INTRODUCTION

Feminism in the Arab world: four perspectives

This issue features a set of four articles by different authors on the applications of feminist thought to contemporary issues in the Arab world and about feminist activism and movements in the region, including Islamic feminism, the very name and significance of which is a source of contention all by itself. For permission to publish these articles in this issue, the Editors wish to thank I.B. Tauris, in conjunction with the Centre for Arab Unity Studies (CAUS), the publisher of a forthcoming collected volume entitled Arab Feminisms: Gender and Equality in the Middle East, due to come out in 2013. Versions of each article in this issue will be included in the collected volume.

The reader is encouraged to sample all four articles because together they afford a rich array of contrasting insights into the work of Arab scholars on the subject of feminism, the disputes and discussions underway in this field, and the significance of contemporary feminist movements in the political turmoil currently gripping the Arab world.

In her article, Marnia Lazreg shows how the application of post-structuralist thought to the study of women in the Middle East has entangled those, mostly Western, feminist thinkers who purport to apply a Foucauldian approach, in a mode of analysis which actually objectifies Muslim women. Whereas initially, as Lazreg explains, the application of social science methodologies to the study of the Middle East delivered this field from the grip of particularistic ‘area studies’ and what Edward Said identified as Orientalism, the application of first-wave feminist approaches was problematic in so far as it identified the practice of Islam as antithetical to women’s rights. In particular, the wearing of the veil was depicted as a manifestation of oppression. As Lazreg further explains, this depiction was reversed in the application of second-wave feminist thinking, pioneered in the United States, but with no less constraining results. Instead of equating the veil with oppression, the phenomenon of (re-)veiling has been depicted as a sign of resistance to oppression, allowing, according to Lazreg, virtually no other explanation or meaning.

In order to explain further the substance of her critique and interrogate the representations of women in the Middle East that she identifies, Lazreg deploys her own application of Foucauldian thought. In the process she reveals the nature and extent of the trap that non-Muslim feminist thinkers have created for themselves and Muslim women wherever they may be. In her contribution Lazreg is especially critical of those feminist thinkers outside the Middle East who see themselves as furthering the cause of women within the region, even as they relegate them to a separate category from other women, the ‘Oriental other’ even, and hence do them no favours.

In her article, by contrast, Kaltham Al-Ghanim pays only scant attention to the development of feminist thought either outside the Arab world or writ large. Instead, she asks what have Arab feminists achieved and comes up with the damming conclusion that Arab women ‘want to improve their lives but do not know that a large part of the problem lies
in their ignorance of their own rights’. Her article is both a plea for women’s emancipation in the Arab world and a series of judgements on what that would mean.

Her opinions on what distinguishes men and women, including women’s ‘special characteristics and role that bestow goodness and love on the world’, and her assertion that in their differences men and women ‘complement one another and compensate for the deficiencies in each’, may give rise to concern that she already has in mind the role that liberated women should and will play in a more egalitarian society.

In some respects, Al-Ghanim’s contribution provides a kind of substantiation, albeit inadvertent, for Lazreg’s critique of the role of Western feminist thought in depriving Arab women of agency in the design of their own feminist aspirations and goals. Al-Ghanim suggests that whereas once Western feminist thought served as a motivator for Arab women and men to work for women’s inclusion in education, politics and the professions, with initially positive results, latterly progress has been lacking. Among other causes she attributes this regression to a general failure in the Arab world to achieve significant economic development across all sectors of society, in the face of successive crises and wars.

Al-Ghanim also situates her assessment of the limited progress achieved by Arab feminists within the Arab awakening that dawned with the uprisings of 2010–2011 and makes the case for the advancement of women’s rights as but one aspect of the changes underway, even as she warns of a resurgence of salafist ideology amid the uprisings. Her main remedy for addressing the needs of women is for more effort to be made to raise awareness of the problems and possibilities and, as indicated above, she thinks women themselves, especially the educated ones, are failing to rally to the cause.

Overall, Al-Ghanim’s approach to the cause of feminism in the Arab world bear some resemblance to the views Mervat Hatem attributes to Arab men advocating women’s rights in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and with which she takes issue. Hatem deconstructs and refutes what she identifies as the founding myths of Arab feminism – namely, that it was Arab men who pioneered the cause of women’s rights in the Arab world, and that the West and ‘modernity’, as defined by Western colonizers and picked up by Arab nationalists, deserve credit for expanding Arab women’s rights.

With illustrations from several works by other Arab scholars in the field, Hatem shows how some Arab proponents of women’s education and inclusion in political and professional roles simply served to co-opt them in the cause of building the modern and secularist Arab state in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. This seeming emancipation, restricted to upper- and middle-class women, rendered them, Hatem argues, not only beholden to the state for their privileges, but also complicit in the representation of such states as progressive, even though they remained dictatorial.

Hatem’s definition of feminism as ‘a set of analytical and critical tools that can be used to enhance women’s understanding/consciousness of themselves and their relation with other important national, regional and international groups of women’ is valuable in the present context. It combines both theory and practice, thereby holding out the promise that non-Arab or instrumentalist Arab nationalist or Islamist notions of feminism need not dominate the discourse. Hatem welcomes the advent of Islamist feminism as an antidote to the assumptions of secular intellectuals about the incompatibility of religiosity and rationalism. She also highlights the quest for a reinterpretation of the Islamic teachings and tradition by Muslim women in a way that, in contrast to
Lazreg’s fears, places Arab rather than Western feminists in control of the direction of this trend.

In her article, Amal Grami focuses specifically on the phenomenon of ‘Islamic feminism’, and begins with an instructive exploration of the definitional problems and confusion that surrounds this contemporary movement. In keeping with Hatem’s definition of feminism, Grami views the movement as a contribution to consciousness-raising as well as an exploration and driver for change. She provides a detailed summary of the defining theories and objectives of the movement as well as outlining the various reactions it has spawned.

Yet, in her conclusion, Grami lists a number of the problems at the heart of arguments espoused by those who embrace the cause of Islamist feminism. She even asks whether ‘resorting to Islam is not a form of opportunism’ and the reinterpretations of the sacred texts somewhat selective? When she asks: ‘Are we not witnessing discrimination between secular Muslim researchers who are culturally Muslim, and practicing Muslim researchers?’ and ‘Is the movement not elitist in its choices and objectives given its tilt towards “female religious scholars” at the expense of others leading to its isolation from reality?’ Grami seems to be echoing some of the concerns expressed by Lazreg.

In sum, Grami leaves the reader with more questions than answers, but she arrives at those questions through a thorough examination of a phenomenon about which it is important to know if one is to understand current developments in the Arab world. And in this respect the four articles presented here are exemplary of the central objective of this journal, namely to bring the work of contemporary Arab scholars to a wider audience.

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