2005, p. 114).

Black women are able to pursue an education, create businesses, and take up politics with poise despite the pressure of racism and sexism. They simply knocked "at the door of Justice and...[asked] for an equal chance" (Kolmar & Bartkowski 14) as white women have. I saw then the solidarity of black women, and felt the same pain of racism and segregation shared amongst them. However, was unifying their struggle the right thing to do at that time? I needed to dig deeper into this movement to come up with a better understanding of Feminism.

The first wave passed after the 1920s, and the second wave (1920–1995) has brought in a new breed of feminist activists who spoke for the rights of colored women with more eloquence and force. Florynce Kennedy (cited in Kolmar & Bartkowski 2005) discusses the misfortunes of women and black women in the economic and political spheres; Kennedy calls for a change by rewriting their own history and breaking out of the shackles of tradition. It was important for "self-rule" among the African-Americans, as she questions the free authority of an Anglo-Saxon's domination over colored people.

Her words made me ponder the supremacy, and how difficult it truly has been for black women in a society that not only suppresses women, but also oppresses colored women in the most degrading manner. Pauli Murray adds to Kennedy's voice in her call for "The Liberation of Black Women" who had suffered the "immoralities of Jim Crow and Jane Crow" (Kolmer and Bartkowski, 232). By this "double burden" of white women oppressing black women, the conduct of degradation continues.

Under the white man's eyes during the time of Jim Crow, black women were still considered as slaves, and that was completely unacceptable and inhumane. Murray advocates documenting important roles of black women in American history, along with their experiences and plights that appear to be left out on purpose. Moreover, the negligence of not pointing out the significance of a black woman in society shows how deep segregation had become. She even condemned the injustice of certain "editors" who called for a black woman to put her family and

children first before her career, and that was simply blasphemous to a woman, especially to a black woman who knew that *herself* should always come first. It appears that it was a man's fear to see a black woman succeed, creating "a dilemma of competing identities and priorities" (Kolmer and Bartkowski, 235). Murray saw that in order to achieve a "common humanity" (239), white and black women should join forces.

Throughout the third wave of Feminism (1995 –), I found my answer in Kimberle Crenshaw cited in Kolmer & Bartowski (2005) that black women are considered as one entity. She said that the "political demands of many... [have spoken] more powerfully than the pleas of a few isolated voices, women...[have] organized against the almost routine violence that... [has shaped] their lives" (Kolmer and Bartkowski, 533). This shows that these "isolated voices" tell a different version of their stories, and because of that, they are still considered a minority. Moreover, Crenshaw touches on violence against women, while race and gender create a double jeopardy for women.

It is plain to see that racial problems could not be solved by using the same weapons of white women. Pre and post slavery era have shown how a white woman has had a better life per say, for education and help in domestic household were options for her. She even had partial authority in household affairs. However, black women were deprived of an education. They had to work the fields, and could only find domestic work to feed their family, and above all that, they had to face the harassments of their white bosses, and their black husbands.

As black women, they were not given proper tools to defend themselves from the oppression coming at them from all aspects of life. The idea of "intersectionality" came into view, a term created by Crenshaw to explain how various aspects of life, such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and ability are mixed with society and culture, and form as social inequality. Racism and sexism have definitely interrelated in oppressing women, especially black women. "Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics" (Kolmer & Bartkowski, 533-541). This is why Black women should have their own tools, because they were the only ones who understood their realm more than anyone else.

After considering intersectional feminism, I realized how their plight is a form of interrelation amongst women as a whole. Yet, this wholeness was not one entity, it was a group of voices of women that have individual stories, a script that went beyond a society's script, and an identity that folds into becomingness. It relates to society and religion.

Ultimately, Feminism was all about individuality, and these voices came together like a beehive, buzzing one truth, for in truth significance arises. The professor's words echoed in my ears: "You can speak your own truth, your own reality, and no one else can do it for you." This is why I can relate to the African-American women's definition of Feminism more than that of the definition of Anglo-American women. Because to me, their experience in oppression is closer to my experience as an Arab woman.

Methodology

Using personal narrative as a form of discovering how feminism, studied as a graduate course, affected me deeply as a woman. Personal narratives are powerful in the way they embrace time and society in one context, as they evade "the extremes of both essentialist and constructivist views of self" (Elliott 2005, 125). By interacting with narratives, I am able to understand how complicated events progress, and realize how a narrator can become the protagonist of his or her

own story (Elliott 2005). To help understand the development of an identity (Riessman 2008), narratives ease the task in finding the structures, layers, and background of narratives.

The reason why I am using personal narrative as a method throughout this paper is relevant because of its raw nature in telling true events. True, it is in man's nature to tell a story, and "we tell stories that relate the quotidian events of our day, funny happenstances, major and minor scenes from our past" (Ingraham 2017, 55). The ability to grow as a person begins when a story is told, and as simple as it may sound, stories have always been part of human development; growing and understanding our surrounding events. Consciousness "begins when brains acquire the power, the simple power...of telling a story" (Damasio 1999, 10). Therefore, using a personal narrative in this venture of understanding feminism, I gradually develop a feminist consciousness as I go through the steps of learning a new theory.

Embracing Feminism

Therefore, Bunch uses four stages when applying Feminism to decode the situation women are in: description, analysis, vision, and strategy. In these four stages, I understood that one should first describe the situation; reflect on the various experiences of women. Then analyze what was going on in reality, and understand the potentiality of a woman. By analyzing, women have started to ask why, and that was the hardest question ever imposed on reality. After finding out the reasons why women are oppressed, it was important to see what should really exist instead of the current situation, and then hypothesize a change and offer a solution. These stages made me realize that describing and analyzing were not easy tasks, especially in the Arab world, because the problem of oppression and inequality was always greeted with a blind eye.

Women in the Middle East particularly have had their fair share of injustices; for example, rape victims in Egypt are accused for seducing the rapist, rather than showing them moral support (Elhennawy, 2019). On the other hand, Jordan faces a rise in domestic violence. On November 6, 2019, a husband "gouged the eyes of his wife...a mother of three children, following domestic dispute" (Husseini, 2019). With an oppressive patriarchy surrounding me, visioning and re-visioning a new world where women could be treated as equal human beings through feminist concepts was groundbreaking, as I discover how feminists created various platforms throughout the world to voice their concern. However, the struggle is still there, and unfortunately continuing till this very day.

Arab women are always silenced under the laws of tradition and customs, even the word *mahram* (a man's subordinate) reflects how an Arabic woman belongs to man and his tribe. In an Arab society, the concept of Walker's "Womanism" and the communion with nature is a vital aspect to the culture of Arab women. I, for one, was forbidden to accept a scholarship to continue my graduate studies abroad because it was "unacceptable" in the family to have their women study overseas, alone, and unsupervised. I wasn't alone in this cage of subordination, for example, women in Saudi Arabia hadn't had a lot of choices before 2019's liberal movement.

Every Saudi woman must have a male guardian, normally a father or husband, but in some cases a brother or even a son, who has the power to make a range of critical decisions on her behalf...As dozens of Saudi women told Human Rights Watch, the male guardianship system is the most significant impediment to realizing women's rights in the country, effectively rendering adult women legal minors who cannot make key decisions for themselves (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

However, complying to my family's wishes to stay, they did not deprive me from continuing with my education locally, so I asked myself, how can I apply Feminism to the Arab world? Studying for my doctorate degree, I needed to understand how a woman can steer herself out of such a tight circle.

Lila Abu-Lughod, a well-known American-Palestinian scholar, focused on cultural forms and how they are connected to power, political representations, and the knowledge they produce. As a Palestinian descendant myself, Abu-Lughod's critique seemed closer to my voice as I unravel her analysis throughout. She focused on women's rights and the question of gender. In her essay "*Orientalism* and Middle East Feminist Studies," she uses Edward Saïd's *Orientalism* as a source for further research, as well as in the fields of history and anthropology. Also, it was a "historical recovery of feminism in the Middle East" (McCann & Kim 204). The images of women depicted by Saïd were unacceptable to feminists, because they were "images of sexuality in Orientalist discourse" (McCann & Kim 204).

Applying Feminism in the Middle East remains a constant fear, because the movement seems imported, and Abu-Lughod argues the fact that it was a "formative power of colonialism in the development of the region" (206). Feminism is closely tied to personal experience, and thus "positionality" becomes vital between religious and cultural laws. The Islamic religion is the dominant religion throughout the Middle East, and throughout history, patriarchal society has interpreted the Holy Qur'ân according to their personal purposes. This shows the thin line between religion and the culture of religion.

The culture of religion is closely entwined with patriarchal traditions and tribal laws shaded under the umbrella of what they call the *right* interpretation of Islam. Abu-Lughod suggests that women should be given a chance to interpret the Holy Qur'ân from their own point of view, and in order to do that, they should be educated first. Oppression is evidently upon Arab women, and finding a balance in this oppressive world that uses religion as its excuse, women must be given the proper space and tools needed to grow and flourish. The crux of women's problems in the Middle East is tradition more than religion. State laws have constantly supported patriarchy, and so women go back to school, get an education, and attain the proper tools in order to fight back closed-minded people.

For once, women should decide for themselves the life they have always wanted. The increase of child marriages, loss of guardianship of their children once they marry, and the inability to pass down their nationality obstruct their need to lead their lives according to their own lens, and steer away from man's supremacy. Moreover, Abu-Lughod has enlightened a path for many women to rewrite his story into her own story.

After understanding the meaning of Feminism from various voices of women, I had to envision how Feminism could be liberating, and the only way to do so was through fiction. Characters came to life when I read Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1992) and watched Oprah Winfrey act as Celie on the silver screen. The struggle of African-American women did not only bring sentimental emotions and empathy, but has also shown me the journey of a fighting woman shedding and creating a new self that is full of strength and confidence. Celie, the main character of the story, goes through a spiritual journey on finding who she is.

Throughout her life, all she could do was accept whatever verbal and physical abuse her father or husband imposed on her. She lives a numb life with no education and no money. As a poor woman, she serves her husband and his children, and never questions his authority and his aggressive behavior. Late at night, Celie writes her silences, adopting a speaking position addressing her sorrows and miseries to God or Nettie. Celie does not develop a self yet, and is

unconscious at the beginning of her journey. The tables turn for her when she is aware of her self-worth through Shug and Sophia. She gradually starts to shed her old identity and embrace her power, voice, and capabilities as they formed her new identity. She emancipates herself by leaving her husband, starting her own business, and relying on herself more than anyone else. Celie is truly as “purple to lavender” in the very end of the novel; she attains a sense of peace and self-confidence needed to survive in a patriarchal society.

Celie’s experience along with Shug and Nettie’s echoed in my thoughts as we are introduced to Fadia Faqir’s *Pillar of Salt* (1996). As seen in *The Color Purple*’s struggle of women, Faqir also illustrates patriarchal oppression over Arab women. In this novel, Faqir explores oral tradition and the tradition of travel writing in order to convey imperialism and sexual politics. It is important to note that women, especially Arab women, are described as “women in bondage” (Suyoufie & Hammad 271). Women are not allowed to delve into politics, sex, and religion because they are realms women have no control over. The lack of control stems from the lack of proper tools needed to delve properly in these fields, and this is why the patriarchal society is careful in not sharing their knowledge with the opposite sex. Faqir breaks this vicious bondage and is trying to change the cycle; “Faqir’s text becomes the site where women’s voices are re-inscribed in a defiant subversion of a long history of silence written in native and not a hosting culture” (Suyoufie & Hammad 271).

The main character, Maha, comes to life as she embodies the soul of resistance. Her plight with her brother Daffash shows how strong she is. As a Bedouin woman, Maha is the daughter of the land who weaves her own tale. Through weaving, she finds her peace, solitude, and space. In the character of Maha, I could see the Dead Sea, the whole of Jordan, and my homeland. In the end when Maha is put into a mental institution, Faqir shows how harsh patriarchal society can be towards women who resist and fight back. The Storyteller is the biggest example of how most men can be; misogynists and oppressors. The Story Teller would do anything to embellish Maha’s story with lies in order to cover up the truth, and by this, Maha, along with Hanniyeh, her friend in the Mental Hospital, ultimately surrender to different modes of being in order to escape their bitter reality.

These various characters, from Celie and Shug to Maha and Hanniyeh, brought about a sense of resistance within me. Feminism is all about finding your voice and voicing it through proper channels of communication. It is all about empowering yourself to fight injustice and inequality. The women I have studied throughout this movement and the experience they share of their spiritual journey in finding themselves has given me the courage and hope to search for who I am as an Arab woman.

Conclusion

Feminism has opened my eyes and changed my perspective of how I perceived the Arab society. I understand how the Jordanian culture has this silent agreement between its members that women are fragile, need to be protected, and are considered the bearers of family honor and trust. These generalized perceptions were the core problems in our society of allowing women to fulfill their full potential. Some have even paid the price with their lives due to honor crimes.

For the first time, I begin to judge not by what the paternal authority thinks, or religious men preach, but by what I believe is right for the welfare of Jordanian women. My decisions should not be made with the influence of patriarchy. I finally understood that by not staying silent, the burden of oppression would only do more harm than heal. I realized that Feminism is a vast

universe that takes part in many other movements like Post-colonialism and Post-modernism, and that Feminism is evolving, as tales of resisting women emerge. At the end, I found the answer I was searching for.

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