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Modern Articulations of Gender Parity: the 'New Woman' Debate in the British Victorian Era and the Modern Muslim World

By Maha F. Habib¹

Abstract

Within the 'New Woman' debates within the Victorian era in Britain and the modern Muslim world (the areas of the former Ottoman Empire), one can witness a powerful feminist consciousness and astounding consistencies in the quest for gender equality, despite the difference in religious traditions, contexts, and contingencies. The debates attest to a consistency in feminist goals and challenges across time and space. The challenges include: intimate and long-standing linkages between scriptural traditions and the social order; interpretative legacies on women and their 'nature' that solidified cultural understandings of gender; and the relationship of these legacies to structures of power, namely patriarchy, resulting in limitations placed on women and their access to modernity. In response, women sought the undoing of regressive, patriarchal notions of gender and gender roles that suppress women in culture and law and sought more favorable religious and political expressions in support of women's progress in their respective societies. More specifically, in the Muslim world, women of all classes began articulating a feminist consciousness in explicit ways from the nineteenth century onward. In the mid-nineteenth century, the writings of Zainab al-Fawwaz (1860-1914), Hind Nawfal (1860-1920), and 'Afifa Karam (1883-1924) re-articulated understandings of women's nature, deconstructing linkages between nature and moralities. By the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, women like Malak Hifni Nasif (1886-1918), Nabawiyyah Musa (1886-1951), and Huda Sha'rawi (1879-1947) tackled fixed socio-cultural notions, hierarchies, and gender-specific practice and participation, opening up avenues for women's education, public participation, and social and political activism. In an attempt to undo patriarchal notions that suppress women in culture and law, they argued for equal religious participation and legal rights, and an expansion of roles of women beyond the bounds of domesticity. Towards the mid-to-late twentieth century, women such as Nezihe Muhiddin (1898-1958) and 'Aisha Abd Al-Rahman (1913-1998) voiced political and religious ideas in support of women's progress. Women in the Muslim world, in similarity to their European counterparts, broadened frontiers and constructed new sensibilities and inclusive modernities with their writing.

Keywords: Women, Misogyny, Muslim feminism, Modernization, 'New Woman' debate, Muslim women writers, British feminism

Introduction

Polemical positions on the status of women in Islam have been expressed since the eighteenth century. Western societies disdained the perceived restrictive cultural norms, the regressive states of Muslim societies, and the inferiority of Muslim women. In contrast, thought

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from the Muslim world asserted the progressive nature of Islam and the rights it accorded women centuries prior to the women's movement in Europe. These rights included economic rights, divorce rights, and the recognition of women as persons. In both societies, however, women have been challenged by particular religious discourses, by politics and political actors, and by socio-cultural customs; women were framed by and entrenched in deep-seated cultural practices and ideological conflicts. Scholars often neglect the fact that Western and Muslim women's challenges and quests were similar, expressing a will for progress. This is particularly apparent in the 'New Woman' debates of the modern period.

It is essential to provide a critical assessment of these historical times in which women, from variant religious traditions, backgrounds and contexts, pushed back against limitations on their framing. To explain the violation against the rights of women, one must not only reflect on these oppressive experiences but also to draw attention to hopeful historical trajectories that have contributed to not only the shaping of a 'New Woman,' but also new cultures in the modern period. Religious traditions and historical religio-cultural practices are critical in charting the origins of patriarchy and in understanding the landscapes of women's negotiation for parity. Within Christian and Muslim communities, scriptural accounts of the beginning of human history defined worldviews, religious cultures, and patterns of social order. Despite the significant differences in the narrative of origins and notions around original sin, there are common aspects of the problematic for women in both cultural geographies: the intimate and long-standing linkages between scriptural traditions and social order; the interpretative legacies on women and their "nature" that solidified cultural understandings of gender; the relationship of these legacies to structures of power, namely patriarchy; and, the resulting limitations placed on women and their access to modernity.

Historically, a hierarchical structuring of gender in European society has been linked to biblical notions of original sin. Lamoureux explains the doctrine of original sin and highlights its importance as a foundational belief "throughout most of Church history" that "features at least ten different facets: fallenness, universal sin ... hereditary sinfulness, inclination toward sinning, propagation of sin through sexual desire" (Lamoureux 40-41). These complex facets have featured prominently in European history and thought, producing a hierarchy that subordinates women by equating them with the biblical Eve. This was coupled with scientific theories defining women as created differently or unequal to men, theories which necessitated a measure of control over women's supposedly biological essence. Ideas about women's and men's "nature" also entered the lexicon as a scientific and rational means to reinforce the gender hierarchy. Thus, theology, science, and nature were connected and utilized to assert the inferior status of women, fueling debate and contestation, culminating in the quest to deconstruct the linkages in the Victorian era, as exhibited in British history (Fox 17-18, 20-21). In Muslim society, the problematic has been historical, socio-cultural and political, with assertions for gender parity grounded in scriptural accounts. According to Mernissi, Islam came to establish "human dignity and equal rights," which were not respected by and seen as threatening to the Arabs of Meccan society; the egalitarian message of Islam was and is "to many in our Muslim societies" a problem not only for an established social or political elite, but to "some modern Muslim men" who believe that "those rights [are in] conflict with...[their] interests," and, thus, offer an "egotistic, highly subjective and mediocre view of culture and society" (Mernissi ix). To deconstruct hierarchical modes of interpreting the place of women, we must analyze the scriptural account of origins as a testament of the equality inherent in nature and in creation, and we must analyze the scriptural landscapes that women occupy to further their quest for equality.

The “New Woman” debate in both the Victorian era (Britain) and the modern Muslim world, particularly in the areas of the former Ottoman Empire (Fertile Crescent, Egypt and Turkey), share important and unacknowledged similarities that were further amplified due to colonial relations. Debates emanating from the Muslim world, much like their British counterparts, focused on contested understandings of women’s nature and women’s influence on social moralities, their public participation and visibility, their education, and the role of religion and culture in authenticating or rejecting women’s equality. The constructs of the debate, however, were largely affected by the respective cultures (socio-cultural, religious and political) at their respective times, and the way in which women understood and situated themselves. In British Victorian society, their quests were legitimated on the basis of natural rights, equally endowed qualities and freedoms, and through a negotiation with long-standing traditions. Differently, within the modern Muslim world, they challenged both patriarchy and colonial praxis, and often used not only notions of natural rights and freedoms, but also Islam as a source of legitimation for change. Given the engagement with European modernity in the Muslim world in the context of colonialism, and the marginalization of women’s voices historically, one finds a powerful feminist consciousness manifest in the late nineteenth and twentieth century that expresses the salient features of Victorian new womanhood, and that simultaneously carves new distinctly Eastern feminist spaces grounded in Eastern culture and in Islamic heritage. Utilizing an Eastern and an Islamic framework, Muslim women attempted to dissociate the historical links between religion, nature, and women. They also deconstructed discourses that prevent women from fully entering the “modern” and engaged in debate about women’s place and role in emerging understandings of modernity, progress and civilization. Principally, they re-articulated understandings around women’s nature, arguing that these notions are faulty and lead to individual and socio-cultural oppression; they deconstructed patriarchal notions that suppress women in culture and law, opening up avenues for participation in various fields; they located progressive religious and political expressions that encourage recognition and equality for women; and, they critiqued fears about virtue, family and society. Therefore, despite the different traditions, contexts, and contingencies of British and Muslim societies, and the complexity of the relationship between them, women in both communities negotiated from marginal positions in highly politicized terrains of exclusion, bespeaking a powerful consistency in women’s struggles and quests for a broadening of frontiers in distinct societies, on their own terms.

Within the Muslim world, the “woman question” has been a contested domain involving colonial discourses, feminism, secular-nationalists, and Islamists. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed the rise of the New Woman debates amidst competing discourses that have encouraged and coaxed women to locate and confront the sources of their containment, to question Western and local male-centered discourses on women’s nature and place in society, and to construct their own voice. Much like in the Enlightenment and British Victorian feminism, this narrative was concerned with women’s lived experiences and perspective. More than a century earlier, British feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft and Mona Caird questioned the status of women and deconstructed the religion-science-nature connection. They pushed for the progress of “knowledge and virtue” and argued against the confinement and inferior position of women (Wollstonecraft 3). They suggested that the lack of cultivation of rationality among women causes them to become “epithets of weakness” and “objects of contempt” (Wollstonecraft 2, 4). This situation produces a hierarchical society of “tyrants and slaves,” a moral degeneracy within society, and an unfulfilled responsibility towards humanity as a whole (Wollstonecraft 7-8; Caird 287-307). In the encounter with modernity, and amidst competing

discourse on the “Woman Question,” Eastern women, in local and international contexts, formulated the question in their own terms. They constructed their own thoughts on gender relations, hegemony, patriarchy, and “broader issues of power” (Abu-Lughod 4-6). Utilizing Easternism and Islam to conceptualize parity for women, they transformed themselves and their societies “in colonial, quasi-colonial, and nationalist contexts” (Abu-Lughod 14). They indicated that their oppression is not dictated by nature or religion, they raised questions of cultural authenticity, and they constructed culturally authentic ways for seeking parity, undoing female subordination in Muslim society (Badran 18). The call “for ‘women’s awakening’ that reverberated through the magazines, books and speeches of the era” were about “how best to become modern,” the role that Islam should play, and “how much of the West to emulate” (Abu-Lughod 8). The era reflected active engagement with new modernities, challenging old and new forms of (foreign and local) control and discipline enforced on women (9).

Although feminist consciousness was initially expressed by elite women through subtle forms of resistance in the nineteenth century, later women of all classes began articulating their feminist consciousness in more explicit ways. The writings of Zainab al-Fawwaz (1860-1914), Hind Nawfal (1860-1920) and ‘Afifa Karam (1883-1924) re-articulated understandings of women’s nature, deconstructing linkages between women’s nature and social moralities. By the late nineteenth to early twentieth century women like Malak Hifni Nasif (1886-1918), Nabawiyyah Musa (1886-1951) & Huda Sha’rawi (1879-1947) tackled fixed socio-cultural notions, hierarchies, and gender-specific practice and participation, opening up avenues for women’s education, public participation, and social and political activism. In an attempt to undo patriarchal notions that suppress women in culture and law, they argued for equal religious participation and legal rights, and an expansion of roles of women beyond the bounds of domesticity. Towards the mid-to-late twentieth century, women such as Nezihe Muhiddin (1898-1958) and ‘Aisha Abd Al-Rahman (1913-1998) located and voiced political and religious ideas in support of women’s progress.

Islam, Women, and Gender Hierarchy

Even though women within Muslim tradition were not represented in the same fashion as they were within the Euro-Christian tradition, they too contended with patriarchy and misogyny that eventually fueled their feminist consciousness. The textual representation of women in the Qur’an is egalitarian, particularly with regards to notions of original sin; however, given historical contexts, Muslim practice differed from this textual equality. Faruqi highlights that the Islamic/Qur’anic essence is based on notions of unity (*Tawhid*), whereby humanity is endowed from its creation with equal faculties, capacities, and responsibilities (Faruqi iii-vi). This absolute identity of the human condition is expressed in the Qur’an: “Muslim men/women; believing men/women ... for men/women who are patient and constant and who humble themselves, who give in charity and fast, for men/women who guard their chastity; and for men/women who engage much in God’s praise... [F]or them God has prepared forgiveness and great reward” (Qur’an 33:35). The Islamic tradition re-affirms the egalitarian essence of Islam, and confirms the elevated status of women as a respected gender. Historical records are also saturated with references to the variant roles played by Muslim women and the rights accorded to them. Muslim women across history have witnessed periods of socio-cultural, economic, political and religious participation and leadership (Faruqi 9; Ansari 96, 109, 114). Therefore, the absence of Qur’anic ascriptions of inferiority becomes the basis for women seeking gender equality; often the problematic is phrased as a digression from divine justice and the true purpose for humankind as

explicated in the Qur'an. Qur'anic portrayals of the first woman, alongside depictions of women as revered, shape the debates about social order in Islam.

According to Ahmed, the problem with regards to women's rights was shaped historically. She explains that certain misogynistic practices pre-dated Islam and later entered the Muslim community as a result of expansion, cross-cultural contact, and ensuing cultural change. A tension arose between the egalitarian message of Islam and misogynistic practices, particularly in Abbasid society, where she locates the onset of such a decline. Muslim conquests and abundance in wealth, the growth of the Muslim community, shifts in the ruling class and their conception of religion, and gender-based practices that predated Islam fed into socio-cultural assumptions about women that became normative at "the highest and most ideologically influential level of society" (Ahmed 79-86). This determined how women were understood, and how "Islamic texts were heard and interpreted and how their broad principles were rendered into law" (86). Consequently, the fusion of cultural and legal practices and the inherited misogynistic practices meant that the ethno-religious communities "who did not come from Arabia" and "were converts from other religions... naturally heard and understood Islam in terms of assumptions they brought with them from these heritages" (86). Islamic endorsement (legal and ideological) was articulated to reinforce "prejudices against women and the mores degrading women," much of which later became codified (87, 90-93). The customs and legal traditions that became normative were social control of women, patriarchy, polygamy, one-sided divorce rights, and notions of women's virtue and virginity. Of the most contested interpretations of the Qur'an are scriptural references to male guardianship/*Qawammah*. Male guidance, male uncontested authority, and male leadership are some of the interpretative meanings that were articulated and subsumed into social practice. Borrowed notions on the nature and status of women from the Euro-Christian tradition were the notions of woman (Eve) as created from Adam's rib and therefore inferior, and women as a threat to virtue and social morality which necessitated social control of women. In later periods, customs, laws, inherited ethno-religious traditions, and socio-economic class governed the way in which women were treated and the liberties and opportunities they had access to within Muslim communities.

The treatment of women was problematized by prevailing social customs and practices, some of which predated Islam (such as veiling and seclusion), some which were borrowed from other cultures (such as social control and patriarchy), and yet others intrinsic to Eastern and Muslim societies (such as tribalism). Keddie notes that there was resistance to the egalitarian Qur'anic and legal prescriptions with regards to women; prevailing cultural customs were far more powerful in reviving and reinforcing patriarchal tribal practices, practices which Muslims "adopted or adapted" and justified using an Islamic legal framework (Keddie 84-85). She notes that, while the "origins of gender inequalities in the ancient near east are a subject of scholarly dispute...with the rise of property and the subordination of women [in later times], many people developed myths that depicted women as the source of evil and sexual temptation, who were hence dangerous and should be controlled" (Keddie 79). In European society, religious and scientific lenses² provided interpretations of untamed human sexuality, which were the basis for social measures of control (Anthony 1-10, 13-14), whereas in Muslim society, because "property and inheritance in the male line became important, female virginity and fidelity became central ideological concerns" (Keddie 79, 82). For instance, veiling and seclusion, particularly among

² The religious lens entails original sin and the continuity of sin in humankind, while the scientific lens entails gender-specific biological essences and a socio-cultural hierarchy (women's inferiority and exclusion).

elite women, were reinforced as a means to control women's movement and sexuality and to avert the male gaze and sexual advances. These practices not only ensured honor and purity of the male line, but also expressed elitism and the socio-economic standing of males (i.e. women as protected and provided for). This practice also necessitated and licensed chastisement. In European society, women's so-called disruption of God's justice was used to justify legal chastisements of "moderate correction" (Rivenbark 16, 20, 24). In the Muslim world "tribal structures placed emphasis on premarital virginity" and marital fidelity; these values sanctioned chastisement, threat, and coercion of women by men to cast away any doubt about the purity of tribes. Hence, even if women were not of elite status, and thus not veiled or secluded, they were tightly controlled. European religious and scientific notions around women's power of attraction led to concerns about the consequential enslavement of men to sexuality, which could lead to sinfulness, immorality, and degeneracy within society (Anthony 8-10, 13-15). Similar ideologies can be found in the Muslim world, where it was assumed that "a woman who behaves with other than traditional modesty arouses uncontrollable urges in men" (Keddie 94). Thus, within the Mamluk and Ottoman periods misogynistic practices existed alongside the active participation of women in various fields; however, "the traditional status of most Muslim women does not seem to have been significantly worse than that of women in many other civilizations" (91-92). Although there was male dominance, there were also other patterns of gendered relations that included female control and male-female equality.

Colonialism, Feminism, and Eastern Women

Within the context of Western colonization, fundamental social and cultural transformations led to the rise of the "Woman Question" within Muslim society. The era witnessed the formation of feminist activity, the prominence of Western discourse on Eastern women, and the rise of state actors, intellectuals, and Islamic figures with a sustained interest in the Woman Question. This took place in the context of significant changes. In the Victorian Era, modernization brought significant transformations for women (Buzwell para. 2). The figure of the New Woman came as a challenge to Christian ideals, to scientific theories, and to long-standing cultural and legal traditions. In the same way, modernization also allowed for the broadening of educational and work opportunities for women in Muslim society: the opening of women's salons for discussion and debate, various journals and magazines created by women; and the involvement of women in politics. These changes took place, however, within a sphere of contestation, since these modernizations were in conflict with colonial praxis, patriarchy, and misconstrued understandings of the place of women in Islam.

The Enlightenment project of the West was expressed through colonial discourse, which articulated the necessity of the evolution of societies towards European models of excellence and civilization. It generated an epistemological typography of Islam and the status of women in Islam, expressing "a radical critique of entrenched systems" and of religious prominence and authority (Kahf 111-113). Britain "developed theories of society and culture...which placed Victorian England, and its associated beliefs and practices, at the culminating point of the evolutionary process," and thus "Victorian womanhood and mores with respect to women, along other aspects of society at the colonial center, were regarded as the ideal measure of civilization" (Ahmed 150-151). Colonial feminism devised theories "to contest the claims of feminism and redirect it, in the service of colonialism, toward Other men and the cultures of Other men" (Ahmed 151). Colonial feminism focused on issues of seclusion and veiling as having "a baneful effect on Muslim society" and as detrimental to true progress, asserting that "Islam was innately

and immutable oppressive to women” and that the “veil and segregation epitomized that oppression” (Ahmed 151-156, 160). The rhetoric of feminism was used to “render morally justifiable its project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonized people” (151). Feminists of imperial Britain between the 1790s and 1850s discussed the position of women in a cross-cultural framework, highlighting the progressive vs. regressive features of the contrasted peoples and civilizations, and locating feminist emancipation in Europe and “abject slavery” in the East (Midgley 19-20, 25-26). The epistemology on Eastern women that developed finds resonance in various literary productions expounding an image of the Muslim woman as “subdued,” passive in “helplessness,” “oppressed” due to socio-cultural and religiously defined orders, and as sexual, seductive and erotic, suggesting immorality and immoral behavior (Bullock 7).

Religious and political figures were receptive to this Western epistemology on Eastern women and were equally invested in change; thus, a new discourse on women was shaped—the New Woman debate. It was part of a larger debate over the status of the Muslim *‘umma* (nation) and the need for national progress. The men of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries echoed the various intellectual, ideological, and cultural entanglements of the day: religious nationalism and politics, ethnic nationalism and politics, and colonial politics (Habib 43-45). As Ahmed explains: “Progress or regress in the position and rights of women has often directly depended on which side of the debate over nationalism and culture the men holding or gaining political power espoused” (Ahmed 129). There was support for women’s rights, albeit in the context of colonial and national politics, and the discussion was limited to matters of veiling and segregation (virtue, sexuality, and social control), education and polygamy (rights and progress), and a limited scope of access to modernity (participation and visibility).

Qasim Amin, for example, advocated for changes to do with these same focal issues. Furthermore, he concretely linked women to national progress, expressing the “mothers of the nation” prototype: “the status of women is inseparably tied to the status of a nation. When the status of a nation is low, reflecting an uncivilized condition for that nation, the status of women is also low” (Amin 6). Amin expressed a need to culturally and religiously authenticate knowledge using an Islamic epistemology, whilst engendering some form of progress conceived along the lines of Westernism. Amin contended that it was essential, for the rise of Muslim nations, to undergo a “cultural and social transformation” in which “various arguments regarding women were embedded: changing customs regarding women and changing their costume, abolishing the veil [face cover] in particular,” arguments which were “grounded in the presumption that veiling and seclusion were customs that, in Cromer’s words, ‘exercised a baneful effect on Eastern society’” (Ahmed 174-175). Influenced by Western thinkers and directed by colonial critique, he expressed admiration for Western advances. Arguing that “Europeans used to have the same opinion of women... that [they] are inferior due to their mental deficiencies, their low status in religion, and their primary role as temptress and agents of the devil,” yet Europeans were able to recognize that they were “instrumental in the inferior position of women” (Amin 115). For Amin, this called for a similar need to recognize the deficiencies of Eastern society and Eastern subjectivity.

For Amin, the locus of backwardness is ontological in nature. He argues that the nature of Eastern subjectivity has been non-conducive to productivity; traits of “ignorance, laziness, and inferiority” plague it (65-66). Women are particularly culpable as they lack intellectual and emotional maturity, moral and ethical capability, skill and “good taste” (21-25). Thus, Eastern women are incapable of a refined character and relationships and of aiding cultural advance. The

transformation entails a devaluation of certain Muslim cultural practices and a new cultural sensibility. As Ahmed staunchly argues: “Amin was in fact calling for the transformation of Muslim society along the lines of the Western model...[U]nder the guise of a plea for the ‘liberation’ of women ... he conducted an attack that in its fundamentals reproduced the colonizer’s attack on native culture and society” (Ahmed 161). Contention between the colonial thesis and indigenous forms of being, knowing, and structuring resulted in an inadvertent adoption of the same thesis on Muslim society and Muslim women. This inadvertent sustaining of the thesis has meant a patriarchal orientation that reframes women’s identity while maintaining control over their subjectivity and presence in culture and society. She is to be educated, but must run a household; she must work in the “sciences, the humanities and the arts, commerce and industry,” but focus on pleasing her husband; she must strive for emancipation, yet uphold cultural and national responsibility (Amin 12-13, 21). Male constructions of women contributed to a limited form of “progress,” requiring women to continue to be the object and subject of male desire.

Eastern Feminists and Subjectivity: Deconstructing the Link between Nature and Morality

Women were not absent from this debate. Their activism became “visible intellectually, then organizationally and politically” with the aim of attaining “political, social and legal equality” (Ahmed 174-176). Ahmed describes the aims of women’s activism and contrasts this with men’s aims. While women in “their writings, and social activities, the charitable institutions founded and to which they dedicated their energies, bear the mark of an impassioned desire to resist injustice,” men in comparison were preoccupied with “abstractions and essentially oblivious of the appalling human cost to women and children” (183). Badran suggests that women in this New Woman debate constructed their own feminism out of their own experiences and lived contexts, in relation to emerging politics (56). Women deconstructed feminist colonial praxis and discourse, exposed the gender bias expressed by their male-counterparts, and pushed against the limitations on their access to modernity, echoing a far more comprehensive view of gender parity in Muslim society.

The nuance of their engagement and articulation is exemplified by al-Fawwaz, Nawfal, Karam and Sha’rawi, among others who had spoken of women’s emancipation long before Amin. In the magazines *al-Nil* and *al-Fatah*, both Fawwaz and Nawfal in 1892 protested the Islamic justification for their exclusion. The “emergent feminism was grounded and legitimized in the framework of Islamic modernism expounded towards the end of the century by ... ‘Abduh, a distinguished teacher and scholar from al-Azhar” (Badran 20). The explicit contestation of the system and its accompanying ideologies finds expression in the writings of Fawwaz and Karam, both literary pioneers. Fawwaz “wrote poetry, novels, and plays that addressed many of the contemporary as well as the feminist issues of her time ... she had an unquestioning commitment to social reform” (Shabaan 23-26). She also established a historical record of independent women from both East and West who contributed to the formation of civil society. Like Fawwaz, Karam focused on reforming the position of women but also men; she wrote about gender and gender relations and asked “provocative questions about outdated” notions and “practices that concern women” (Shabaan 27-30). Although Karam was a Lebanese-American journalist, she was a critical voice that is closely associated with both the cultural and the religious heritage of the Muslim world. As she proclaimed in *Al-Hoda*, “I know my faith and I consider all other religions equally. I am Maronite, Catholic, Muslim” (qtd. in Karroum para.15). Her thought is reflected in her novel *Badi’a and Fu’ad* (1906). Like feminist writing in the Victorian era, her

novel reconstructs women's nature, undermining in the process inherited concepts of "male-female relations" that have fostered "servitude and inequality" (Shabaan 23-25, 30-31). She establishes that "equality is an important prerequisite of love" and utilizes Victorian feminist cultural models for the realization of this ideal (qtd. in Shabaan 30).

British Victorian feminists challenged Christian ideals, scientific theories, and long-standing traditions that expressed dichotomies of pure/impure and sexually perverse/chaste women. Similarly, Karam deconstructs the links between traditional constructs of women's nature and their purity and morality. An awareness of women's state of nature as one of freedom, purity, and independence is aptly expressed in Karam's writing: "On a moonlight summer night, a flock of young women ... went out to fill up ... [N]othing hindered their procession, with agility and grace" (qtd. in Saylor 83). She constructs women as a part of nature, suggesting that their independence and freedom is a natural state; therefore, their purity and virtue should not be contested. This natural state is further enhanced with agency, for behind "A beautiful, fresh face and a healthy, supple body" is "a factory of virtue and domestic and social benefit" that can be realized through "edification and knowledge ... which are denied to girls ... contributing to the killing of half of the potential benefit" of society?" (qtd. in Saylor 86). She maintains that "Our women are beautiful ... Pure.... Noble and intelligent... Like nature, their mother ... [H]owever, what is the use of the tool if it is without a hand to operate it?" (qtd. in Saylor 86). Intellectual and spiritual development are critical for social reform. Distinct from men's discourses on progress, Karam's idea of progress entails the total realization of women's subjectivity, in which women are moral subjects with a contributive agency. She also deconstructs the dualities of pure/virtuous versus impure/fallen women that were often utilized to contrast the moral and upright traditions of the East and those of the West, thus allowing women an access to modernity without capitulating to male concerns over loss of virtue. Distancing herself from colonial and national discourses on women, she argues that true realization of the Eastern woman will be achieved through an appreciation of a purified indigenous self-hood and selective cultural borrowing. Her role thus realized is beyond colonial, traditionalist, and secular-nationalist discourses and practices that mar the dignity of women, and beyond the limitations of the 'mothers of the nation' prototype that was constructed in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century.

Education, Public Participation, and Political Activism: Re-evaluating Discourses of Domesticity

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, feminist consciousness was solidified and widely expressed. Women like Nasif, Musa, and Sha'rawi found an environment for their activism and aspirations; as Badran notes, "In the early modern state-building and colonial period, during which Islamic modernism, liberal nationalism, and the feminism of progressive men were prevalent, women's causes found a positive and supportive environment" (Badran 23). They began to reshape their world through wider concerns for self and society: the re-framing of discourses of domesticity and child-rearing, the opening up of greater opportunities, and political/national activism. Egyptian writing on women of "the turn-of-the-century ... noted the centrality of motherhood and wifehood," highlighting scientific and rational means to a more disciplined family for developing "productive members of society" imbued with morality and "an ethic of industry and economy" (Shakry 126). Similarly, in Turkey at the turn-of-the-century, education was seen as a scientific discipline linked to progress, and "new discourses of domesticity and child-rearing" arose "in which mothers came to be responsible for the physical, moral, and intellectual development of children within the nexus of

a nascent nationalist discourse” (126). Egyptian and Ottoman feminists of the educated elite “presented their arguments in utilitarian terms: since the family was the foundation of the country, and the mother the foundation of the family, her intellectual development was a primary factor in determining the development of the country” (Knaus 49). This was parallel to the “European metropole discourses on mothering and the nation, aimed primarily at the lower classes, [which] positioned women analogously as markers of progress and backwardness” (Shakry 127). There were common assumptions within the liberal secular-nationalist and Islamist press that women were the locus of cultural integrity and national progress. Thus, colonial, secular-national, and Islamist discourses articulated the desire to reconstruct the domain of women, albeit with respective concerns in mind (Shakry 127-130). Despite the fact that women took part in these discourses, the impetus and method of reform differed. Nasif and Aliye, for instance, explicitly situated their reform ideas “within an Islamic discursive tradition.” Aliye asserted the universally valid principles of Islam, and Nasif articulated proper education, *tarbiyya* (Shakry 145-146; Knaus 47). *Tarbiyya* aims to make “women useful members of the body politic and ... prepare them for their roles as wives and mothers” with an “inculcation of the proper moral and religious virtues” (Shakry 146). Nasif asserted that the “semi-feud” and “low agreement” between men and women should not divert attention from mutual responsibility in the realization of a divine vision for humanity. She argued for individual freedom and education for women, though men attempt to prevent it in the guise of protecting the family. She disapproved of masculinist arguments for domesticity: “Is this a God-given dictate? How are we to know this since no holy book has spelled it out? ... [T]he division of labor is merely a human creation” (qtd. in Khater 75-76).

Like Karam and Nasif, Sha’rawi advocated for social and cultural reform, as well as civic and political rights for women. Sha’rawi promoted a reform “within the existing social and political order ... [and] the framework of Islam. By helping to reform, rather than subvert, the existing social order, she called for a change in manners and cultural mores which aimed at transforming the education of women ... and the attitudes of men” (Quawas 222). She asserted that misogynistic practices were outside of the realm of Islam and its conception of rights: “Muslim law clearly acknowledges and advocates the equality of the sexes and does not ascribe one domain of work to one more than the other” (qtd. in Quawas 228). Arguing that sex is biologically determined and social roles socially constructed, she asserts that neither nature nor religion ordain the strict separation of gender roles and limitations on women. Muslim women grounded their feminism in natural law, in Islam, and the ethos of the times. Arguing for this unlimited sphere for women’s activity, women became active in various spheres. Sha’rawi participated in the 1919 Egyptian revolution against British occupation, believing that it is a women’s duty to partake in political activities and in the formation of the nation (Sha’rawi 126). Similarly, in Turkey, a seminal shift took place in women’s activism from the Ottoman to the early Republican era. In the “late nineteenth-century Ottoman society, women were involved in public debates about women’s rights,” and in recognition that “women’s legal rights are far behind men’s legal rights,” they constructed the Turkish Women’s Union and organization to push for greater rights for women (Knaus 47-49). These organizations and unions in Egypt and Turkey opened new avenues and opportunities for education, employment, and public participation.

Legal Change and Religious Re-interpretation: Engendering Equality

Towards the mid-to-late twentieth century, feminism developed with an attempt to deconstruct repressive notions at deeper levels. Women's concerns expanded to include participation in politics, changes to law pertaining to women and the family, and feminist Qur'anic re-interpretation. In their writing, they "constructed a vision of a world where parity between the sexes reflected positively on both," seeking "neither superiority nor authority over men," but rather a place for "women to function as rational individuals who might positively contribute to human advancement" (Shabaan 39). In this era, women recognized that they continue to be objects not subjects of the debate, often limited or directed in their access to modernity, and challenged and belittled for their contributions. Male writers such as Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898-1987), 'Abbas al-'Aqqad (1889-1964), and 'Abd al-Quddus (1919-1990) recycled old-age notions on gender: women as male possessions, as of a lesser nature, as sexual objects for male pleasure, and as a threat to social moralities. Al-Zayyat highlights this within male writing: "Women as they emerge in this selection of novels and short stories are sexual objects engaged either in the procreation of children to ensure a safe transference of private ownership from one man to another or to provide pleasure for men ... [T]he concept of sex ... reflects the multiple distorted concepts that prevail" (qtd. in Shabaan 42). An excellent example of sexist male writing is al-Hakim's "The Woman after the Year 2000" (1946). In this narrative, women seek emancipation that leads to de-feminization represented by the shortening of hair, male-centered occupations and behaviors, and the loss of appeal and attraction between the sexes. He foreshadows in a journalistic, yet comical fashion, that women will return to seek femininity through domesticity, forsaking quests for emancipation in an expression of a deeper awareness of their true ontological nature: modest, submissive, emotional (irrational), and feminine (i.e. in need of a strong male presence) (al-Hakim 73-76). A similar unease with women's emancipation is repeated in al-'Aqqad. He opens his text *Woman in the Qur'an* with a proclamation that historically no woman has been able to achieve what men have achieved. The instances in which women excel in traditionally male fields are instances of unique and unprecedented circumstance. While he fervently defends the rights of women as established by Islam, he also insists that women's nature dictates a (dis)engagement in certain spaces. For instance, he argues that women, by nature, are able to excel in cooking, embroidery, and sewing (al-'Aqqad 62-63). Ignoring a long established tradition within Muslim society of female activity and scholarship, he suggests that Islam has safeguarded selfhood and society via such ideological and practical structuring of gender.

Women tackle and deconstruct this framing. Muhiddin, an Ottoman activist and political leader, attacked this framing legally, and 'Abd al-Rahman, an Egyptian intellectual/academic, contested this framing religiously. Muhiddin wanted all "barriers to education, professional and working life" to be "removed," and for legal codes regarding personal affairs, such as marriage and divorce, to be reconsidered; to be equal "in the eyes of the law," to have the right to vote, and the right to "be elected to office" were just as integral (Knaus 50-51). 'Abd al-Rahman, on the other hand, was the first woman to undertake Qur'anic interpretation to deconstruct linkages between religion, nature, and socio-cultural structuring of gender and gender relations. While European readings of the biblical narrative across history, such as those of Aquinas, Martin Luther and Nietzsche, attempt to deconstruct the linkage by re-interpreting original sin as immaturity, ignorance, and lack of culpability (Rivenbark 2-3), Muslim re-interpretation highlighted the egalitarian nature of Islam and the esteemed status of women within. 'Abd al-Rahman argues in her essays for "a new and liberated treatment of the 'women question' in

the Islamic tradition” so that women’s position in society may be re-articulated. She highlights egalitarian notions in the Qur’an, and further claims the right of women to “understand, interpret and explain divine discourse” (Naguib 7111-72). Her exegesis presents a defocusing on gender-specific interpretation, and a focusing on the shared condition and responsibility of all humanity. She grounds her exegesis on readings that entail the unified nature of humankind and the shared existential reality: a state of *fitra*, trust, and viceregency. The state of *fitra* is a natural state that expresses divinely ordained liberty of mind (rationality), will, and action. It is a state that is accompanied by trust, responsibility, and viceregency (accountability). The trust expressed in the Qur’an is ritualistic (religious ritual), societal (relations amongst members), ethical (covenant/testament, justice and equality, integrity, and dignity), and rational (contemplation, rationalization, wisdom), enabling the growth and flourishing of humankind (‘Abd al-Rahman 16-25, 36, 63-66, 79-80). The responsibility is to enact human freedom in realization of the trust. In the Qur’an, these ideas are not gendered, extolling a unity in creation, entailing responsibility and accountability, and the possibility of both gain and hardship in upholding divine commands and prohibitions. She challenges gender-specific readings of the text and ascriptions of women’s difference and inferiority, claiming a place for women as equal members of humankind, with equal trust and responsibility. She suggests that the focusing on women in the Islamic tradition highlights the special nature of women, and a responsibility towards them defined by gentle treatment and kindness (43). To further deconstruct structural inequalities, she addresses the Qur’anic references to women by making a distinction between the reference to a gendered-being (*Imra’a*, woman) and a non-gendered being (*Zawj*, companion). She concludes that Qur’anic references to “woman” often denote a gendered-being that does not fulfill the trust and responsibility. Meanwhile, references to “companion” suggest a being that does fulfill trust and responsibility and plays a role in the divine vision for humanity. In the inverse, the use of *zawj* and accompanying construct of companionship is negated in instances where the male in question does not fulfill responsibility and trust (Mehfooz and Rafiq 101-102). Solidifying new notions around womanhood, she deconstructs the links between religion, nature, and culture, and highlights readings of religious text that foster feminist values.

Conclusion

Eastern women well into the twentieth century continued to construct feminisms (Islamic and secular) and debate important issues. They became “visible intellectually... organizationally and politically” with the aims of contending with socio-cultural and socio-political framing (Ahmed 174-176). These women offered a more comprehensive view on justice and gender parity within society, surpassing men’s engagement with the ‘New Woman’ debate. An equally powerful and influential women’s movement can be found in the Muslim world. This article explored a feminist consciousness invested in a universal push towards women’s parity, albeit in differing contexts. The development of feminism in both British Victorian and 19th and 20th century Muslim societies has to do with societal modernization, a historical process that expresses progressive shifts in the social imaginary of gender and gender roles, and in understanding religious and legal traditions that are often sources of legitimation and solidification of the social order. The ‘New Woman’ debates, despite these different contexts, exigencies, and challenges, attest to a universal character of feminist consciousness and the consistency in feminist desires across time and space.

These debates express the following wants: 1) a re-articulation of understandings of women’s nature; 2) the undoing of patriarchal notions that suppress women in culture and law; 3)

a movement beyond regressive notions of gender and gender roles, and gender-specific practice and participation; and, 4) locating and voicing religious and political expressions in support of progress. These wants are manifest in the arguments of these debates: 1) critiques of false notions of women's nature as weak, apathetic and dependent, and a new focus on women as productive in all spheres; 2) women as independent individuals, and therefore of equal agency and right to recognition, opportunity, and participation; 3) shifting notions of vice and virtue, deconstructing fears over the loss of family and social morality, and asserting that virtue is an equal responsibility of men and women that does not necessitate social control; and, 4) education and public participation as a critical means to increase agency and the flourishing of the human being, ensuring familial/national prosperity, and the elevation of civilization.

The critical core of these debates is the trespassing of set boundaries for women, and an opening of the inaccessible frontiers of the modern for women to participate in socio-cultural formation. These 'New Woman' debates represent the voicing of women's narratives and wants, the desire to speak instead of being spoken for, to represent instead of being represented (socially, culturally and legally). They wanted to right the wrongs of their societies and redirect the tides of change, expressing desires for the betterment of women, of their civilizations, and of humanity.

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