

Arab Women, Caught in the Net

The Arab woman's role in reconstructing her society is perpetually caught in the adhesive web woven and reinforced by the powerhouses of Nationalism and Islam. While these institutions move with the currents of the time to utilize the commodity of women promising change, after revolutionary, economic and cultural dust settles, Arab women find themselves caught in a trench allowing for little room to maneuver, finding that the dialogue they must engage in remains firmly ensconced in a male dominated language. The institutions of Nationalism and Islam reaffirm these shackles, but contemporary Arab women find in modernity tools to loosen these bonds and thereby inch closer to a freedom they can fully embrace. It is impossible to consider Nationalism and Islam separate from Patriarchy but the two systems should be addressed in some form independently.

The Oxford dictionary describes nationalism as "a patriotic feeling, often to an excessive degree, [or] advocacy of political independence for a particular country."¹ Arab Nationalism, according to *The Ideas of Arab Nationalism* can be separated into three eras: Pre-Islamic, Islamic and Modern.² Nuseibeh posits that these eras can neither be chronologically placed, nor viewed as completely separate from one another. They are ideological in nature and use. For the purposes of this paper, the conceptualized Arab Nationalism that will be discussed will be post Islamic. Because the voice of Islam is a global one, reaching out to not nations but people all over the globe, the question must be asked; Under what grounds can Arab Nationalism and Islam forge an alliance? When

¹ http://www.askoxford.com:80/concise_oed/nationalism?view=uk

² Hazem Zaki Nuseibeh, *The Ideas of Arab Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1956) 1, *Questia*, Web, 17 June 2010.

very core of Islam does not favor the tenants of nationalism what relationship can the two tenants have with one another? Nuseibeh believes the answer to be in Islam's evolution into more than merely doctrine:

As a creed Islam is unequivocally hostile to the sort of divisive contentions that are an endemic feature of nationalism. Islam, however, signifies more than doctrinal ideals and beliefs. It is used to designate a polity. From its inchoate and modest career as a city republic, we follow the Arab Islamic community as it expanded like a gigantic tree till its foliage overarched the greater part of the then known world. In doing so the Arab-Islamic community outgrew its beginnings. The hegemony of the Arabs, which at first had been both the mainstay and the substance of the imperial state, gave way to the universalism of the caliphate. Thus, as a polity, Islam represents several types and stages of development, sufficiently different from one another to require careful differentiation.³

It is within that "difference" that nationalism creeps in and takes hold merging the two powerhouses into a single political/ideological force within which Arab women find themselves both a empowered and enslaved. Both Algeria and Palestine serve as prime examples of a cultural construct rife with proponents allowing Arab Nationalism to breed with Islam thereby creating a vacuum for women in which they are strong weapons of a revolutionary nationalistic resistance but inevitably hitting the ceiling of Islamic jurisprudence leaving little room for empowerment. Despite such powerful allies, Islam itself stands independently in the ability to hinder the Arab Woman's quest for equality.

Islam's genesis dates back to 7th century Saudi Arabia. The Prophet Mohammad, an illiterate man of the working classes, is said to have dictated the Qur'an as told to him

³ ¹ Hazem Zaki Nuseibeh, *The Ideas of Arab Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1956) 19, *Questia*, Web, 17 June 2010.

by the voice of Allah. The youngest of the major world religions, Islam purportedly paves the way for a unique acceptance of the other religions, sharing with them many of the same prophets and saints. The reaches of Islam go far beyond theology however. After the Prophet's death a civil war of sorts broke out regarding who would take his place. Herein was born the great schism of Islam into the Sunni and Shi'a sects, which then splintered exponentially into further subsects. The important element to mark is that this schism was not theological by nature, but political. Thus the tenants of male dominated power and affairs of state emerge almost from the conception of Islam and have not yet been excised. Furthermore, it is important to remember that the language with which these politics and power are empowered exclude women as anything more than commodities. As cultures evolve, however, and power changes hands, the women of Islamic countries have found a way to emerge, deconstructing the language that has held them back, denying the power politics that interpret that language to exclude them, and returning to the origins of Islam to use the words of the prophet directly, rather than via interpretations made centuries after his death, as their main weapon. These Muslim Feminists have masterfully slid through every crack available to them in the foundations of a male dominated institution weakening it from the base and waiting patiently for the structure to ultimately crumble. The cement holding all these bricks together is the powerful tradition of Patriarchy.

Patriarchy, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is "a social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line; *broadly*: control

by men of a disproportionately large share of power.”⁴ Words such as dependence, power, and control seem impudent on the page, but are a potent reality for Arab women around the globe. Even cultures that boast a modernity that escapes the outward clutches of Patriarchy are not completely clear of its ramifications. Here in America, for example, while the words dependence, control and power no longer fall in the forefront of social living between a man and woman, the undeniable inequalities of monetary salary, sexism, and the complex conceptualization of motherhood and the responsibilities that fall upon the woman linger. How then do things fare for the Arab woman, living in a social construct that doesn’t hide its Patriarchic tendencies, but rather seems to celebrate them? Arab women entrenched in Patriarchal societies are seen as either commodities and/or symbols of a man’s honor in so far as their chastity is the all encompassing measure by which a man, his name and his male hood is measured. The ability to give male heirs is the crowning glory of a woman’s purpose in such social networks, and thus motherhood becomes a shining halo with a dark underbelly. This is evident in the surfacing of sexuality and motherhood as seen through Patriarchal confines within Arab women’s artistic endeavors.

Enough and *Sitt Marie-Rose* are both works that showcase the tentative position women have when involved in Nationalistic endeavors. To free itself of a colonial or invading force, most societies engage in acts of warfare. Historically, revolution is a staple of independence. Where then do Arab women find themselves within the configuration of revolutionary thought and action? Conventionally, women are hailed and recruited in the secondary functions of revolution. They are the birthing vessels of

⁴ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/patriarchy>

sons, and they are expected to raise them with “nationalistic” identity.⁵ More functional roles of nursing, providing food and shelter, and even in some cases sexual release for soldiers of the revolutions are also acceptable. Not until recently however, have women begun to take a more active part in the physical battle:

Women are now taking a leading role in conflicts by becoming suicide bombers-- using their bodies as human detonators for the explosive material strapped around their waists. The first female suicide bomber, a seventeen-year-old Lebanese girl named Sana'a Mehaydali, was sent by the Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP/PPS), a secular, pro-Syrian Lebanese organization, to blow herself up near an Israeli convoy in Lebanon in 1985, killing five Israeli soldiers. Of the twelve suicide attacks conducted by the SSNP, women took part in six of them... Out of the approximately seventeen groups that have started using the tactical innovation of suicide bombing, women have been operatives in more than half of them. (2) Between 1985 and 2006, there have been in excess of 220 women suicide bombers, representing about 15 percent of the total. (3) Moreover, the upsurge in the number of female bombers has come from both secular and religious organizations, even though religious groups initially resisted using women.⁶

This evolution creates a shadowed place where man and woman are on equal footing, where the walls separating the physical body and the enforced boundary become hazy at best. But in the act of becoming violent, in standing toe to toe with the soldiers of wars, she violates that very edict, momentarily breaking free of bonds placed on her by male power and politics. It is a fleeting moment, and when the bomb has gone off, the woman goes back to her accepted place within the confines of household and Patriarchy, which

⁵ Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2000) xi, *Questia*, Web, 16 June 2010.

⁶ ¹ Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2000) xi, *Questia*, Web, 16 June 2010.

sometimes takes an even firmer hold to reassert itself. Take the example of Khadidja in the film *Enough!*, directed by Djamila Sahraoui. Set in 1990, Algeria is torn by war, and the character of Khadidja is the physical manifestation of the dilemma women who were active in rebellion face. She fought alongside men, she bled with them, healed them, and it changed her as a “woman.” The character that we are presented with is an opinionated, pushy, unafraid woman who will do whatever she needs in order to get whatever task at hand is complete. She walks between the worlds of man and woman. She is neither an object of desire, as seen in the café when the young men come after her young counterpart, nor is she an authority, still being shackled to the laws of men’s judgment. She is not mother or wife, and yet she is still bound by the laws that would define her through those words. She carries a gun, but cannot use it. The only weapon she has to wield is intimate knowledge of men who have power over her. This knowledge is only afforded her through revolutionary activities. “I remember your scars,” she says to one such man, when he is the decider of her fate. “I know where they are.” And so she and her young friend are set free. The only character with which Khadidja can relate is the old man, living beyond the limits of city and classification. The old man who still drives a horse drawn cart, and lives in the past where his wife and son are with him. He has lost his place as Khadidja has lost hers, and by aligning her with him, the director is telling the audience not only that the past generations have been reduced to a nomadic existence by the prevailing nation which has no use for them, but also that women who fought for their country, their nation, become ghosts when Arms are put down. Even her female counterpart doesn’t understand Khadidja, and prefers to remain ignorant of her revolutionary activities. One has sacrificed so the other can condemn her.

Nationalism has another politic through which it uses the female identity. In paralleling the woman, her body, her purity, with that of the nation, Nationalism creates a powerful tool in which the individuality of womankind transforms into an idolatrous notion of the beautiful land to be protected. Ahlam Mosteghanemi shows the union of woman and city through Khaled's insistence that Harat *is* Constantinople. Again, this novel takes place in Algeria, and the concept of Nationalism, and the obtaining it through revolutionary means, is firmly injected into the plot's core. Thus, when Khaled makes the claim:

You were not a woman. You were a city teeming with diversely conflicting women, different in age and features, in dress and perfume, in timidity and boldness, women who ranged from before the days of my mother to your own days. Women, all of them are you. I knew that only when it was too late. After you had swallowed me up, as closed cities do, to their children.⁷

He takes ownership of more than Harat, but all of womankind. Khaled is taking the romantic notion of Harat and projecting it to generations before and all to come, he is infusing the "idea" of her into the city, taking from her any possibility of uniqueness, otherness, independent character. Thus, anything done to her is done unto a Nation, a city politic, no longer in the realm of flesh and blood. This concept becomes more worrisome as the text continues and the language becomes more riddled with possession:

Constantine was a two-faced city that would not acknowledge lust nor permit a lover's yearning. Yet it still took on everything quietly so as to preserve its

⁷ Ahlam Mosteghanemi, *Memory in the Flesh* (American University in Cairo Press) 92.

reputation as ancient cities did. That is the reason it blesses adulterers and thieves along with its Saints.⁸

Khaled has already established that Harat is Constantine, and so now as he is showing his mounting frustration with Constantine, can it not also become a desire for Harat that is going unfettered, unfulfilled. In his mind, she no longer constitutes a person, a woman, she is a concept and his rejection by her enters an ethereal world where any action is not merely against a woman, but a city. In his painting of Constantine he can have her, however he wants her, she is “a city, not a woman...and every time [he] paints Constantine [he] paints her.”⁹ This is dangerous dialogue, which opens the doors for men to take what they have fought for, the nation becomes the city becomes the woman. Khaled’s words continue to prove this as he “goes back and forth with [his] brush as if with [his] lips...kissing its soil, its stones, its trees its valleys.”¹⁰ He is taking her without her consent, creating a space in his mind where she is already his. This may be a space that isn’t corporeal, but the leap is not far from one to the other. The climax of such a path becomes the violent way in which Nationalism is attained, the revolution that takes the city, the rape that claims the woman:

Was it me who had been sleeping and waking up with you, even raping you, for months in my sleep? Some cities are like women: their names defeat you in advance; they seduce you and confuse you. They fill you, they empty you.¹¹

⁸ Ahlam Mosteghanemi 93

⁹ Ahlam Mosteghanemi 108

¹⁰ Ahlam Mosteghanemi 125

¹¹ Ahlam Mosteghanemi 142

Here, Nationalism has created a space, be it imaginary, that allows for the possession of a woman against her will in the guise of her role as the city or nation state. With such an undercurrent, the waters of Nationalism become treacherous for women to navigate, regardless of their actions in revolutionary context. Khadidja found herself with no place to dwell with in the framework of the new nation state she helped form, Harat lost her identity to a Nationalistic ideal that reinvented her as the city, the land, the source the fighting strove to possess, but the reality is much darker still.

Sitt Marie Rose circumnavigates the theory of Nationalism as it pertains to women and shows with blaring reality the dangers to the physical state of women entangled in the messy web of revolution. Here as well, the city is the woman:

Beirut is humiliated. She suffered the defeat; she's the one who lost. She's like a dog with her tail between her legs. She was heedless to the point of folly. She gathered the manners and customs, the flaws and vengeance, the guilt and debauchery of the whole world into her own belly. Now she has thrown it all up, and that vomit fills all her spaces.¹²

Again we see the city as feminine, bloated with motherly symbolism. The presence of Nationalism is also strong, and very vividly a danger to women:

Pain also encumbers them. Somebody else's pain, of course; that will never touch them. Their pity, when it exists, is tribal. That's why I doubt Marie-Rose will leave this confrontation alive.¹³

While the "they" in this passage refers to the Chabab mafia, which is nomadic by nature as presented in the book, this entity is fighting for something, they consider themselves to be "the tribe" and anyone else to be the "invader." The purest form of

¹² Etel Adnan *Sitt Marie-Rose A Novel* (The Post-Apollo Press) 20

¹³ Etel Adnan 40

Nationalistic thought. And what does that Nationalistic notion do to woman? Draws and Quarters her in front of the children who love her. Because Marie Rose did not offer up her womb to the “right” man, because they could not control her words, because she stepped outside their edits, she could no longer exist:

I would have killed her long ago. My own sister is very nice. That’s something else. She never goes out except with our mother. When you speak to her she lowers her eyes. But when whores like [Marie Rose] get mixed up in a war, now that’s something to get disgusted about.¹⁴

It is the concept of Nationalism that Marie Rose fights against, and thus Nationalism must destroy her. And even in her death, she clings to individuality, spurning the Nation that is executing her. She moves away from a collective consciousness, the unified bond that brings all together under one conceived notion of Nation:

Death is never in the plural. Let’s not exaggerate its victory. It’s total enough. Let’s not sing about that victory. There are not millions of deaths. It happens millions of times that someone dies.¹⁵

And with her death, she reclaims herself, her individuality, and takes herself outside the grasp of a Nationalistic discourse:

You can’t exchange me. I’m not an object. What makes you think that I wouldn’t rather die than serve as the small change in one of your transactions?¹⁶

¹⁴ Etel Adnan 60

¹⁵ Etel Adnan 84

¹⁶ Etel Adnan 87

But where does that leave the space available for women within a Nationalistic society? Either they follow the rules set down by the nature of the beast, or they must sacrifice themselves to gain individuality. Is there an emerging place for a solution, a door through which another way can be found? If there are any silver linings sewn into the dark clouds that mire Arab women's progress under the firm grip of Nationalism, they exist within the refusal of such women to silence their political voices. As can be seen in post revolutionary countries like Iran, women are inching towards a more egalitarian state of affairs by entrenching themselves within the body politic, mastering the Nationalistic dialogue, deconstructing it, and rebuilding a sphere in which their voices can be heard and acknowledged. Shirin Ebadi is a Nobel Peace Prize winner, and an Iranian woman. Her global presence gives a rare view into the not so open society of Iran. In the article entitled "The Brutal Crackdowns Only Make Iran's Women Stronger," Ebadi talks about a young woman named Shirin Alam Holi, a 28 year old Kurdish woman executed for the crime of terrorism. Letters from jail revealed that she was tortured but didn't confess and thus was killed.¹⁷ A similar story to Marie Rose? But there is a different tone to this article. Ebadi uses the execution to outline the fact that no matter how harsh the punishment is for going against the "state" women's voices grow louder. And the voices are backed up by action. Iranian women are no longer just speaking the language of equality, but they are ensconcing themselves within the infrastructure that is attempting to keep them down:

¹⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jun/08/brutal-crackdown-iran-women-protest>

Women in Iran have enjoyed the right to vote for nearly 50 years, since 1963. Today, under an even more repressive regime, they are flooding the ranks of doctors, professors and chief executives. Women now constitute more than 63% of university students. Is it any wonder that they refuse to stand idly by and accept that their lives are not worth as much as that of a man?¹⁸

So women in Iran are learning that in order to establish themselves as equal, the power is in the language of the law, economic independence and a shift outside the realm of household duties into the professional spheres that will afford them the power to be heard and acknowledged by a Nationalistic, Islamic government born from a long line of Patriarchs. Other Muslim Feminists parallel these concepts and are working towards reclaiming their voices as both women and Muslims.

Islam has two faces: ideal, and reality, Qur'an and Sharia, the words themselves and the interpretations that followed four hundred years later. The emergent discourse of Muslim Feminism seeks to tear down the reality and use the ideal to rebuild a new space in which women can claim the equality they believe Islam is meant to afford them. In order to understand how difficult a mountain this is to climb, it is important to see what the reality holds in store for women within the realm of Islamic states.

In 1995 Sheikh 'Abdur-Rahman 'Abdul-Khaliq prepared to go before the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. He presented a paper

¹⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jun/08/brutal-crackdown-iran-women-protest>

entitled “The Wisdom behind The Islamic Laws Regarding Women.”¹⁹ His aim, according to the paper, was to enlighten the world as to why specific laws inherent in Islam regarding women are both upright and in the best interest of said women.

An example of such a law would be:

Allah (Glorified and Exalted be He) lifted from women the obligation of working to provide and support herself and her family. He made this obligation particular for men alone. Allah commanded men to be responsible for the care of women during all stages of their life.²⁰

From his particular Islamic perspective, the fact that women are not held up to the grueling task of being in society and working among men and their filthy desires is a positive thing. Perhaps in 7th Century Saudi Arabia this might have been true. But what the Sheikh Khaliq doesn’t address is the fact that in present day, such laws keep women bound to their men for survival. In being “responsible” for women, men have taken the empowerment away from them, and made them completely dependent. Thus the woman’s value is always in relation to her man, be it a father, husband or son. Also this edict creates a wasteland of widows, divorcées or women who have never had the benefit of being married, and thus are completely outside the realm of their own society, without power or voice. Texts by Arab women are riddled with such characters. Perhaps the best example can be found in Fatima Mernissi’s *Dreams of Trespass*. In this text, Mernissi mirrors Sheikh Khaliq’s estimation of Islamic laws regarding women:

¹⁹http://d1.islamhouse.com/data/en/ih_books/signal/en_Islamic_Laws_Regarding_Women.pdf

²⁰Khaliq

All respectable men provided for their womenfolk, so that they did not have to go out into dangerous, unsafe streets. They gave them lovely palaces with marble floors and fountains, good food, nice clothes, and jewelry. What more did a woman need to be happy? It was only poor women like Luza, the wife of Ahmed the doorkeeper, who needed to go outside, to work and feed themselves. Privileged women were spared that trauma. ²¹

Mernissi shows that she is very comfortable navigating through the language of Islam as it is represented by the power structure. However, aside from the visible sense of sarcasm with which the words come off the page, Mernissi is doing something far more potent. She is setting up a house of cards in preparation to take it down. Enter the character of Aunt Habiba:

Upstairs was also the place to go for storytelling. You would climb the hundreds of glazed steps that lead all the way up to the third and top floor of the house and the terrace, which lay before it...that was where Aunt Habiba had her room, small and quite empty. Her husband had kept everything from their marriage, with the idea that should he ever lift his finger and ask her to come home again, she would bow her head and come rushing back. 'But he can never take the most important things away from me,' Aunt Habiba would say sometimes, 'my laughter'....Aunt Habiba often cried for no reason.²²

Subtly, Mernissi is challenging the surface concept that women are happy to be taken care of by their men. In Aunt Habiba, she creates a casualty of a war that rages beneath the calm ripples of Islam's treatment of women. Aunt Habiba is stuck, she has no options, she has no power, and though she would put among the assets

²¹ Fatima Mernissi *Dreams of Trespass* (Basic Books) 46

²² Fatima Mernissi *Dreams of Trespass* (Basic Books) 17

that can't be taken from her the ability to laugh, she is known for her unusual episodes of crying. Mernissi showcases her brilliant use of words, rewording and restructuring the commonly held edicts of Islam, the preconceived notions of the harem, and the accepted definition of what it means to be a Muslim Woman.

In fact, Mernissi is a pioneer among the emerging sect of Muslim Feminists attempting strip the male dominated interpretations of The Prophet's words, and returning to a more literal reading of the Qur'an in favor of women's equality. Here is where Sheikh Khaliq and Mernissi part ways, if they were indeed ever on the same path. While Sheikh Khaliq would argue:

The truth of the matter is that it is impossible to have absolute equality between men and women in what is specific for each of them. So long as it is impossible to achieve absolute equality between men and women, it is required to distribute rights and obligations [between the spouses] according to the manner in which the Creator (Glorified and Exalted be He) has assigned each one.²³

Mernissi would counter that such a view is the result of translations with very specific agendas in place. The original text and intent of the Qur'an, and thereby Islam itself, does not posit any such inequality between men and women, and in order to bring this truth to light, one must put aside the interpretations occurring hundreds of years after the fact, and go to the original text. She particularly focuses on a man named Abu Hurayra. As Miriam Cook summarizes:

Mernissi investigates another source of Traditions, a certain Abu Hurayra whom she found to be arrogant, stupid, and manipulative in the way he

²³ Khaliq

quoted the Prophet's words. As Djebbar has noted, Aisha kept an eye on these men who felt free once the Prophet was dead to quote him opportunistically and even to invent words he never uttered and deeds he never performed. Few were as egregious as Abu Hurayra; several times he was recorded as having been corrected by Aisha, yet he persisted in his deviousness. Nonetheless, centuries of scholars accepted his assertion that the Prophet had said that when dogs, asses, and women intervene between the worshipper and the qibla, or direction of prayer toward Mecca, they disturb prayer. Mernissi's complaint is with the historians who refused, or perhaps were afraid, to acknowledge women's strong positions in Muhammad's society, where they knew they had the right to ask how Islam "would improve their situation. This critical spirit on the part of women toward the political leader remained alive and well during the first decades of Islam. It only disappeared with the onset of absolutism...and the disappearance of Islam as the Prophet's experiment in living, in which equality, however merely potential it might be, opened the door to the dream of a practicing democracy." Revolutionary Islam disappeared because men like Abu Bakra and Abu Hurayra willfully misrepresented Muhammad's words and actions.²⁴

In the age of modernity, with the advent of the Internet, the growing number of women seeking knowledge and learning language, it is impossible for the words of a text as important and influential as the Qur'an to be ferreted away for men alone. Mernissi bravely challenges the interpretations that have stood for generations, sending questions into a pool of women ready to seek the answers and demand they be upheld the way in which they believe Islam intended. One palpable example of

²⁴ Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 73, *Questia, Web*, 17 June 2010.

how this discourse has filtered Muslim societies and is beginning to fuel the fires of change is the feminist magazine *Zanan* published in Iran. According to Cooke:

Reading the Qur'an from a women's viewpoint, the contributors [of *Zanan*] aim not merely to produce new legal interpretations for a small group of religious scholars, but rather to "awaken women so that they will proclaim their rights" and thus transform society (Najmabadi 1998:72, 66, 71). Like nineteenth-century American Protestant women reformers, they are appropriating "religious authority and social power [using] religious authority as both guide and shield in their efforts to claim the right to shape public reality" (Buchanan 1996:141). By juxtaposing religious texts of all sorts with Western feminist writings they are confusing the "comforting categories of Islamic and secular [and are making] West and East speak in a new combined tongue in dialogue with rather than as negating of each other." Afsaneh Najmabadi claims that their radical interpretations are reconfiguring space in such a way that "women of different outlooks can have a common stake" (Najmabadi 1998:77). These Iranian women have chosen the most public of venues to demand a hearing so as to enter spaces previously closed to them.²⁵

Not only has Mernissi's concept of rereading the original texts independent of the Sharia or any male dominated interpretation opened a door many Muslim Feminists are walking through, a new language is emerging which gives women back a certain sense of empowerment not easily ripped from them by the existing Islamic infrastructure. The women of Iran are not alone in this endeavor:

In Saudi Arabia, women interpreters of the Qur'an have become prominent in the last two years, and they are appealing to women of all classes also. On

²⁵ Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2000) xiii, *Questia*, Web, 17 June 2010.

Mondays in downtown Jeddah, Samira Jamjum lectures to a hall full of women. On Saturdays, it is the turn of the acclaimed religious authority Dr. Fatima Umar Naseef to lecture to over five hundred women. Her clarion cry is taken straight from the Prophet Muhammad: "Seek knowledge wherever you can find it, even in China." She has devoted an entire chapter of her *Women in Islam* to a woman's right to seek knowledge and to "learn about her rights and duties and to put this knowledge into practice" (Naseef 1999:81).²⁶

One startling text which attempts to take back the identity of women within the sphere of Islamic language comes from Salwa Al Neimi. In *The Proof of the Honey*, the very guarded concept of a woman's sexuality within a Muslim context is turned inside out. Al Neimi takes the language provided her by Muslim male hegemony and inserts herself, and with her women in general, rewriting the tenants and restructuring the body of sexuality thus far reserved for men alone. The narrator of this piece is a woman who embraces her sexuality with language that is bold, unapologetic and empowered. Where the text addresses the man, she takes on his identity and cuts the maleness out inserting her right as a woman to be sexual within Islamic bounds:

...Even before reading this Hadith from the Prophet to his daughter Fatima, on the eve of her wedding to 'Ali ibn Abi Talib: 'Wash yourself ever with water; thus, when your husband looks at you, he shall delight in you.' I washed myself with water; thus, when I looked at myself, I was delighted²⁷

²⁶ Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2000) xvii, *Questia*, Web, 17 June 2010.

²⁷ Salwa Al Neimi *The Proof of the Honey* (Europa editions) 50

She becomes the husband, she is the wife, she is the sole deliverer and recipient of the delight. The malignant imposition of man is cut out. Furthermore, love does not enter the confines of this book. Where it is assumed in that women must feel love to engage in sex, and men are riddled with sexual desire void of love, Neimi refuses to bow to such notions. Her heroine doesn't need to feel love to engage in sex, and delight in it. Throughout the text, Neimi attaches the words of well respected men in the Islamic faith and tradition to subversive notions of what women want:

The Sufi al Junayd wrote: 'I hunger for coition as I hunger for food.' I have a physical need for water, semen and words. The three things I need in life. I cannot exist without them.²⁸

Again, she has taken the words of a well-respected man within the Islamic faith and she applies them to herself in a brazen unapologetic way. Neimi asserts herself not by creating a shocking novel floating above and beyond the academic or spiritual confines of the Islamic religion. Rather she uses the words so precious and imperative to the sustenance of male dominance within that religion to rebuild an alter image of what it is to be a sexual woman within the accepted tenants of Islam. In a male dominated sphere where a woman's sexuality is the main string by which she is pulled and controlled as a commodity by the patriarch, this reclaiming is a bold and important step towards empowerment. Neimi takes the concept of reinterpreting Muslim tenants from a feminine perspective to the edge of the power struggle, soaring past the concept of freedom of dress, freedom of speech, freedom of ideology, straight into the freedom of owning one's body and the sexuality that

²⁸ Salwa Al Niemi 49

comes with it. This notion is most threatening to the great machine of Patriarchy, a strong hand reaching throughout the reality of Nationalism and Islamic notion within the Arab woman's world.

Patriarchy is perhaps the most difficult obstacle for Muslim Feminists to overcome. No matter what strides are made, every step forward is lost within a system whose very language, existence and nature lies in the control of women, from virginity to womb. Every text, every concept discussed so far has been forced to exist within a realm of male discourse, male dominated laws and female subservience. Thus it can be argued that Nationalism and Islam are heirs to an inheritance left by Patriarchy, excluding women as anything but tools, commodities to be used when necessary and put away at all other times. Whether it is the revolutionary striving to find a place for herself among her fellow soldiers, or the Muslim Feminist struggling to create a language, an interpretation that includes her as an individual equal to men, each and every one stand before the firing squad of the Patriarch. To some, like Neimi, the answer lies in taking the proverbial bull by the horns and facing off with Patriarchal society by boldly effacing the preconceived notions enforced by Patriarchy, turning its language on itself, and inside out. To others like Mernissi, the answer lies in circumventing those who would use words to manipulate women's positions and go straight to the source. Without exiling herself to the land of extremists, Mernissi travels the path with the flow of the current, and yet manages to change the potential destination. It stands true that from revolutionary to writer, martyr to artist for Muslim Feminists to reach equality it will never be enough to act within the existing structures set by Nationalism and

Islam, but rather, a new structure must be built upon a discourse that denounces Patriarchal tenants and creates a new language within which women can freely move and express themselves.

Works Cited

Adnan, Etel. *Sitt Marie Rose*. California: Post Apollo Press, 1982

Al Neimi, Salwa. *The Proof of the Honey*. Translated by Carol Perkins. New York: Europa Editions, 2009.

Cooke, Miriam. *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2000. *Questia*. Web. 18 June 2010.

Mernissi, Fatima. *Dreams of Tresspass*. New York: Basic Books, 1994.

Moghadam, Valentine M. "Patriarchy in Transition: and the Changing Family in the Middle East," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 35.2 (2004), *Questia*, Web, 16 June 2010.

Mokhtari, Shadi. "The Search for Human Rights within an Islamic Framework in Iran." *The Muslim World* 94.4 (2004): 469+. *Questia*. Web. 18 June 2010.

Mosteghanemi, Ahlam. *Memory in the Flesh*. Cairo: American University Cairo Press, 2003.

Nuseibeh, Hazem Zaki. *The Ideas of Arab Nationalism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1956. *Questia*. Web. 18 June 2010.

Ramanathan, Geetha, and Stacey Schlau. "Third World Women's Texts and the Politics of Feminist Criticisms." *College Literature* 22.1 (1995): 1-9. *Questia*. Web. 18 June 2010.

Wadud, Amina. *Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. *Questia*. Web. 18 June 2010.

Zuhur, Sherifa. "Women and Empowerment in the Arab World." *Arab Studies Quarterly (ASQ)* 25.4 (2003): 17+. *Questia*. Web. 18 June 2010.

<http://www.al-islam.org/laws/marriage2.html>

Sheikh 'Abdur-Rahman 'Abdul-Khaliq "The Wisdom behind The Islamic Laws Regarding Women." Translation and Notes Ali Al-Timimi Prepared for The UN Fourth World Conference on Women Beijing, China 1-15th September 1995 The Islamic Assembly of North America www.islamhouse.com Copyright © The Islamic Assembly of North America, 1995. 3588 Plymouth Road, #270. Ann Arbor, MI 48105. US