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Muslim Women and the West: Faith, Feminism, and the Quest for Gender Equality

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MUSLIM WOMEN AND THE WEST:
FAITH, FEMINISM, AND THE QUEST FOR GENDER EQUALITY

MUSLIM WOMEN AND THE WEST:
FAITH, FEMINISM, AND THE QUEST FOR GENDER EQUALITY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Political Science

By

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ABSTRACT

For centuries the West has seen the Muslim woman as an entire group of people in need of saving. Lacking a thorough understanding of Islam and an incredibly diverse Middle Eastern society, Western powers endeavored to shape women of the Middle East into secular, modern examples of “liberated” women. Completely unacknowledged in this pursuit are the grass roots movements that emerged out of nationalist movements in the early twentieth century. An attempt to understand why the West is so incredibly fascinated by Muslim is undertaken in this scholarly pursuit. Additionally, a case study on the nation of Egypt shows not only the rights enjoyed by Muslim women throughout the centuries, but the specific tenure of gender activism unique to this area of the world.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents and my husband. Without their support my dreams of a graduate education would not have been realized.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

There is something about the Muslim woman that has attracted widespread interest and meddling by Westerners for centuries. The extent of the interest in not just the socio-economic status of Muslim women residing in the Middle East, but extending to areas like clothing and marriage begs the question as to why? While I am not arguing that the status of women throughout the world does not need improving in certain areas- the level of fascination, money and time devoted by Western countries to women in the Middle East is disproportionate when compared to the rights and quality of life enjoyed by these women. Throughout history the West has maintained an elitist misperception of not only Muslim women but also Islam. Colonialism helped perpetuate the “white is right” mentality at the expense of not only cultural tradition.

The purpose of this thesis is to show the historical connection to the current fascination with the “oppressed Muslim woman, and how the West arrived at the conclusion that the Muslim women needed to be liberated. I will discuss the growth of the feminist or gender equality movements within the Islamic community, and use a case study on Egypt to provide a strong example of life before and after colonialism. The chapter on Egypt will also highlight the diversity of the gender equality movement in the Middle East, as well as clearly show that grass roots movements are always more successful than those imposed by foreigners.

Before moving on to the first chapter discussing the historical creation of the Muslim “other”, I want to point out the hypocrisy of the West in regards to Islam and women that helped serve as the catalyst for selecting this topic as my master’s thesis. In a world that is becoming increasingly divided along political lines filled with misplaced

anger and ignorance directed towards Islam, I was struck by the amount of attention Muslim women were receiving, and through subsequent study have always received.

However, it was the year and a half I spent serving in Iraq as part of yet another ill-fated Western military foray into the Middle East that sparked my profound interest in this particular topic. It was more than the governmental quota set up by the new “Iraqi government” and the Coalition Provincial Authority designating a certain number of seats for women in government. Nor was it the creation of a ministry to deal specifically with women’s issues. This thesis was born out of conversations with American soldiers who entered the homes of Iraqi civilians by night while conducting missions to capture alleged insurgents or seek out weapons caches. Young, physically fit and armed- these young men consistently mentioned the Iraqi women as one of their greatest concerns when entering a home. It was the surprise in their voice that troubled me the most, as if they could not fathom that a Muslim woman would defend her home, both violently and non-violently, from foreign armed men arriving in the night. When I asked them what their mothers or wives would do if the situation were reversed, and their home was on the receiving end of a midnight raid coming to take away the males on the premise, they very adamantly and boastfully lauded their families matriarchs willingness to protect her family. As I engaged in these conversations I understood that the fervent belief in the docility of Muslim women must stem from somewhere. It surprised me that they were so surprised. Did they truly believe they would be welcomed by these women as their alleged oppressors were being carried off by the western males?

For all of discussion on the multi-polarity of the world, the West continues social and political hypocrisy when engaging in other parts of the world. The military invasions

of Afghanistan and Iraq have allowed the United States to shape governments and decide social policies. Muslim women are the rallying cry for war entirely based on false pretenses and ignorance.

On November 17, 2001, Laura Bush made an appeal to the American people to support the war in Afghanistan. In her speech, no link was made between the military operation in Afghanistan and the September 11th attacks. Instead, she called upon the American people to support an operation that would encompass the salvation of Afghan women, “to kick off a world-wide effort to focus on the brutality against women and children by the al-Qaeda terrorist network and the regime it supports in Afghanistan, the Taliban.” Called “women of cover,” by former president George W. Bush, Muslim women are rendered static victims in a discourse of transnational feminism that has been deployed to justify military intervention in the Middle East and Afghanistan.¹

When examined critically, many Westerners and their respective governments are uniformed when it comes to gender issues in the Middle East. In places like Iraq and Afghanistan on the heels of American military intervention we ensure a quota system is in place within these new “democracies” ensuring women have a place in government. While admirable for securing women’s political involvement albeit on the end of an M4 rifle, the American democracy only has seventeen female senators out of one hundred in a country where half the population is female.²

It seems that when it comes to Islam and politics, the West has attempted to create a utopian Western society- full of democracy and equality, brought about through American power, but pushing for an absence of religion. For example, the American government chastises the Palestinian people for electing Hamas to political office saying they are terrorists and Islamists who want to institute sharia law, but finds it is perfectly

¹ Sarah Sheffer, “The Myth of the Muslim Woman: The False Narrative of Salvation,” Northeastern University Political Review; April 14, 2011

² www.senate.gov

acceptable for American Republic Party Presidential candidates to curry favor with leading evangelicals like Billy Graham and James Dobson every four years in order to secure the parties nomination.

There are many areas of gender inequality that would be better served by the political and economic power of western countries rather than passing laws banning headscarves, which has recently been legislated in Europe. The French Republic, the great defender of Muslim women equality through its ban on the burqa and niqab, has never had a female head of state in sharp contrast to the Muslim countries of Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The tragic sexual assault of white CBS news reporter Lara Logan in Cairo received international attention, with many comments focusing on how Muslim women are consistently treated badly across the Middle East.³ Yet a study published in the June issue of the American Journal of Public Health indicated that four hundred thousand women has been raped in Congo over a year between 2006 and 2007. This roughly calculates to forty-eight women raped every hour.⁴ Did the tragedy in the Congo receive as much attention as Lara Logans assault? No. Were many disparaging comments made in regards to male Congolese and their religion as the cause of these heinous crimes? No.

I am concerned as to why that was not the case. Are these preconceived notions developed in the West over centuries in regards to Islam and gender so strong that

³ <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/02/15/60minutes/main20032070.shtml>

⁴ A. Peterman, T. Palermo, and C. Bredenkamp, "Estimates and Determinants of Sexual Violence Against Women in the Democratic Republic of Congo," *American Journal of Public Health Vol 101, No. 6 June 2011*

individual acts of violence are only associated with religion if the perpetrator is Muslim?

In this writing, I endeavor to discern the reasons for Western concern for Muslim women through historical, scholarly and news sources. I will discuss western creation of the Muslim woman in the mind, the creation of the gender equality movement in the Middle East- both secular and religious, and utilize the country of Egypt to serve as a case study to show gender equality before and after colonialism.

CHAPTER II: CREATING THE MUSLIM WOMAN

PART A: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Since the conception of a Western self, explicitly detailed in Zachary Lockman's *Contending Visions of the Middle East*, the "Orient" or "Near East" has always served as the counter-point. Whatever the west was, the east was the opposite.

Almost from the earliest times in Europe, the Orient was something more than what was empirically known about it at least until the early eighteenth century. European understanding of one kind of Oriental culture, the Islamic, was ignorant but complex.⁵

Through the examination of relations between the Christian West and the Muslim East during the rise of the Roman Church, and concluding in a United States caught up in a "Global War on Terror," the unfortunate truth identified and supported in Lockman's work, and that of Edward Said, is that gross misunderstanding, elitism, racism and ignorance was adopted by the early Christian Europeans from the outset. Edward Said encapsulated all of these term into one key and defining word "orientalism."

As Islam expanded from its birthplace on the Arabian Peninsula and expanded into European territory, the faith became to be considered a threat to not just European territorial integrity, but the Roman Christian Church's monopoly on monotheistic faith. Islam was seen as a novelty when compared to the one true Christian faith. Up until the Crusades in the eleventh century, the vast knowledge of Islam obtained by early Europeans was through information passed from person to person generally travelling a great distance allowing for gross distortion of the truth, including the fact that Islam was a monotheistic faith in line with Judaism and Christianity.

⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, p. 55

According to Maxime Rodinson, the west developed a greater and clearer knowledge of Islam during the eleventh century. During this time, the Roman Catholic Church identified Muslims as the “enemies of God” and called on all Christians to liberate the Holy Land. The Crusades marked the first military foray by European powers in the Middle East setting a tone for events that have continued until today. In an effort to recognize whom the Crusaders would be engaging in battle with, the first European scholarship into Middle East studies began with the intention to understand Islam and Muslim society in order to know how to best defeat it. There were some scholars who endeavored to portray Islam accurately; unfortunately a widespread and grossly inaccurate understanding of Islam gained a greater foothold in European intellectual society. The overarching problem stemmed from the fact that majority of these scholars would read the Qur’an in translation and rely on secondary and questionable sources for information on Muslim society. The opinions and ideas of Islam developed by these early Church scholars began a trend of incorrect information about Islam, which would exist until the twentieth century.

Though favorable attitudes emerged towards Islam during the time of the Renaissance, the late sixteenth century witnessed the emergence of the concept of western superiority especially when compared to the Muslim Ottoman Empire. Instead of being a despotic and morally corrupt empire, like the Ottomans, Europe was full of enlightened rulers grounded in law and logic-regardless if that was accurate or not. Given the realization that the world was much larger than initially believed identified through overseas exploration, the West began to see their society as distinctive from the rest of the world, uniquely linked to the greatness of ancient Greece and Rome. European

society was superior and modern moving forward with scientific and technological advancement. If a society did not fit the western model, they could either adapt or face century's societal stagnation.

In addition to Western pride and false sense of superiority, underneath the bravado of Western boasting lurked a real fear of Islam.

For Europe, Islam was a lasting trauma. Until the end of the seventeenth century the "Ottoman peril" lurked alongside Europe to represent for the whole Christian civilization a constant danger, and in time European civilization incorporated that peril and its lore, its great events, figures, virtues, and vices, as something woven into the fabric of life.⁶

The belief in western superiority would dominate scholarly thinking well into the twentieth century in particular the idea that Muslim society was static. Karl Marx asserted that Asian societies had been unchanging for thousands of years, completely ignoring the vast intellectual, scientific, and technological advances achieved by Muslim societies while Europe was floundering following the collapse of Rome. The beliefs espoused by Marx fell in line not only with the popular views of Islam at the time, but the inaccurate direct linkage between ancient Greece and European society at the time. For whatever reason, the fact that there were flourishing Asian civilizations existing between the time of ancient Greece and the rise of the European nation state was completely ignored. Marx believed that Europeans must develop Asian societies in order for them to break free of centuries of stagnation. Through the rise of European colonialism across the globe, particularly in the Middle East and Asia, we see the continuation of racist's European policies. The "white mans burden" was accepted by the majority of Europeans and later American who thought it their duty to modernize their colonial subjects.

⁶ Edward Said, p. 59-60

With the fall of the Ottoman Empire following World War I, the creation of nation-states in the Middle East along European lines, the end of colonialism post-World War II, and the emergence of the United States as the dominant player in that area of the world, the political and geographic makeup of the Muslim world has changed dramatically, and as recent events have shown- still evolving. What unfortunately persisted during this time period is the continuation of Western superiority and misconceptions of Islam. Though effort was made immediately following World War I to explain the dramatic change of events taking place in the Middle East by debunking the position that the Muslim world was stagnate.

However, by the time of the Cold War and the rise of Bernard Lewis as the dominant voice in Orientalism, the belief in Islam's inability to change was widely accepted. Lewis completely ignored or failed to examine the growth of pan-Arab nationalist movements during this time as evidence completely contradictory to his theory. Emerging American social scientists at the time developed the modernization theory, contradictory to Lewis, in an effort to explain the social, political and cultural changes taking place across much of the third world at this time. In order to resist communism and become a "modern" society countries in the Middle East needed to emulate Western society. Much like Orientalism and the views expressed by Marx, these countries could not achieve modernization alone but only through the help out outside sources. Modernization theory is the continuation of the "us" versus "them" mentality that emerged in the early European Christian Church. We are modern and superior while "they" are tied to tradition. Yet with the help of the West, they too could achieve modernization regardless if they wanted to or not.

Orientalists or Arabs are thereafter shown to be gullible, “devoid of energy or initiative,” much given to “fulsome flattery,” intrigue, cunning, and unkindness to animals; Orientalists cannot walk on either a road or a pavement (their disordered minds fail to understand what the clever European grasps immediately, that the roads and pavements are made for walking); Orientalists are inveterate liars, they “lethargic and suspicious,” and in everything oppose the clarity, directness and nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race.⁷

Since the first interactions between the West and Islam, the relationship has always been fraught with suspicion and elitism. So while different theories have been developed throughout the centuries to reconcile the West and Islam, they by and large are based rooted in Western elitism making it difficult for a relationship built on mutual respect and understanding.

In my opinion the misinformation, especially in regards to sexuality, that has existed over the centuries allowed for distorted information in regards to the Muslim woman to be created over the centuries. While Islam provided their female followers with the right to sexual satisfaction, the early Catholic Church went with sex only in the pursuit of procreation approach. The marriage between the Prophet and his wife A’isha is being utilized today by Muslim women advocating for more equality in society. Yet, in the 1850 American play *Mohammed, the Arabian Prophet: A Tragedy in Five Acts* their relationship is changed from a marriage to one of sexual addiction. A’isha is the epitome of “oriental” sexuality.

Her blushing cheeks, made fragrant by her breath. Excels the Persian rose- her ruby lips. Mother unblemished pearls, upon her brow. Aspiring scorn divided empire holds. With soft attraction, and with every motion, new graces flutter round her buoyant limbs.⁸

⁷ Edward Said, p. 38-39

⁸ George H. Mills, *Mohammed, the Arabian Prophet: A Tragedy in Five Acts*, p.89

In the play the Prophet's downfall is his inability to control his home, namely A'isha's unchecked sexuality and independence. At the end of the play A'isha poisons Muhammad for being a false prophet, playing into conservative Christian dismissing of Islam as not a true faith. The description of A'isha sexuality, the presence of the Prophet's multiple wives in the play, and the overall questioning of Islam illustrate Western opinions in the middle of the nineteenth century. The Muslim woman must not only be saved from herself and her religion, but from the men in her society as well.

The presence of the sexuality, the harem, gender based bathhouses, and polygamy in Islamic society was a new and shocking concept for a Christian society grounded in the sexual repression and monogamy. Yet it was the lack of access to women in the Middle East by European males that lead to their belief that Muslim women needed a savior. It is almost as if the Western male was thinking that since Muslim women were segregated, made to wear a veil, and involved in "deviant" sexual behavior their salvation at the hands of modernity must be a key part of Western encroachment in the region.

While the colonial policies of European powers in the Middle East had profound impact on the lives of all who inhabited the region, Muslim women were the most impacted by battle of Western-secularism and a more national grass-roots movements grounded in Islam. While the old colonial powers do not physically occupy their former colonies, the battle over the Muslim woman has continued. While Edward Said argued that in imperialism "race takes precedence over both class and gender," what is becoming more evident is that Muslim women are used to market and sell intervention in the Muslim world.

PART B: A CALL TO ARMS

The November 17, 2011 speech by former First Lady Laura Bush, which was mentioned in the introduction, clearly shows that war was being sold to the American people as a rescue mission for the women of Afghanistan. According to Mrs. Bush, “the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.”⁹ Due to the overwhelming military intervention of American forces in Afghanistan, Muslim “women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear or punishment.”¹⁰ While I am in no way arguing that the Taliban’s policies towards women were anything other than horrible. I am just wondering why we cared so little for the Afghan woman before the events of September 11, 2001? It was my understanding that the war in Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom if you will, was to destroy Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in response to their attacks on the United States. Women were used to justify American intervention in Afghanistan.¹¹

Following the invasion, news outlets reported that the Northern Alliance had prevented Afghan women from marching on Kabul twice. The response from the Bush administration was rather dismissive. “We’re talking about different regions of the world where people have their own cultures and histories... We cannot dictate every day’s events to everybody all throughout Afghanistan.”¹²

⁹ Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon, *The Production of the Muslim Woman*, p. 177

¹⁰ Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon, p. 177

¹¹ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others,” *American Anthropologist* 2002

It is important to note that the use of women as a cause for war during the age of American military might did not begin with Afghanistan. America's first modern military invasion into the Muslim world, following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, saw the Muslim woman deployed to help justify intervention and the American media machine activated to aid in reaffirming age-old stereotypes about Arab women, Arab men and the cultural superiority of the United States. Yet, despite the Muslim woman being highlighted as a reason for American intervention during the Persian Gulf War- they were virtually absent from the discourse. I say virtually because American media program displayed pictures of hijab or abayah wearing women standing near American female soldiers in camouflage in order to highlight what our military intervention was doing for the women of the region. Yet, when it came time for actual commentary on the role of women during the Persian Gulf War in the American media, the Muslim woman was not called upon to speak for herself rather a white woman was the "expert" on the matter.

Many of the U.S. women who operated as their legitimate speakers or stand-ins for Arab women played their roles too well, reinforcing racist assumptions and aiding in the further oppression of all women.¹³

For military and logistical reasons, the American led military coalition staged their forces in Saudi Arabia. Arguably the most stringent society in terms of gender equality and relations, the rhetoric used by the American media during the U.S. presence in the country was full of empty statements.

¹² Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon, p. 182

¹³ Theresa Saliba, "Military Presences and Absences: Arab Women and the Persian Gulf War," Food for Our Grandmothers; p. 132

Yet to cover over the contradiction of U.S. support of the repressive Saudi regime, the reports also fairly consistently ended with claims that the Saudi royal family and King Kahd supported women driving, and that by all indications were moving slowly towards more liberal policies concerning women's rights.¹⁴

The statement above is taken from a 1990 *New York Times* article, but it could have been taken from this morning's paper save replacing Fahd with Abdullah. Despite the rhetoric, the American government's overwhelming support for Saudi Arabia despite its track record on gender issues clearly shows that oil is more important equality. Seventeen of the nineteen September 11th hijackers were Saudi Arabia citizens, yet the American military did not invade. Instead they sent bunker busting bombs and American military boots on the ground to Afghanistan to help free the oppressed women who lived there. What seems to be overwhelmingly evident to me, is that American military intervention in the Muslim world starting with the Persian Gulf War is colonialism by force.

There is an important difference within this group of twenty-first century Lord Cromer's, and that is presence of powerful women who still advocate for the repressed Muslim women. Laura Bush, Hilary Clinton, Madeline Albright and others all give speeches and express concern in regards improving the lives of women throughout the world. For example, the State Department's 2012 fiscal-year request includes \$1.2 billion in programs specifically targeting women.¹⁵ The goal of these powerful women is much like that of centuries past-give them a life like the woman in the West. It is through this westernized, secular feminism that is being pushed for through American dollars.

¹⁴ Saliba, p. 130

¹⁵ Stephanie Sinclair, The Hillary Doctrine, *Newsweek Magazine*, March 6, 2011

Western attempts to “modernize” the Muslim woman through military force, political power, financial funding and quotas are top-down approaches to bringing about a desired change. What has been missing from the Western discourse on the issue are the voices and positions of the Muslim women themselves. The realization and acceptance that many Muslim women want to wear the veil or follow a more traditional career path centered on the home and family is necessary for a balanced approach to gender equality issues. In the next chapter, I will discuss the positions of a diverse group of Muslim feminists that believe many different positions in regards to equality within Islam. Regardless of whether the group is secular or religious the one underlying theme of all of their positions in regards to gender is self-determination.

CHAPTER III: GENDER ACTIVISM

PART A: TWO SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

Secular feminism. Islamic feminism. All of these terms deal with gender equality issues within the Muslim community, albeit with different approaches and methods of attempting to bring about change. Though feminism is often seen as a dirty word in equality efforts due to the words affiliation with Westernization. Feminism, as I will continue to when discussing gender activism in this chapter, came to the Middle East in the later part of the nineteenth century- the perfect partner to nationalism. Two avenues allowed for feminism to spread among the middle and upper classes. These were the widespread use of the printing press, and increased literacy within the female populace. The discussion on feminism at the time was not entirely devoid of religion. What seems to have emerged was a hybrid of Islamic modernization, nationalism, and the secular desire to have greater access to the public space.¹⁶

It can be argued that the increased female literacy which help spread the nascent feminist movement, was a direct result of colonialism and their efforts to install widespread, universal education. Thus, if women were gaining equality and access to education throughout the Muslim world, why has the early feminist movements given way to Islamic feminism? The answer is quite simple. Like the rise of political Islam, Islamic feminism was born out of the failures of secularism and the corrupt and dictatorial governments that rule Muslim countries. Islamic feminism, a term identified by scholars in the early 1990's, emerged first in countries with a long tradition of political

¹⁶ Margot Badran, *Between Secularism and Islamic Feminism: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond*, p. 7

Islam such as Egypt or Iran.¹⁷ Secular women's movements throughout the Middle East saw themselves being increasingly co-opted by the State. According to Margot Badran, the term secular was given a different meaning in the 1970's at the hand of Islamists who wanted to use the word to identify movements or beliefs that were un-Islamic, anti-Islamic, and non-Islamic.¹⁸ Instead of empowering all women, the authoritarian governments would appoint various women to a few governmental positions in order to placate the masses. True empowerment for all was not achieved. It is difficult and hypocritical to laud the appointment of a woman to a certain ministry in an authoritarian government when Amnesty International publishes a report detailing gender inequality and abuses in the same country.¹⁹

Islamic feminism not only utilizes Islamic discourse in arguing for women's rights, gender equality, and social justice but also to defy secular authoritarian governments which failed to deliver on past promises of equality. According to Islamic feminists, the Qu'ran affirms the equality of both men and women. However, the practice of equality between the sexes has been hijacked by patriarchal ideas and practices over the centuries by taking the holy books of Islam out of context to support ideas and societal policies that subjugate women. Islamic feminists approach the Qu'ran as women with their own life experiences thereby bringing a different interpretation to the text.

A central tenant of Islamic feminism is that Muslim women should not have to choose between their faith and their rights. There are ample rights for women

¹⁷ Margot Badran, *Between Secularism and Islamic Feminism: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond*, p. 8

¹⁸ Margot Badran, p. 10

¹⁹ John L. Esposito, *The Future of Islam*, p. 120

within Islam, if only the patriarchal practices and interpretations can be stripped away from Muhammed's revolutionary message of equality.²⁰

Through the tools of *ijtihad* and *tafsir*, Muslim gender activists are looking for a woman's voice to be heard within Islam, not just as a subject of the discussion. Dr. Amina Wadud in her book *Inside the Gender Jihad* discusses at length how patriarchal beliefs impacted sharia law, and that the experience of the male was considered normative.²¹ The woman is the recipient of the decisions made for them by men, not the decider. Dr. Wadud, like many other leading Islamic feminists, consistently calls for Muslim women to study the holy books for themselves instead of blindly accepting the male interpretation that has been widely accepted for centuries.

Islamic feminism began in the late 1980's by female Muslim scholars looking for avenues that allowed them to maintain their faith, but question certain chauvinistic aspects of Islam. Today, Islamic feminism is a global, grass roots movement aided by globalization, the internet, and satellite television. In an interesting twist of events, it is the greater access to education at the highest level afforded to Muslim women at the hands of secular, authoritarian governments that helped give rise to this movement. Instead of blindly accepting the party line of the religious establishment, educated Muslim women are turning the texts that have been used to justify their repression into their weapons of equality.

Today, activists are successfully using Islamic arguments to reform discriminatory laws, to change centuries of patriarchal customs and practices carried out in the name of Islam, and to promote change in sensitive areas like

²⁰ Isobel Coleman, *Paradise Beneath Her Feet*, p. 47

²¹ Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, p. 219

women's reproductive health and family law.²²

Despite the movements grounding in religion, Islamic feminists are considered more radical than their secular predecessors. Their insistence on equality in both the public and private space mark a sharp contrast between the secular feminist movements who were historically unable or unwilling to address gender inequalities in the private, domestic home front. Additionally, by operating a movement grounded in faith Islamic feminism avoids many of the class distinctions that plagued secular feminists during the nationalist movements of the early twentieth century.

Today, the push for equality is no longer about upper and middle class elite women subjecting the poor and powerless to their goals. While their calls for gender equality have gained participants the ire of religious conservatives linking their goals to the slippery slope of Western immorality, Islamic feminism is distinct in the religious and ethnic groups they represent due to their overwhelming dedication to their faith and their refusal to surrender it to the patriarchal establishment. Western feminists of Christian and Jewish origins have accepted that their respective religious books are too broken and too patriarchal to be used to further their goals. In their view no woman, “will ever experience wholeness, healing, integrity, and autonomy while committed to a biblical religion.”²³

PART B: VEILING

In writing this thesis, I had hoped to avoid discussing the issue of veiling as I

²² Isobel Coleman, p. 55

²³ Rita Gross, *Feminism and Religion*, p. 41

personally feel it is an intensely personal decision made by the wearer. However, the recent events in France and the continued focus the issue receives from the western media forces me to address the issue due to its status as a signifier of both repression and tradition. In countries all over the world, Muslim women veiling themselves in various states- the hijab, niqab, or burqua- is a highly contentious issue with nations banning or making mandatory the wearing of one of the garments. More than just a religious symbol, the veil has become a political issue of international proportions. Dr. Amina Wadud has called the hijab the “six pillar of Islam” stating it is impossible to talk about Islam and gender without discussing the wearing of the hijab.²⁴ Yet, colonial feminism maintained the veil as both the symbol of unyielding oppression and Islamic radicalism.²⁵

Early Islamic feminist in Egypt removed the niqab to signal the beginning of the gender equality movement. For these early activists, covering their faces was not a religious requirement rather an antiquated symbol of patriarchal control. They continued to wear the hijab out of respect for their faith, but gradually as secular nationalist governments pursued greater “westernization” on their societies the veil was slowly relegated to the lower classes of society creating a sharp distinction. From Ataturk to the Shah of Iran, secular governments came to power in the post-colonial age and banning the veil became their symbol of being western and modern regardless of what their female citizens wanted. Countries like Turkey, Egypt, and Tunisia have all outlawed the wearing either the niqab or the hijab in governmental and state-controlled educational establishment. Recently, Syria outlawed the niqab in public and private universities and

²⁴ Amina Wadud, p. 219

²⁵ Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon, p. 16

schools.²⁶

To the conservative elements of society, the removal of the veil also became a symbol forever tied to westernization and the loss of the religion as dominant within society. Contrasting starkly with secular Muslim countries like Turkey and Egypt, conservative Islamic states like Saudi Arabia and Iran make the veiling of women mandatory. Following the 1979 Iranian Revolution which ousted the secular Shah from power, the conservative religious victors of the conflict instituted the mandatory wearing of the chador by all Iranian women. Saudi Arabia is one of the most conservative countries in the world, and also requires their female citizens to cover their faces in addition to their heads.

For the west, the veil has become the most clearly defined symbol of Islam's repression of women. Burqa enveloped women in Afghanistan juxtaposed against Iranian women draped head to toe in black chadors are seared into the Western subconscious. It is not the fact that women cannot drive in Saudi Arabia, or vote for that matter that informs western opinion on Islam and gender, but instead a piece of fabric has come to symbolize so much. To many westerners, the hijab of choice looks the same as the hijab of repression.

For a continent that clings to the notion of liberalism, many European countries are extremely hostile to Islamic dress particularly on women. Spain is in the process of debating legislation that would ban the veil being worn by women in their country, while Belgium recently enacted a law banning Islamic dress that covers the wearers face.²⁷

²⁶ *BBC News*, "Syria Bans Face Veil at Universities," July 19, 2010

Many European countries associate female veiling with oppression and see the practice as counter to the strong prevalence of secularism in their countries. In France, where the Sarkozy government is vehemently anti-niqab and burqa, the law has become national law and any woman caught wearing the niqab will be fined.²⁸ In Germany, four out of the sixteen states have enacted restricted on wearing of the hijab by teachers in public schools. Muslim women in Germany who wear the burqa or chador are forbidden from driving.²⁹

In Europe where the population is becoming increasingly Muslim, European citizens and governments have to discern a way to balance their secular principles and way of life in the face of an entirely different religion and culture. A study carried out by the Pew Research Center found that the majority of citizens in western European countries favored a ban on the burqa or niqab. Notably, and in spite of all the anti-Muslim sentiment said to be possessed by the United States, sixty-five percent of Americans opposed banning Islamic clothing as such a practice would be considered “un-American.”³⁰

The cultural clash taking place in Europe over women’s Islamic dress highlights two developments in my mind. First, European governments are behaving much as they did during the early ages of colonialism. They view the veiling of Muslim women as oppressive and feel the European male must liberate them. In a message to his cabinet

²⁷ BBC News, “Belgium Ban on Face Veils Comes into Force,” July 23, 2011

²⁸ Abdullah Al-Shiri, “Saudi: OK to Uncover Face in Anti-Burqa Countries,” *Washington Post*, July 24, 2010

²⁹ *BBC News*, “The Veil Across Europe,” June 15, 2010

³⁰ Pew Global Attitudes Project, “Widespread Support for Banning Full Islamic Face Veil in Europe,” July 8, 2010

French President Sarkozy said, “the full veil hurts the dignity of women and is unacceptable in French society.”³¹ While overtly religious symbols are banned in governmental and educational buildings in France, I take issue with President Sarkozy and his assertion that a religious style of dress hurts a woman’s dignity. Did President Sarkozy or any member of the French government ask these women if they were feeling oppressed or having their dignity injured? Sadly, the answer is more than likely no.

The controversy over the veil in Europe, the requirement to wear the veil in Saudi Arabia and Iran, or the inability to wear the veil in building under government control in Turkey, Egypt, or Syria shows that once again women are not the deciders in these matters, but being told how to live their lives by the overwhelmingly male political and religious establishment. European colonial powers co-opted the veil to signify the liberation the Muslim woman. Secular nationalist movements co-opted the veil to symbolize their newfound equality and modernization. Religious conservatives and political Islamists co-opted the veil as not only a symbol for Islam, but as a symbol for political expression against secular authoritarian governments.

In all of this co-option, where is the woman who just wants to wear the veil because she sees it as a tenant of her faith? Or a woman who has made a conscious choice to not wear the veil? Both of these, are lost in the co-option of a purely feminine symbol. While their personal preferences are pure, they cannot wear or not wear the veil without sending a two-fold message.

Even though dress may be coincidental, it is laden with significance in the gender jihad. Women observe or ignore the traditional head covering or hijab with or

³¹ Howard LaFranchi, “In the Battle of the Burqa, Obama and Sarkozy Differ,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 23, 2009

without full intention or volition... wear hijab has never been free of the tremendous symbolism given to it within and without Muslim communities over the past several decades.³²

For the veil to no longer serve a double meaning Muslim women, not just feminists, are going to have to rest the forty-five inches of fabric away from male secularists, Islamists, and every one else in between.

PART C: DIVERSE COMMUNITY

What the veil debate does indicate is that there are Muslim women in society who adhere to a more traditional way of life. They see male stewardship of both the government and the home as they way things should be and have actually taken up against Islamic feminists for disrupting the status quo. Highlighting this new trend is a women's campaign in Saudi Arabia called, "My Guardian Knows Best for Me." Developed by Rowdha Yousef in response to an attempt by women's rights activist Wajeha al-Huwaider to cross into neighboring Bahrain by herself and without male permission, the "My Guardian Knows Best for Me" campaign wants an end to women's movements trying to change deeply ingrained rules in Saudi society. The steps taken by Rowdha Yousef and her fellow campaigners to curb the women's equality movement has ranged from writing letters to King Abdullah to calling for punishments for the feminists.³³

PART D: SOCIETAL SHIFTS

³² Amina Wadud, p. 223

³³ Katherine Zoepf, "Talk of Women's Rights Divides Saudi Arabia," *New York Times*; May 31, 2010

The events in Saudi Arabia underscore a deeply divided society not just among male, but members of the female population as well. As both groups- liberals and conservatives- try to shape the future of the kingdom, the divided nature of Saudi Arabian women will make the highly contentious with both sides able to claim they have the support of Saudi women on their side. If Islamic feminists in Saudi Arabia and throughout the region want to make substantial changes they must work to find common ground with the more conservative elements of society.

If fellow Muslim women throughout the Middle East do not support the initiatives and goals of the Islamic feminism movement, why does the movement continually try to improve the lives of the women disregarding their support or lack thereof? Is it a vain attempt to just achieve equality with men? Or do proven benefits exist in regards to gender equality besides the injustice of the double standard? Aiding the mission of secular and Islamic feminist is the existence of statistical and logical proof confirming that the empowering of women in a society serves a good greater than basic human rights.

Across the Muslim world, the role of women in society and the changes being pursued in the name of equality by activists is almost a fault line dividing moderate and fundamentalist Islam.

The mullah who is willing to bring girls into his mosque to educate them and the Taliban who burn down girls schools merely for existing is but one extreme example of how these disagreements play out in various Islamic societies in the world today.³⁴

³⁴ Isobel Coleman, p. xx

In the most basic terms, a society cannot achieve prosperity if half of their population is barred from participating. A study conducted by the World Bank in 2007 found empirical evidence proving the achievement of gender equality by women in society coupled with greater access to education and more of a voice in household matter by female members not only led to the a greater reduction in domestic poverty levels but also improved the lives of children.³⁵ Greater access by women to the public sphere also produces benefits for the society at large. Unsurprisingly, countries with the harshest and repressive stance towards their female citizens, are also the most authoritarian. Saudi Arabia and Iran fit such a mold.³⁶

The rise of international terrorism, the ill conceived invasion of Iraq by the United States, and anti-Muslim sentiment expressed by conservative media outlets in the west like Fox News has lead many people to suggest a great clash of civilizations is taking place between the Christian and Muslim worlds as first suggested by Samuel Huntington's in his infamous 1993 thesis. Recently, scholars have offered a new take on the clash of civilizations, one that is more about gender and society than faith and politics.

Over eighty percent of the world's population believes that democracy is the best form of government and the one they would most like to see implemented in their country if it does not currently exist in that form.³⁷ When it comes to cultural and gender

³⁵ The World Bank; *Gender Equality, Poverty and Economic Growth*; September 2007

³⁶ Isobel Coleman, p. xx

³⁷ Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "The True Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Policy* No. 135 p. 63

issues a greater percentage of difference exist among the West and the Middle East. The biggest gap identified by the World Values Survey conducted between 2000-2002 was the issue of gender equality particularly among the younger generation.

While youth in Western societies presume equality between the sexes, younger generations in Muslim countries have, in many cases, grown up in an environment more overtly religious than that of their parents' generation, and have remained deeply traditional in their views on gender roles.³⁸

Thus, the emerging cultural gap regarding gender issues between West and East will unfortunately provide an obstacle to not just relations between the two different parts of the world but for the Islamic feminists operating in these countries trying to bring about change. The rise of political Islamist parties in the Middle East, historically suspicious of women's equality movements due to its assumed though not accurate affiliation with the west, see efforts to enact gender reform as a threat to not just their culture but their faith.³⁹ In my view, the rise of political Islam and the religious resurgence in Islamic countries provides a challenge to gender equality that can only be bested by the Islamic feminist movement. Secular feminisms has largely been confined to the urban or intellectual elite and therefore does not possess the grass roots appeal vital to bring about real change in the Middle East. However, Islamic feminism and its ability to appeal to women across class lines and its foundation in Islam affords it a unique position in society.

³⁸ Isobel Coleman, p. xxi

³⁹ Isobel Coleman, p. xx

CHAPTER THREE: EGYPT

The protests that began in Cairo, Egypt on January 25, 2011 were groundbreaking for many reasons- the breakdown of the fear barrier built up over thirty years of rule by Hosni Mubarak, the uniting of divergent groups across the political spectrum, and the highly visible presence of Egyptian women. While the presence of Egyptian women during the protests was praised by many in the western media looking at Egypt through a classical orientalist lens, the discussion of Egypt's rich history chalked full of women's activists-both secular and religious-largely passed unnoticed save a few publications.

While talking heads on western news networks explained or reviled the Muslim Brotherhood, or worried about al-Qaeda taking advantage of the chaos during the revolution, the ground breaking events taking place in Tahir Square in regards to the presence of women in the public space and the lack of sexual harassment received little press. Tahir Square was the venue for a transformative moment in Egyptian history as Egyptian women, long subject to harassment by their male countrymen, were shoulder to shoulder with them in the effort to oust Hosni Mubarak. While some Americans may have an idea who Hasan al-Bana was after the events in January and February, the name Hoda Shaarawi will definitely draw an unfortunate blank. For a part of the world i.e. the "West" who focuses so much attention on the "plight" of Muslim women, Egypt's revolution and the gender empowering societal shifts seen across the globe went unheralded. The activism by Egyptian women- both secular and religious- is a strong counterpoint against the belief in the subjugated Muslim woman. While Egypt is no means a perfect society in terms of gender equality, America is really in no position to throw stones.

PART A: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Historically gender equality, supported by Islam, has a rich tradition in Egypt prior to the arrival of European colonials. Egypt in the eighteenth century was the sight of a chaotic government dominated by a military class known as the Mamluks that controlled much of the Ottoman administration of Egypt, though the Ottomans had ruled Egypt since 1516.⁴⁰ The wives and female relatives of this ruling military class were granted the responsibility of managing their wealth and property while the men were occupied with fighting. A society in which the ruling elites are occupied with warfare leads to two main outcomes. The first is a relatively short lifespan for males, the second sees the women of this ruling class marrying multiple husbands. Women during this time period in Egypt were allowed to inherit and hold wealth and property through family ties or marriage.

The lifespan of the Mamluks in general was often not long. Once a grandee fell then his wife or wives were married off to his second in command, or to his victor, so that Mamluk women were much married, resulting in an accumulation.⁴¹

How these women used the wealth is actually quite interesting. Instead of donating the money to charitable causes, these eighteenth century Egyptian women acted as local entrepreneurs. They invested in tax farms and bought property to be used as rentals and what we would consider shopping malls in current parlance. A tax farm is a property that is bid on by lot, and whoever wins the bidding process pays the taxes a year in advance to the Ottoman government. From there taxes are collected from the peasant class who work the land, with a portion being kept for the tax farmer. It is important to note that the owning, buying and selling of property and involvement in commerce by

⁴⁰ Mai Yamani, *Feminism and Islam*, p. 36

⁴¹ Mai Yamani, p. 37

Egyptian women was seen at all levels of society, including from the harem, not just at the elite level. It was the coming of colonialism that destroyed this important position held by women in society.

Culturally and religiously, this period of time in Egypt bears witness to incredible egalitarianism in regards to gender issues. Issues such as suing for divorce, bad business dealings or using the courts to force the repayment of a financial loan by ones husbands were dealt with fairly regardless of sex. This historical information of eighteenth century Egypt casts a different light on the Muslim woman who has been repressed through the ages.

Jabarti, the historian of the period, gives us accounts of women who beat their husbands, women who played tricks on the Ottoman soldiers, and women who were wealthy and powerful. It is true these women did not sit in officials positions of power, nor hold legislative functions, but they were close to those who did, and wielded influence as much as those office-holders.⁴²

The nineteenth century, in comparison to the eighteenth, saw Egyptian women on the losing end of a deal that affected them culturally, politically and financially. Muhammed Ali, an Ottoman soldier of Albanian origin, had successfully taken over Egypt creating a de-facto independent government within the Ottoman Empire at the expense of the Sultan in Constantinople and the Mamluks who had ruled Egypt for hundreds of years. The rise of Muhammed Ali saw the previous centuries chaotic and decentralized government give way to a centralized system of government in which the ruler controlled all sources of wealth and doled it out to individuals who were supportive of his reign and useful to his agenda.

⁴² Mai Yamani, p. 40

The previous sources of wealth for women- tax farms, property ownership, and access to the influential power brokers of the day was gone under Muhammed Ali's rule. European traders had arrived in Egypt by the thousands, forcing upon the government trade with Europe that replaced traditional ones throughout the Ottoman Empire. The last thirty years of the nineteenth century saw sixty-eight thousand European traders in Egypt of whom Egyptian women had little access or influence. This new encroachment saw the development of European institutions to Egyptian life like banks and insurance companies. These European institutions would not legally recognized Egyptian women in their institutions forcing male only engagement and the ending centuries of female presence in commerce.⁴³

The bureaucratization of the Egyptian government witnessed the end of the independent male and female Egyptians earning a living through their own means. Bureaucrats subject to the will of a hierarchical system paid with a salary replaced independent earner. This male only system forced the men in many social classes, save the most poor, to become the sole earners in the family thus stripping away the more equal position once enjoyed by Egyptian women through their ability to help provide for the family.

As I mentioned previously, historical encounters between the "West" and the "Middle East" laid the foundation for the idea that Islam is a religion that mistreats women.⁴⁴

⁴³ Mai Yamani, p. 41

⁴⁴ Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, p. 13

Lord Cromer (British Controller- General of Egypt) condemned Islam first and foremost for its treatment of women; to attain mental and moral development, Egypt must abandon women's seclusion and the veil. In England, however, Cromer was a founding member and sometime President of the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage.⁴⁵

Egypt's geographic position brought it into close contact with European countries that resulted in invasion and occupation by France and Britain respectively. While Egyptian women were active in nationalist movement against their European occupiers, they were subject to an intense focus by the European countries to be "liberated." They needed to be saved by these largely chauvinistic, white male Europeans and become the symbol for the modernization of Egypt under European tutelage.

The retarded development of the nation corresponded, it could now be argued, to the retarded development of the Egyptian woman. This was a favorite theme of the British colonial administrators. 'The position of women in Egypt,' wrote Lord Cromer, is 'a fatal obstacle to the attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of European civilization.' This civilization would not succeed...if 'the position which women occupied in Europe is abstracted from the general plan.'⁴⁶

The focus of the British occupiers was to transform Egyptian women writ large into the European idealized version of modern motherhood. From the British perspective, "modernization" and progress on the path of European modernity needed to start in the home. The image of the British Victorian woman as silly, emotional and decorative appendage best suited the staying home and raising children became applied rather quickly to the elite and bourgeois Egyptian women.⁴⁷ The values seen as essential for the European female at the time- domesticity, sexual purity and chastity was twisted and used

⁴⁵ Leila Ahmed, p. 52

⁴⁶ Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, p. 111

⁴⁷ Mai Yamani, p. 42

as evidence of the subjugation of Muslim women in Egypt. While British women were sexually and culturally repressed, this “colonial feminism” introduced in Egypt was to be resisted without fail. I found the new focus paid to women in Egyptian society to be particularly indicative as to how the imposition of order came to be so incredibly important. The British believed that by transforming the home through the mother and their role in instilling morality in their children. It is the woman’s fault that a society is backward; therefore Egyptian women must be broken of their disruptive habits and turned into agents of the state. Through the education of girls thereby exposing them to the new order permeating Egyptian society, they will take this belief in order and bring it into their homes when they become mothers instilling it in their children from birth. Yet the man leading the charge for the emancipation of the Egyptian woman, Lord Cromer, was the founding member and occasional president of the Men’s League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage.⁴⁸

Feminism on the home front and feminism directed against white men was to be resisted and suppressed; but taken abroad and directed against the cultures of colonized peoples, it could be promoted in ways that admirably served and furthered the project of the dominance of the white man.⁴⁹

Thus, the British transform the culture and social role of Egyptian women in society but they help destroy any avenues to financial independence. Land that both sexes had previously been able to purchase and own was now for men only. Modern department stores owned by Europeans and filled with European style clothing and goods. These changes saw the elite and middle class women bow out of Egyptian commercial life. Women of the peasant class continued to work outside of the home, but

⁴⁸ Leila Ahmed, p. 153

⁴⁹ Leila Ahmed, p. 153

traditional areas in which they earned their living were replaced by modern inventions were swept away. New careers available to women catering to the new Egyptian “housewives” in areas such as door to door clothing sales, foreign language and musical instrument instruction were increasingly out of reach to poor Egyptian women as they did not possess the necessary qualifications.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, British commercial enterprises superseded any ideas of relegating Egyptian women to the home. They realized that women were responsible for the majority of economic purchases for the home. The lack of Western-style education for Egyptian women was in essence costing British commerce profits. Thus, the push for educational opportunities for Egyptian girls and young women was not to answer some egalitarian belief in universal education. Rather, it was about money.

Schools for women were opened and the education of women was encouraged by men who wanted a new kind of wife, one that could be trusted to bring up educated sons and who spoke foreign languages.⁵⁰

PART B: THE SCHOLARLY RESPONSE

It is necessary to point out that the effort to transform Egyptian women into examples of modernity was not solely confined to the British colonials. The confrontation with colonialism caused the Muslim scholars of the world to reexamine Islam and make it more compatible with modern life laying the very foundation for Islamic gender activism today.

Faced with Western economic, military, and technological superiority, Muslim intellectuals from Delhi to Cairo entered a period of profound reflection. They emerged convinced that Islam’s core belief system was well suited to the demands

⁵⁰ Mai Yamani, p. 44

of the modern world, but that Islamic law had strayed greatly from the progressive and dynamic nature of early Islam.⁵¹

For the new Islamic modernists who emerged during the period of colonialism, they believed reform was necessary for the survival of the Muslim community in the face of European intervention. A key component of their reform efforts focused on women and their status in society. One of the most influential early intellectuals of the Islamic modernists movement was Sir Syed Ahmed Khan of India. Like other reform-minded scholars of the day, Khan believed that Islam was not the problem, but the manner of interpretation over the centuries. In order to combat the overwhelming British influence in India, Sir Syed focused heavily on instituting and developing a modern education for Muslims. The onslaught by British Christian missionaries and political-military elite chastising Islam for their practices against women including child marriage and gender segregation, led Sir Syed to examine both English and Islamic laws directed at women in the 1870's. Much like Lord Cromer in Egypt, the charges laid against Islam in the name of female equality by the British were overwhelmingly hypocritical. In England once a woman married, her separate existence from money to property became her husbands. Sir Syed argued that in Islam, women continued to own their own property and control their inheritance regardless of their marital status. It was the Muslim countries which prevented this God-given right from occurring, not the faith itself. For his progressive views on religion and women, Sir Syed was attacked by conservative members of the ulama and branded a heretic by the Deobandi and Wahabi branches.⁵²

⁵¹ Isobel Coleman, p. 41

⁵² Isobel Coleman, p. 43

One of his students, Mumtaz Ali continued Sir Syed's studies and made the status of women in Islam a focus of his groundbreaking scholarly work *Rights of Women* published in 1898. The overall thesis of the work was to prove the equality of women in the eyes of God using the Qur'an, Sunnah, and Islamic law to support his assertions. Through his writing, he helped disprove many of the reasons falsely grounded in Islam used to justify centuries of male superiority by placing the passages within the context of the time. Like Sir Syed, Mumtaz was condemned by the conservative ulama. The *Rights of Women* failed to make a widespread impact on the Islamic community in regards to gender issues. However, the progressive interpretation of Islam supported by Islamic texts would later serve as an intellectual foundation for the Islamic gender equality movement in the twentieth century.⁵³

The British colonial power in Egypt had just as harsh a view of Islam and Islamic society as they did in India. The question that Egyptian intellectuals sought to answer was how to remain true and loyal to their faith in the face of the challenges posed by modernity. Like Islamic modernists in India, Egyptian modernist thinkers recognized that Islam was not the problem, rather the way man had caused the religion to stray from its original intent. Within Egypt, two of most prominent Muslim modernists and strong advocates of women's rights emerged- the first was Muhammed Abduh. As a respected Islamic scholar, Abduh promoted the practice of ijihad, particularly when he became Egypt's grand mufti, understanding the need to have authentic Islamic traditions based in the Quran and the Sunnah to support efforts for reform.

⁵³ Isobel Coleman, p. 45

Qasim Amin, a member of wealthy Egyptian landowners, in fact took the idea of the new Egyptian woman one step further. Not only did he call for modern mothers, he pressed for female education in order put an end to one thousand years of Egyptian societal stagnation.

Qasim Amin explained that within the Egyptian home it was women and not men who held power. It was this power that was to be engaged, in order to establish science as society's principle order. Education must be given to girls, he said, to enable them as mothers to offer scientific answers to the eternal questioning of their children...the process of creating a modern political order was to begin on the mother's knee.⁵⁴

Amin furthered his position for Egypt's new modern woman in two of his books, *The Liberation of Women* and *The New Women*. Both tomes reiterated Amin's belief that Egypt's development was hinged on female emancipation. The position advocated by Egyptian intellectuals like Qasim Amin placed Egyptian women in an awkward position. In the statement quoted above, he valiantly calls for female education but at the same time blames women for all of Egypt's ills. With unfortunate foreshadowing, Amin's writing is more about the position of women in the domestic sphere rather than the political sphere.

While Amin called for reforms for women such as access to higher education, opportunities to enter into the labor market, and the need to protect the family from random practice of divorce, he was not concerned with their political rights. Of all his goals for women, however, the one that received the severest criticism was his demand that they remove the veil.⁵⁵

The result of both the British colonial powers and Egyptian intellectuals singling out Egyptian women and girls they inadvertently created a symbol for the fight between

⁵⁴ Timothy Mitchell, p. 113

⁵⁵ Sherine Hafez, *The Terms of Empowerment: Islamic Women Activists in Egypt*, p. 24

European encroachment and traditional Egyptian societal norms and values not just socially but economically as well. One of the great symbols of the debate became veiling, and the wearing of the veil came to symbolize so much more than personal choice and religious devotion.⁵⁶ According to Amin, the veil was the quintessential sign of Islam's inferiority to the west and pushed women's issues to the forefront of western imperial meddling. In his view, the veil was a roadblock to modernity and the lower classes in Egypt were to blame for their stubborn refusal to adopt a more western style of dress. The view point of Amin would have long lasting repercussions until this very day. His argument forever linked unveiling with the West and colonialism causing conservatives to cling to the veil for not just religious reasons but to demonstrate resistance to Western domination.⁵⁷

Sayyid Qutb, an influential twentieth century Egyptian scholar and nationalist, inspires many of the conservative Islamists movements that are not just on the rise politically throughout the Middle East, but show the diversity of the political landscape across the region- both of which impact gender equality issues. In the 1930's he "contributed to the creation of a new and dynamic Egyptian culture, one that was "authentic" and open to modernization."⁵⁸ However this authenticity was grounded in widespread and acceptable Egyptian societal norms- not societal norms permissible in the West. The growing gender integration and widespread unveiling throughout Egyptian society seemed to impact Qutb greatly. He did not want Egyptian women to revert back

⁵⁶ Sherine Hafez, p. 24

⁵⁷ Isobel Coleman, p. 47

⁵⁸ John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism*, p. 101

to the era of seclusion, however he did want the moral fabric of Egyptian society, already under attack by Western colonialism, to be maintained through the observance of proper gender roles and interactions.

The free mixing of men and women threatened family life and kinship structures. In Qutb's opinion, unmarried men and women should meet only to choose marriage partners, and then only under the watchful eye of their parents. Unchecked, women's sexuality had the power to entice men.⁵⁹

Everything associated with the governments under the Egyptian monarchy or the Nasser regime was tainted by secularism. In Qutb's view, Islam would be the answer to the social inequalities found throughout Egyptian society and the politics of governance. Islam was not compatible with secularism, but it was compatible with modernity. The position of Sayyid Qutb saw the governments of the world as jahili societies, under these oppressive, secular, Westernized government of Nasser.

In jahili societies, the strong oppress the weak, materialism and selfish individualism prevail over concern for the common good, and populations resort to decadent and immoral behavior, especially of the sexual variety.⁶⁰

Qutb took centuries old concepts from Islamic studies and transformed them to be relevant in twentieth century Egypt. It was not about a return to the way of life in the age of the Prophet, instead he called for a return to the values from the days of the Prophet when the role of Islam in government was paramount. However, the early death of Qutb prevented the further refinement of his ideas from their black and white position developed while in jail to a more shades of gray approach when the actual time came for the marriage of Islam and governance. The uncompromising position of some of Qutb's

⁵⁹ John Calvert, p. 108-109

⁶⁰ John Calvert, p. 248

point of views in areas like jihad and the application of Sharia law has been co-opted by extreme Islamist elements and implemented in places like Afghanistan pre-2001.

When examining the new modernism that emerged from the likes of Qutb the role of oppression and violence cannot be overlooked. The modernization of Egypt came with the high cost of oppression and violence. Qutb spent years in prison for his ideas, tortured, and forced to live in deplorable conditions. It was this jail time that saw his political positions becomes more rigid, more grounded in Islam than nationalism.

For the entire glorification of the west by the government of Egypt in the forms of fashion, education and technology the concept of political freedoms was lost to all save members at the very upper echelons of society. The continued failure of governments to answer the needs of their people has been the cause of revolution and change for centuries. The messages delivered in the rallying cries of Qutb were about local empowerment and being true to the rich cultural tradition you were born into. If violence was necessary to bring about this change, then engage it in.

“According to Qutb, the Arabs must learn from the Zionists and likewise adopt direct action, even if it earns them the censure of Western nations. The only language the modern world understands is the one used by the Jews [in Palestine], namely, force. Qutb enjoined Arabs to take matters into their own hands. They must determine their destinies independent of their ineffectual political leaders.”⁶¹

PART C: THE EGYPTIAN FEMINIST MOVEMENT

The growth of feminist movements in the Middle East during the same time as secularism and Islamic modernists caused an undeniable taint to feminist or gender

⁶¹ John Calvert, p. 122

activist movements carried over to today. The strong importance placed on women's liberation by the hypocritical colonial powers cast women's equality movements in a suspicious light and linked them as western in design and therefore un-Islamic. These charges levied against Islamic feminist and gender activist movements are un-supportable. The Muslim communities in India and Egypt ignited the early 20th century feminist movements- not a group of European women in London or Paris. Thus while women's equality movements were taking place in the West, the particular brand of gender activism taking place in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century within the Muslim community were overwhelmingly grass roots in nature.

Following British occupation of Egypt in 1882, Egyptian men and women began a nationalist movement to expel the British from their land. The secular, male leaders of the Egyptian nationalist movement focused on achieving power in the public political arena therefore relegating the private sphere to religion, which would be used to regulate family life.

While secular nationalist men saw this in general as politically expedient and as advantageous to themselves as men, as secular nation-state builders, and as family patriarchs, feminist women could not ignore religion and the "private" sphere, which was a site of inequality and inequity...⁶²

Thus Egyptian women active in the nationalist and feminist movement were fighting for equality in both the public and private spheres. Through engagement in these two sectors, early Egyptian women's equality activists were secular, modern and Islamic at the same time. The feminist movement in Egypt was a grounds up approach to change through tying women's issues to the secular nationalist and anti-colonial movements of the time.

⁶² Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergence*, p. 226

In the colonial (1882-1922) and quasi-postcolonial (1922-1956) periods, Egyptian (secular) nationalism prevailed as the paramount public discourse but never eradicated Islamic discourse. Muslim women as feminists-who continued to identify with and practice their religion- called themselves simply feminists, assuming their affiliation with and upholding Islam to be self-evident.⁶³

The 1919 Egyptian revolution against the British saw active female participation alongside their male counterparts in the nationalist cause much like the events of early 2011.

Women's nationalist militancy in the period from 1919 to 1922 became the bridge from what was a mainly invisible social feminism to a highly public and organised collective feminism. Women went out in public protest for the first time when they mounted a demonstration on 16 March 1919, joining the entire nation in decrying the continued British colonial occupation and demanding national independence.⁶⁴

After quasi-independence was achieved, a ruling elite emerge from the landed aristocracy helping to continue the class divide on women's equality issues. The ruling elite's continuation of capitalist economic practices fueled by close ties with the west prevented the governing nationalist party, the Wafd, from creating and implementing the government desired by the majority of Egyptians. What came to fruition was in essence a parliamentary monarchy. The landed elite allied themselves with industrialists and western educated intellectuals to consolidate their position in the new Egypt. Elite women of the day carved out a position for themselves in line with the continuation of Western societal norms along with their male counterparts. Despite effectively carving out room in the public space for women, efforts to see secular laws passed that benefitted women never materialized. Thus, their very active efforts to repel the British colonials

⁶³ Margot Badran, p. 226

⁶⁴ Margot Badran, "Egyptian Feminism in a Nationalist Century," Al-Ahram Weekly, 30 Dec 1995

from Egypt were pushed aside and seemingly forgotten with separate laws enacted to govern the genders- secular for men, religious for women.⁶⁵

The failure of the post-revolutionary Egypt to secure equality for its women, particularly the denying of women the right to vote in the 1923 constitution, taught Egyptian women that not only were cross-cultural alliances necessary in the hopes of reaching gender equality, but that efforts to achieve these goals could no longer be gained through the pressing of male elites for results in familial and social circles.

The Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) created in 1923 by Houda Shaarawi, famously known for removing her face covered, authored and submitted a list of demands to the Egyptian parliament calling for the end of personnel status laws for women and a multitude of other societal norms. The parliamentary government subsequently ignored their demands. The EFU and other gender equality activists shifted their attention to the pervasive secularism of the male governing elite. It was a beneficial relationship, particularly for elite women, of which Shaarawi was a member, as they could continue their Western ties yet help bring about social reform.⁶⁶ This focus on social reform in the face of political oppression came to dominate the Egyptian women's movement until recent events in January and February 2011.

The period leading up to the Free Officers Revolution in 1952 was a rather prolific time for female advancement in Egypt. Gains were seen in the number of

⁶⁵ Cathlyn Mariscotti, *Gender and Class in the Egyptian Women's Movement, 1925-1939*, p. 38-39

⁶⁶ Cathlyn Mariscotti, p. 139

females receiving an education, an increased female presence in the professional work force, and a broadening of the gender equality movement throughout the Arab world lead by Egypt marked the period from the 1930's through 1950's.

The promise felt following the 1952 Revolution, and its promise to usher in an era of social egalitarianism was well received by both women and men. In 1956, the Nasser government granted Egyptian women the right to vote with albeit with conditions. A National Charter, which reorganized the social and political life of Egypt, legally declared the equality of both Egyptian men and women in 1962.

Woman must be regarded as equal to man and must, therefore, shed the remaining shackles that impede her free movement, so that she might take a constructive and profound part in the shaping of life.⁶⁷

Despite the legal, political and economic gains achieved by Egyptian women following the revolution, all was not well. The Nasser government closed the Egyptian Feminist Union, and all independent organizations, forcing it to reconstitute itself as social service organization known as The Houda Shaarawi Association.⁶⁸ What became clear in light of the successive authoritarian regimes- Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak respectively was an increased membership in social service organizations as vast majorities of the Egyptian polity were shut out of politics.

While much of the early Egyptian women's equality movement saw elite and upper middle class women become more European in terms of dress and behavior, the Nasser period and late 1960's and 1970's saw two divergent shifts in the Egyptian gender

⁶⁷ Leila Ahmed, p. 211

⁶⁸ Margot Badran, "Egyptian Feminism in a Nationalist Century," Al-Ahram Weekly, 30 Dec 1995

equality movement. First, due to the Nasserist movement's roots in socialism, gender equality became a function of the State rather than the people. While results such as universal education were positive, quotas and the co-option of a movement by the State facilitate the loss of popular support. In Egypt's case, gender equality activism became "State Feminism."

The new socialist regime adopted policies of reform that did not single out women as repositories of special policies...As equal citizens to men; women gained the vote, and were promoted to positions of leadership in the country. The state went on to establish a policy of "State Feminism," by which many women were mobilized. While a remarkable improvement took place in women's public roles, in the realm of the family, gender roles were not ideologically challenged as the regime refused to amend the Personal Status Laws. Without this significant element, a complete transformation of Egyptian women could not take place.⁶⁹

Second the role of religion, which for so long was pushed out of the gender equality debate due to European and socialist insistence on secularism saw a strong presence reemerge in the political sphere. Many scholars argue that the resurgence of Islam was brought about following the Egyptian defeat during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war as religion was what comforted a shocked nation. The Nasser government's policies of secularism and pan-Arabism repressed religiously affiliated political movements and parties. What emerges out of this religious resurgence is the schism of Egypt's gender equality movement into two camps. One, that continued to rely on secular, westernized ideas to further their goals. The other believed that Islam guaranteed women's liberation in society.

Many scholars mark 1967 as the year in which Islamism began to take hold in the country's politics. It was not only in the street that this shift was felt, but at the upper

⁶⁹ Sherine Hafez, p. 28

echelons of politics as well during the Sadat era. The Egyptian government backed away from past socialist practices of the Nasser era during Sadat's rule, causing him to be the subject of political attacks from the left. In order to balance these attacks and maintain political primacy, he permitted outlawed Islamist political parties-most notably the Muslim Brotherhood- to actively participate in politics again. It is important to note that it was not just the military defeat in 1967 that brought about the rise of Islamists, but also a belief in the corruption of Egypt's social fabric.

A sense that corruption and moral breakdown were rife and were associated with foreigners, Arab and Western, began to be common among some Egyptians. This laxity was felt to be affecting personal as well as business mores. An unfamiliar and culturally offensive mixing of sexes- drinking, dating, sex-were seen as in vogue.⁷⁰

The Islamist presence in Egypt writ large continued to grow throughout the Sadat and Mubarak eras as economic problems, regional conflict with Israel, and an increased Western influence among Egyptian youth shook the foundation of society.

Whether the problem is Egypt's defeat by Israel in 1967 or the lack of affordable housing in 1998, activists promote Islam as a political, social, and economical and spiritual embodiment of the "solution." Certainly, argue the Islamists, the failure of both socialism and capitalism to address Egypt's (and the entire Muslim worlds) grievances indicate that a return to Islam at both the individual and the collective levels is imperative to the success of the nation.⁷¹

What this meant for Egyptian women was not a loss of ability to organize and advocate their goals, but rather a shift in focus. No longer were western ideas of feminism and the role of women in society the paramount theory dominating the gender equality movement. The recognition of the important role of Islam in Egyptian society,

⁷⁰ Leila Ahmed, p. 218

⁷¹ Dennis Sullivan and Sana Abed-Kotb, *Islam in Contemporary Egypt: Civil Society vs. the state*, p. 124

and an examination of what Egyptian women truly wanted out of their society gained greater traction.

The phenomenon of veiling and the adoption of the Islamic dress code prevail among the majority of urban women. Many women find their calling in an Islamic ideology that promises not only a worldly status of respectability, but an eternal value to their good deeds in heaven. Islamic activism is to many women the most easily accessible social means to improve themselves, enhance their social status and instate improvements in Egyptian society.⁷²

By expanding the range of activism options for women interested in gender issues, the movement actually became more representative. It showed the diversity of the gender equality activists, and the one size fits all mentality of many in the west for what it would take to “liberate” the women of Egypt was completely unfounded. The old beliefs in what it means to be an emancipated woman in the Middle East was completely destroyed by the images streaming out of Tahir Square in January and February. Not only were women open and vocally protesting against the Mubarak Regime, the vast majority of them were wearing veils.

The initial euphoria and sense of promise following the fall of the Mubarak regime in February 2011 rapidly receded. Constitutional reform, a key demand of the protestors, is being undertaken by eight legal jurists all of whom are men. The head of the committee, Tareq al-Bishri, led the opposition against the appointment of Egypt’s first female judge in 2003.

International Women’s Day on March 8th, just a few short weeks after the revolution, witnessed a clash of genders on the streets of Cairo. When helping to oust Mubarak, women were welcome. When they entered the streets and advocated for their

⁷² Sherine Hafez, p. 28

issues, the result was physical and verbal abuse by their countrymen and forced virginity tests by the nations police.⁷³ What has become increasingly evident is that the revolution did little to alter the social behavior of the country.

The lack of women from the post-revolution planning process, coupled with an increased presence of conservative political elements in the constitutional review indicates to many activists that the social freedoms women enjoyed under Mubarak may be under threat. Second, just like in 1919 gender issues are being shut out of the national discussion under the auspice of political reform and economic issues. These moves by the post-Mubarak government are unfortunate as Egypt is the one who loses out. You cannot call yourself a democracy, and then cut out half of your population from the decision process.

Is there an end to Western involvement in Egypt's gender affairs? It is not likely. When asked by reporters if women's right provided a necessary reason for American involvement in Egyptian affairs, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, "If a country doesn't recognize minority rights and human rights, including women's rights, you will not have the kind of stability and prosperity that is possible... If [the Egyptians] are truly going to have a democracy, they can't leave out half the population."⁷⁴ The steps taken by the new Egyptian government in regards to gender issues will set the tone for western meddling in their affairs. Egypt is not the only nation that the burden of gender equality now rests. The revolutionary wave sweeping across the Arab world will set the course for relations between the "West" and "East." Gender issues are only one part of the relationship, but

⁷³ BBC News "A Woman's place in the new Egypt,"; 23 March 2011

⁷⁴ Stephanie Sinclair, The Hillary Doctrine, *Newsweek Magazine*, March 6, 2011

past precedent indicates that Muslim women serve as the rallying cry and excuse for western involvement in internal Arab affairs.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

The centuries of incorrect understanding in Islam and the encompassing social-cultural role that it plays in the life of its believers has led to Western powers intervening in an area of the world they thought they knew. The very construction of Muslim society by the West reeks with elitism, and this sense of betterment still permeates society today. What is different in the twenty-first century is that technology plays a pivotal role in furthering the opinions and beliefs. The study of the Middle East, formerly known as Orientalism, is no longer confined to a class of scholars. Instead everyone with a blog or an avenue to broadcast his or her particular opinion globally is seen as an expert. Sensational journalism on the part of Western media outlets latch on to a story that casts Islam and its alleged treatment towards women in a negative light. A report on honor killings brings in viewers, reporting on community outreach by Muslim women within their neighborhood does not.

What is most important to highlight as the great difference between twenty-first century colonialism, and that of the past is the location in which the social-cultural war is taking place. The venue has shifted from Cairo to Paris to middle America. Immigration and the increased multi-culturalism of society brought about fear that the status quo is shifting. France did not ban the burqa and niqab because it oppresses women. They banned it because it threatened the notion of what it meant to be French. The events of September 11th complicated an already misunderstood relationship between the West and the Muslim Middle East. The fear of Islam encroachment was somehow carried forth from the Middle Ages, and once again women were the battlefield.

The symbolism attached to Muslim women was not about their sense of self, but rather a sense of the strength of the community. America installs political gender quotas

in Afghanistan and Iraq, while Iran and Saudi Arabia dictate women's dress. That is why the veil is such an incredibly hot issue right now, because of its symbolism. What is missing from this discourse is the opinion of the wearer. Nation states, both autocratic and democratic, can decide the fate of Muslim women's clothing, but the actual wearer cannot in all instances.

The diversity of the gender equality movement is just an offshoot of the veil debate- it comes down to choice. A level of acceptance in the idea that it is okay to be a female engineer in jeans or a stay-at-home mom in a hijab needs to be adopted by everyone- both east and west. Muslim women are a diverse community, like the rest of the globe, and must be recognized as such.

The end of the Western interest in the Muslim woman has no signs of dissipating as long as the international effort against terrorism, some of whom happen to be Muslim, subsides. What can be moderated is the intense focus in western democracies on this particular group. If a country is truly a democracy, but it is the opinion of the governmental elite that their citizens are being oppressed, that is an issue that must be addressed nationally not by focusing in on one group in particular. The best way for Western countries to truly bring about greater gender equality throughout the world, not just in the Middle East, is to understand the nature of the society in question. A recognition of the taint of Western imperialism in regards to issues like gender needs to be acknowledge, as well as support for local, grass roots gender advocacy movements. The hypocritical West needs to look inward to assess its own success in achieving gender equality before it can continue to tell the world how they should live.

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