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Arab Woman : Different Culture, Different Feminism

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Université de Montréal
Faculté des études supérieures

Ce mémoire intitulé :
Arab Woman : Different Culture, Different Feminism

Présenté par:
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Membre du jury

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RÉSUMÉ DE SYNTHÈSE

Ce mémoire cherche à montrer les différences entre le féminisme arabe et le féminisme occidental. En fait, contrairement à ce que plusieurs féministes occidentales pensent, les femmes arabes ont leur propre féminisme qui n'est pas une simple imitation de celui de l'occident mais qui est plutôt créé selon leurs besoins.

Afin de mieux comprendre les enjeux et de mieux saisir cette problématique de différence, j'ai divisé mon travail en trois chapitres. Le premier sera consacré à la perception de la femme arabe dans l'imaginaire occidental. Le deuxième portera sur la distinction du féminisme arabe de son vis-à-vis occidental. Quant au dernier, il sera question d'étudier et de mettre en valeur des œuvres de Nawal El Saadawi et Fatima Mernissi. Toutes deux sont d'accord pour dire que les occidentaux ont une perception erronée de la problématique de la femme arabe. À la lumière de ces travaux qui restent indispensables à la compréhension de cette problématique, j'ai pu, comme même, élargir le débat en donnant d'autres pistes sur le fait que la femme arabe n'est pas plus opprimé que sa 'soeur' occidentale mais plutôt subit une autre forme de distinction.

Mots-clés : femme, féminisme, culture, différence.

ABSTRACT

According to many Western feminists, there is nothing which can be called *Arab* feminism. What exists in the Arab countries is for many of them too moderate to be called feminism, and it is for the others an imitation of the "authentic" Western version. But in this thesis, I try to prove the existence of Arab feminism as different from the Western one(s), and as a product of a specific cultural context.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. In the first one, I look at Western feminists right to speak for others. I also study the disfigured image of Arab woman which Western people have had for many decades now. This paves the way to the second chapter where I show the real image of Arab women, and underline the specificities of their feminism, the aspects which make it different from the Western one(s). In the third chapter, I use the example of the modern Arab feminists Nawal El Saadawi and Fatima Mernissi to explain even better the difference of Arab feminism.

The prevailing idea which Western people have of Arab women is that they are very submissive and much more oppressed than their "sisters" in the West. But what I argue in this thesis is that Arab women are not more oppressed but rather differently oppressed, and that they are not submissive but they simply have a different perception of the world. Indeed their culture as a whole is completely different from those of the West which gives them their own feminism.

Key words: Feminism, Woman, Culture, Difference.

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To my wonderful parents, ***Mahmoud*** and ***Khadija Zairi*** who taught me how to be. And to my little angel, my dearest daughter ***Meyssam*** with whom I came to understand their message even better.

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INTRODUCTION

Arab women have been an interesting topic of study for many Westerners for long years now. They have been the central topic or the main heroines of many anthropological, sociological, literary or cinematographic works. Of course, the reason for their being interesting is not just their being women, but most of all their being *Arab* and *Muslim* women, which makes them seem exotic and somehow bizarre for many Westerners who see them as not conforming to the "female norm."

Keeping Western women as the norm, many Western feminists think of Arab women as part of the universal "second sex." They believe that Arab women and third world women in general are subordinate to men just like Western women but, of course, much more oppressed; and that they have to follow the example of their Western sisters in order to free themselves and gain their rights. This makes many Occidental feminists neglect the different identities of women and consider the female sex as a hegemonic group. They deal with gender and the women question from a global perspective, but always with Western women as the reference and the best example to be followed.

Indeed, I decided to write on this topic of the difference of the Arab woman, because in the age of deconstruction and of questioning all "our notions of formerly stable things," (Said, *Representing* 206) many Western feminists still believe in "the common identity of women" or "the universal sisterhood." Even when not using these expressions, a great number of Western feminists believe that women are the same everywhere, and that they can be classified in a category of women as opposed to men. Western feminists, generally speaking, assume that the first thing that links women is their biology. Women may differ in their colour, race, class, religion or culture; but they all share the same biological characteristics. This biological similarity is a fact that no one can deny. It is a reality that

relates women in small tribes in Africa to women in the largest metropolises in the U.S.A or Europe, and it relates women from extremely poor countries in Asia or Latin America to queens and princesses. This fact makes them feel similar and somehow close.

The other argument used by Western feminists to justify their belief in a category of women is the universal cultural construction of the female sex. In fact, many people belonging to different trends of feminisms (particularly liberal, radical and Marxist) tend to think that women are the product of a structure which can be political, economic or social (according to the different type of feminism), but which is always a men-centred structure that constructs women in the same way: through oppression, exploitation, prohibitions and limitations. They believe that in addition to their common biology (or maybe because of it) women are linked by other facts which are their subordination to men, their problems, and their need to fight in order to change their situation. If we read, for instance, books by some Western leading figures of feminist criticism in the twentieth century, such as *The Second Sex* of Simone de Beauvoir (1949), or Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985), or Cixous's *The Newly Born Woman* (1986) and many others, we see that they have different approaches and different ideas about women, but they all have one thing in common which is dealing with women as if they were a category, as if they were similar everywhere.

Western feminists believe that everywhere women are not considered as subjects not because they lack agency, but because men objectify them and consider them as "the other". They are also convinced that the way women are constructed has nothing to do with their nature or real capacities, and that had it not been for some events in history (especially economic events such as the emergence of private property), men would not have gained the upper position, and would not have been able to dominate the other half of society. It is

not a question of natural or biological superiority, but rather a privilege given by culture, all cultures.

Indeed, this domination of women by men is thought to be universal. "Patriarchy is universal," says Steven Goldberg, "for all the variety different societies have demonstrated in developing different types of political, economic, religious, and social systems, there has never been a society which failed to associate hierarchical authority and leadership in these areas with men. Indeed, of all social institutions there is probably no one whose universality is so totally agreed upon." (Goldberg 15) This universality of patriarchy means that anywhere in this world, women are dominated by men. In another chapter of the same book, Steven Goldberg writes, "cross-cultural compilations of ethnographic materials demonstrate the universality of male dominance with the same conclusiveness with which they demonstrate that of patriarchy." (Goldberg 31)

Thus, not only do women share the same biology, but also their gender is constructed in the same way by a universal patriarchal society, which makes them sympathize with each other and understand each other. This is what Simone de Beauvoir means when she says, "Still, we know the feminine world more intimately than do the men because we have our roots in it, we grasp more immediately than do men what it means to a human being to be feminine." (de Beauvoir xxxii) Elspeth Probyn approaches the same issue from another angle: woman's representation in literary works written by women authors. She explains how a woman reading a work by another woman can identify with her as she recognizes that the writer, as a woman, lived the same experience as her. She says, "through reading one could experience that welcome shock of recognition that other women had experienced the same things. In very simple terms, the solitary woman reading was not

alone." (Probyn 37) Other feminists say that patriarchy makes women have a common identity, but Probyn prefers to use the word "experience". She believes that "women living in a deeply patriarchal culture" have similar experiences, which are expressed in their literature.

Thus, the majority of Western feminists speak of women as "we", a pronoun under which they include all women of all countries and cultures in the world, though they do not forget to make a hierarchy with Western women on the top. Even when there started to be different kinds of feminisms within the West, with different views of the sources of women's oppression, and of the best way to put an end to it, they all (except for ethnic group feminists such as Black women) considered women as similar, and saw their fights against patriarchy as echoes of their own Western feminism(s).

But, as an Arab woman, I do not feel similar to women of the West even though I may have the same biology as all of them. I do not identify with them and neither do I approve of many of their opinions (though I may do of some). I do not mean, however, that their ideas are wrong, or that I, as an Arab woman, have better ones. It is certainly not a question of right or wrong, or of who is better than the other. It is simply a matter of difference.

It is with that difference that I want to deal in this thesis. In fact I cannot really see how Arab women or third world women in general can be said to belong to the same "category" as the American or European women. If "woman", as gender, is a cultural construction, how can the constructions of such different cultures be similar to the point of talking of them as a category? I believe that the Arab culture is very specific, and that its

female subjects are so different from Western women in terms of their perception of the world and their ways of reacting to it.

Many Western people believe that Arab women are very submissive, and that they do not show enough enthusiasm to change their situation. Similarly, many Western feminists do not believe in the existence of Arab feminism; for how can feminism exist among very passive women submitted to an extremely patriarchal society and to archaic rules of a religion that adds to their subordination. This is what Martha Levin, the editor of Elizabeth Warnock Fernea's *In Search for Islamic Feminism* (1998) expresses when she writes on the back cover of that book, "'Islamic feminism' would seem a contradiction in terms to many Westerners. We are taught to think of Islam as a culture wherein social code and religious law alike force women to accept male authority and surrender to the veil. How could feminism emerge under such a code, let alone flourish?" Other Western feminists however, think that there are certain feminist voices in the Arab world, yet they are convinced that they imitate the "original" Western feminism(s), which they think is the right thing to do since Western feminism is good for all women anywhere in the world. But, to what extent can this idea be correct? Is it really impossible to have an Arab or Islamic feminism? What can we call the concern of a great number of Arab women and even men about the condition of Arab women? Is it a mere concern or sympathy? Cannot that be called feminism, a different kind of feminism? And if so, is it an imitation of the Western feminisms, or is it original and completely different?

To be able to answer these questions, I will divide the thesis into three chapters. The first one will deal with the legitimacy of Western feminists' speaking for other women from other cultures, and with the image that Western feminists have of Arab women. This image

which goes back in history to the time of the Crusades is reaffirmed in the Westerners' minds by different events throughout history such as those of September 11, 2001. After these last events, Western people have shown more interest in what happens in the Arab world. But continuing to look at things from a Western perspective makes them keep the same old image they have had of Arab people as backward and primitive. One of the things which according to many Westerners prove and at the same time explain Arab people's backwardness is the condition of women within their societies, which can be true to a certain extent. But, the problem is that these Western people tend first to sensationalize certain issues related to women such as the veil, polygamy and kinship, and second, they tend to inaugurate themselves as the liberators of those oppressed women. Thus, they bring to them their own view and methods of women's liberation which have worked in their own countries, but they forget that culture related matters such as women's liberation and feminism can never be imposed from the outside, and that they have to be born from within in order to succeed. This is why in the following chapters I will try to show the real image of Arab women. I will show their difference in terms of their culture, their situation, their perception of their problems, their views of women's rights and their reaction to men's supremacy. I will also argue that they are capable of speaking for themselves, because they are the best ones who know their problems and needs.

In the second chapter, I will try to situate Arab women within Arab society, by understanding their situation, their agency, and their relation with Islam. I believe that Islam is a very important factor in defining Arab women's personality, since the Arab social, political and cultural codes are soundly based on Islamic legislation. For that reason, I cannot speak about Arab women's agency without speaking of their relationship with Islam

and see whether it is a relationship of subjectivity or of subjection. As for the last part of this chapter, it will deal with the Arab men and women pioneers in women's liberation.

The last section of this thesis will be consecrated to two major figures of modern Arab feminism: Nawal El Saadawi from Egypt and Fatima Mernissi from Morocco. Through some of their fictional and non-fictional works, I will try to understand their feminism and their view of woman's rights within the Arab society. This will help understand even better the difference of Arab feminism from those of the West since these two women writers and activists are very famous and very important names in the Arab feminist itinerary. Their works are translated into different languages, and they are the first names representing Arab feminists in international conferences. Besides they may be said to represent almost all Arab women since they come from the two parts of the Arab world: the East and the West.

Two other important methodological remarks ought to be made here so that the reader will not be confused. It is important to mention that being totally aware of the differences that exist between the different feminist trends within the West, I choose to transcend them, and, in most parts of this thesis, I will refer to them as "Western feminism", because I believe, and this is what I will prove in this thesis, that Arab feminism is different from Western feminisms with all their diversity. However, I will deal with Arab women as a hegemonic group; for, in spite of the political differences that exist between Arab countries, especially between countries in the Arab East or the Mashreq, and those in the West, or the Maghreb, which certainly affect women, Arab women share many important factors that enable us to deal with them as a category. Indeed, their history, culture,

language and religion are the same (except for very few exceptions), which makes them very similar despite their negligible differences.

As an Arab woman myself, I will certainly be approaching the topic from an Arab woman's perspective; but, at the same time, I will try to understand the Western women's position, and to be objective as much as this field of study allows me to be.

Chapter I

Arab Women: the Self or the Other

1. Western Feminists and the Right of Speaking for Others

Speaking for and about women of other countries and cultures is a common practice among many Western feminists. They either refer to them as part of the "We" which they use to encompass all women of the world within a universal sisterhood. Or, they consider them as "the other", but a silent other for whom they think they have the right to speak. In both cases, the speaker (Western feminist) does not necessarily have the permission of the women for whom she speaks, but she assumes that her status as a theorist, an anthropologist, or even a feminist who believes in universal sisterhood, gives her the right to speak on behalf of all members of her own sex.

Many of these Western feminists have a good intention. They speak for other women because they believe it is their "political responsibility to speak out against oppression." (Alcoff, *The Problem* 8) But as they see gender as the major, or even the only source of oppression for women, and as they deny "the structural process of 'othering' by a host of other factors such as race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, national origin and age," (Friedman 9) they feel it is their right and duty to speak for their oppressed "sisters" of all cultures. Indeed, the problem which many Western feminists are not aware of is that it is "impossible to separate out "gender" from political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained." (Butler 3) and that the fact of being a woman does not mean that one is similar to all women of the world, or that one necessarily has the same experience as other women; which means that being a woman does not give one the right to speak on behalf of all members of the female sex.

Other Western feminists, however, tend to speak for other women out of obligation. I mean that they are convinced that Western white women have always been "ignoring,

trivializing, or distorting the lives of women who were "different" through other forms of othering," (Friedman 9) so they feel that it is their duty now to speak for those women, advocate their case, and defend them against all the kinds of oppression they face.

The third kind of Western feminist who tends to represent others and speak for them are those who feel better because they are better educated, more civilized, and they belong to a developed world. This privilege, they believe, gives them the right to speak for those other women who, according to them, do not have the means to speak for themselves. This kind of arrogant Western feminist is the product of Western imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism which have been dominating the Third World for long years. They are those who believe the most in what Edward Said, in "*Representing the Colonized*", calls "fateful superiority," (215) the superiority of Western cultures which "justifies" their dominance and prevailing over other cultures in the rest of the world.

Whatever the motive is, speaking for other women implies the representation of those women, of their "needs, goals, situation, and in fact *who they are.*" (Alcoff, *The Problem* 9) This means that the speaker engages in a process of re-construction of those women in the way she understands them which is not necessarily the right way, and which will certainly have an impact on the women represented. For, it is unmistakably true that "where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says." (Alcoff, *The Problem* 6) I am not of course saying that Western women must never speak for other women, and I do not share the view of the "strong, albeit contested, current within feminism which holds that speaking for others is arrogant, vain, unethical, and politically illegitimate." (Alcoff, *The Problem* 6) But I insist that it is very important that these women speakers make sure that they are well placed to do the job. If they want to speak for other

women of other cultures, they have first to understand those women and know enough about their "world", culture, history, psyche, needs, expectations, and so on. They should also avoid playing the role of the researcher who takes those other women for her subject of study. They should rather try to put themselves in those other women's shoes, and look through their eyes to be able to understand their way of thinking, and their way of perceiving the world which would otherwise seem to them as "primitive." If not, their speaking for those other women would not be a real representation of the latter's needs and expectations, and would serve nobody but the speakers themselves.

Maria C. Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman deal with the legitimacy and possibility of speaking on behalf of other women through the particular case of Hespanas and white Anglo-American women. They see friendship as the only relationship within which Western (in this case American) feminists may really understand other women. They address white American feminists in their essay "*Have We Got a Theory for You!*" saying,

> From within friendship you may be moved by friendship to undergo the very difficult task of understanding the texts of our cultures by understanding our lives in our communities. This learning calls for circumspection, for questioning of yourselves and your roles in your own culture. It necessitates a striving to understand while in the comfortable position of not having an official calling card (as scientific observers of our communities have).It demands recognition that you do not have the authority of knowledge; it requires coming to the task without ready-made theories to frame our lives. This learning is then extremely hard because it requires openness (including

> openness to severe criticism to white/Anglo world), sensitivity, concentration, self questioning, circumspection. (*Hypatia Reborn* 33)

In fact, the task is very hard and challenging, but if one is not capable of doing it, one should rather give up the idea of speaking for others altogether, because the result may be totally opposite to ones intentions, or to what speaking on behalf of others is supposed to be.

For instance, many Western feminists, after visiting some Third World countries in Asia or Africa, wrote books about the "bizarre" traditions and practices they saw during their visits such as sati and excision. They sympathized with third World women and wanted to help them put an end to those practices that oppressed them, but, they did not really serve those women's purpose. In fact, instead of looking for the real origin of those practices, Western feminists focused their efforts on showing Third World societies as primitive and completely ignorant. This, indeed, did not really serve the cause of Third World women. If it did serve any purpose, it was that of showing Western societies as the total opposite of those Third World ones, which means civilized, very developed and having nothing to do with "primitive" practices.

Arab women have been among the "Other women" whom Western feminists have tried to speak about and for. They have also been the subject of study of many Western feminist researchers who want, for one purpose or another, to have a better understanding of the Arab and Muslim world in its relationship with women. The following section, deals with the image that Western feminists have of Arab women.

1. The Arab Woman Under Western Eyes

Rare are the Western writers and researchers (either feminist or not) who have really understood the functioning of the social system in Arab countries, and succeeded in being objective in their writing about that different society and those different people. Though we cannot deny the existence of some Western feminists who dealt with Arab women and society without that sense of superiority we usually find in Western writings on Third World people, and who succeeded in making "scientific" studies without any prejudices or value judgments, we have to admit that they are few. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea is one of them. She writes with astonishing objectivity, something which is not always welcomed by her Western readers. Though she is now one of the most respected feminist figures in the West, things were different for her in the beginning. She recalls her friends' reaction when she first started writing about Arab and Muslim women (people),

> "Saying anything positive about Arabs or the Arab World was suspect in our circles of liberal friends [...] Even though we were proud of our Western society and its values, other modes of life existed, I Said; we should respect them because they weren't all necessarily evil, only different. After all these years, I still remember the strange looks I received from friends I thought I knew well. They changed the subject. (Fernea, *In Search* xiii)

In fact, this kind of writings does not always have a big echo among Western readers, since it does not represent what the latter usually expect to find in works about "uncivilized" communities. I chose not to deal with these books because I want to focus on the works that

have the greater impact on the Westerners' perception of Arab people in general and Arab women in particular, and which are anyway much more numerous.

Generally speaking, Western writers tend to look at the Arab people not only as different, but as inferior and sometimes even as vulgar, barbaric and primitive. In fact, there are many examples of books by Western writers, either men or women, dealing with different social, economic, political, or religious aspects of the Arab countries with a special tone of amazement, unbelief or even mockery. It is the amazement of the civilized intelligent person who discovers the existence of barbaric primitive practices among uncivilized societies. They see the difference of Arab people from them as a sign of their inferiority. In fact, many Westerner people use otherness and difference as "an instrument to relegate the rights of others to an inferior or lesser status." (Said, *An Ideology* 41) They are convinced that no one can simply be different from them (as Westerners: the human norm) and still be their equal.

Many writings by Western feminists who take Arab women as their object of study belong to this "context of the global hegemony of Western Scholarship." (Mohanty 55) Indeed, Western feminists almost always keep in mind (sometimes unconsciously) that they come from a more developed, more "civilized", and more affluent world, and that Arab women are their total opposites. So it is clear from the beginning, with this prejudice in mind, that the result of their research would not be objective. They would tend to take Western feminists (or women) as the reference, and then define Arab women in a relational way[1]. They are everything that the reference is not. They are primitive, naïve, very submissive while Western women are civilized, intelligent and rebels. Thus Western

[1] According to Val Plumwood "the underside of any dualistically conceived pair is defined in relation to the upper side as a lack, a negativity." (Plumwood 52)

feminists end up by constructing Arab women in their own way which is part of the hegemonic way in which they "construct a Third World or even an Orient in which gender oppression is subtly explained as symptomatic of an essential non-Western barbarism." (Butler 3) They give themselves the right to draw quick conclusions and make value judgments which should not be included in any research that is meant to be objective and scientific.

As Judith Butler explains in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble* (1990) Western feminists, in their relationship with Arab women, play the role of the oppressor, which makes them similar to the patriarchal structure they are fighting against. This is exactly what Afro-American women feel when white American feminists tend to support them in their fight against racism. They know that "the movement which purports to represent the interests of "women" is, similarly, the desire of a few white women to enter the corporate boardroom. The metamorphosis which this feat in itself would require in patriarchal society might slightly better the lives of some women, but would only basically change the sex of the "master"." (Johnson-Odim 319)

Many European women went to settle in different Arab countries during the years of their colonization by European forces (late 19th and first half of 20th-centuries). Some of these women wrote letters and/or books about their lives in those Arab countries. They were mainly concerned with women and the multiple sources of their oppression, and they addressed their writings to a European audience who was eager to learn about the remote parts of the empire. But their works did not really reflect the real image of Arab women and society. As Mervat Hatem points out, those women writers –generally speaking–

> were influenced by the production of popular images about the "Orient" in their original societies. These images were derived largely from European travelers' accounts and the various translations of the *Arabian Nights*. The Muslims with their exacting rituals (especially the fasting of Ramadan which fascinated the authors), their veiled, beautiful, and erotic women and despotic cultures and political systems, served to define the boundaries between East and West in the women's writings. (Hatem 48)

All these prejudices made the European women come to the Arab countries with a ready made mold, which they wanted to fit Arab women by any means. In their writings they wanted to confirm that image they already had of the Arabs. For instance, they wrote a lot about the women of the harem whom they defined as "sexual slaves," (an image introduced to the Westerners' minds (as mentioned in the quotation above) by the different translations of the *Arabian Nights,* mainly that of Antoine Galland, as well as the Western and especially the American movies about Arab people.) I can mention for example *Harem life* by Mary Torok who became known as Djavidan Hanum, and *Harems et musulmanes d'Egypte* (1900) by the French Eugenie Le Brun. The image of Arab women and people in general reflected in these books is similar to what Lucie Duff Gordon shows in this paragraph from her *Letters from Egypt*

> Mme. Mounier described Rachel's stay with them for three months at Luxor, in my house, where they lived. She hated it so, that on embarking to leave she turned back and spat on the ground and cursed the place inhabited by savages where she had been *ennuyée à mort.*

> Mme. Mounier fully sympathized with her and thought no *femme aimable* could live with Arabs, who are not at all *gallants.* She is Levantine and I believe half Arab herself, but hated here and hates the Muslims. As I write this I laugh to think *galanterie* and Arab in one sentence." (Chaudhuri and Strobel 53)

So it is clear that those European women settlers saw Arab women and people in general as inferior, not only because of their being Arab, but also because of their religion. Christian Arabs, such as Mm. Mounier mentioned in the above quotation, were more highly esteemed than Muslim ones. Indeed Islam was seen as an additional source of the barbarism and savagery of the Arabs, or as Edward Said puts it, it was (and still is) seen as "little short of a terrorist culture." (Said, *Representing* 219)

Such women settlers guided by their sense of superiority have not been the only European women interested in Arab women. There are also those whom in the previous chapter I qualified as having a good intention. They are the feminists who believe in the importance of a global cooperation of women in the face of all kinds of oppression. But, as they always considered feminism and the feminist movement as a "Western innovation" they gave themselves the right "to lay down patterns of thought and action for all women –even those in the South whose conditions and history are different and who must therefore seek original forms of organization and appropriate solutions to their problems." (El-Saadawi, *Reader* 32) They want Arab women to accept the agenda they set, and to work with them in the way they decide is the best; even though neither the agenda, nor the method is convenient to their partners. This makes me think of the event mentioned by Margot Badran (*Feminists* 71). It concerns the Western leaders of the International Woman Suffrage

Alliance (IWSA) who in the 1920s wanted to convince the Egyptian women members of the Egyptian Women's Union to join them in their demand for women's right to vote, at a time when Egypt was still a British colony where even men did not have that right. Egyptian women were then fighting with Egyptian men against colonization, and independence was the first and major right they wanted. If in this case Egyptian women would not cooperate with their British "sisters," the reason, according to the latter, would be that Arab women are more oppressed than them, and that they do not dare to, nor know how to ask for their rights. They would not understand that it is their agenda which is not appropriate and which does not take into consideration the interests of Arab women (in this case, Egyptian women.)

This kind of Western feminist believes that though all women are oppressed, the level of their oppression varies from one culture to another. Starting from this fact, they draw incorrect conclusions which are only for their benefit. They conclude, for instance, that Arab women are among the most oppressed females in the whole world; and that they need the help of their more informed, more liberated and more confident Western sisters in order to put an end to their subordination. They believe that Arab women, bound and most of the time blinded by the different aspects of their culture, cannot see their plight as it really is, and that external observers such as Western feminists can help them put their fingers on the real origins of their subordination. Thus, they start interfering with Arab women's lives in different ways, and they give themselves the right to represent them and speak on their behalf.

In their writings about Arab women, Western feminists deal with different aspects of Arab women's lives which they see as the origins of their oppression. The veil, female genital mutilation and the family system (mainly polygamy) are among the topics that keep

reappearing in their books where Arab women are re-presented as mere victims of their extremely patriarchal society. They sympathize with those poor women who are not allowed to have control over their bodies and lives. But the problem with many of them is that they, generally speaking, do not uncover the truth since they do not probe the history and origin of things. They also tend to generalize and make of specific events they witness in a particular Arab country within a specific context a truth applicable to all Arab women and people. I can mention as an example among many others *La femme voilée: l'Islam au féminin* (1990) by Juliette Minces who mentions that her book is the result of ten years of observation in different Arab and Muslim countries. She says that it is the revision of her 1980 version entitled *La femme dans le monde Arabe,* which was translated into English by Michael Pallis as *The House of Obedience.*

Though I do not see any real difference between the two books, neither do I understand how the second is the revision of the first, nor how the book itself is the result of long years of contemplation, this is not what matters the most. What really attracts my attention is the extent to which the writer allows herself to generalize her remarks to make them refer to all Arab women; and how starting from a particular event she witnesses somewhere in the Arab and Muslim world, she draws illogical conclusions that she seems to believe are true for all Arab people. For example under the subtitle *"L'HOMME ARABE"* (The Arab man) she draws a portrait that, she believes, suits all the males of the Arab society except "des élites occidentalisées" (Minces, *La femme voilée* 57) The Arab man as seen by Julitte Minces is an arrogant, egotistical person who stands against any liberation of women. He is a man very attached to traditions to the point of killing a female member of his family if ever she dares to forget about her chastity. Minces deliberately forgets to specify where in particular she got this image of the Arab man, as she seems to purposely generalize the

tradition of killing unchaste women to all Arab men. She does not mention that this practice exists only in few tribes in some Arab countries such as Egypt, and that the governments and societies alike are doing their best to put an end to it.

I am equally surprised by the way Minces uses the Koran to support her idea about Islam as a religion against women. She does not seem to be aware of the fact that explaining the verses of the Koran is not an easy task, and that it is much more so for a Westerner who is probably reading the Koran for the first time in a translated version. She also forgets to contextualize what she reads; or maybe (and this is more probable) she cannot, because of her ignorance of the specific context of each single Sourate. The result is a very superficial book full of paradoxes, a book which is supposed to be about Arab women but which does not reflect the real image of those women nor of the Arab society in general, and which ultimately totally disfigures the image of Islam.

This image of Arab women and Arab people in general is, unfortunately, the one which found the most in Western writings and media. It is the product of imperial ideologies which tend to make of the other a mere primitive that needs "the civilizing modernization provided by historical colonialism" (Said, *Representing* 215) to help him develop and rise to the level of human beings. Edward Said, in his "*Representing the Colonized*" discusses this strong relationship between imperialism and Western literature, mainly anthropology not withstanding feminist anthropology. He explains how Western anthropologists tend always to take the Western cultures (mainly the American culture) as the norm to which they tend to compare other cultures to show their backwardness. He says, "The history of that cultural practice [i.e. anthropology] in Europe and the United States carries within it as a major constitutive element, the unequal relationship of force between the outside Western

ethnographer-observer and a primitive, or at least different but certainly weaker and less developed, non-Western society." (Said, *Representing* 217)

The great majority of Western feminist writings on Arab women belong, as I already mentioned, to this trend. Even the feminists who write about Arab women because they really sympathize with them cannot, generally, avoid this Western sense of superiority and ethnocentrism. Mervat Hatem explains this tendency as follows, "By accepting the contention that they were superior to women from other cultures, European women's attention was diverted from the fact that they continued to be subordinate to European and other men with whom they came into contact." (Hatem 56) In fact, in their binary analysis, in which they set themselves as the subject and Arab women as the other, many Western feminists try their best to unveil and overstress all Arab women's forms of oppression; because the more miseries they discover, the more highlighted their qualities of Western women become.

Thus, they tend to exaggerate when narrating their lives in Arab countries, and they usually fail to conduct more or less objective "scientific" research about their subject of study. They rather sensationalize what they "discover" of Arab women's forms of oppression, and do not succeed in making deep, logical and efficient studies that can really serve the cause of Arab women. Nawal El-Saadawi, for instance, deals with the Western feminists' concern about the female genital mutilation. She says, "[We have to] recognize its historical and political causes. Admit that women in our countries have been dealing with it for a long time. Instead of making a sensational fashion out of something that some Western feminists discovered yesterday and will forget tomorrow." (El-Saadawi, *Reader* 68)

Even if Western feminists differ in their perception of Arab women, and even if their methods and ways of analysis vary, the result of their works is almost always the same. They all agree that Arab women are among the most oppressed women in the whole world, if not really the most oppressed ones as Juliette Minces thinks. (Minces, *La femme voilée* 220) Being, thus, motivated by their different feelings of superiority, sympathy, pity or even anger, Western feminist writers reflect almost the same image of Arab women. An image similar to that we find in the song by Joe Bocan where she says

> Dans ces pays
>
> Aux femmes voilées
>
> La femme existe moins qu'une bête
>
> Ici les hommes
>
> Préfèrent leurs chiens
>
> Alors quand ils n'ont rien compris
>
> Ils donnent des coups
>
> Ils donnent des coups. (1988, Palmies, PA-101)

So, the conclusion they make is that these miserable women who are not considered in their countries as human beings, these veiled women who are imprisoned by Islam, and weakened by a culture where polygamy and male violence are permitted, cannot become feminists. They believe that those Arab women who accept all those religious, cultural and social restraints cannot have feminist characteristics that would enable them to rebel and fight to get their freedom, which means that they desperately need the help of their Western sisters. They admit, however, that there are *some* exceptions, but they believe that they are –as Minces mentions– those few Arab women who had the privilege of studying in Western universities and coming in touch with "civilization" which allowed them –once back home–

to copy Western feminists (Mince, *La femme voile* 15). This simply means that Arab women would always need the help of their "Western sisters." In the following part of this thesis, I will try to see how far this idea about Arab women can be justified, and whether Arab women really need the interference of Western feminists or if they are capable of speaking for themselves.

Chapter II

Woman's Place in Arab society

1. Arab Society and Woman's Agency

Agency is defined by sociologists as the capacity of the individual, as a subject of a given social structure, to act "independently of the determining constraints of [that] structure." (Jary 10) In other words, it is the person's ability to react to the social structure and make free choices and determined actions.

Seen as such, agency has always existed among Arab women. There have always been women known for their strong personalities, their boldness, and capacity to say "No" and to stand against the injustices of patriarchy, in addition to their wisdom and great knowledge. Though history books had been for a long time written exclusively by men who did not give much importance to women, some ancient Arab historians included in their writings the biographies of a great number of women who lived either before or after the advent of Islam, and who had a very strong sense of self. For instance *Imam Ibn 'Asakir* consecrated the last volume of his eighty-volume book, *The History of Damascus* (written in the 12th -century), to women. He mentions 196 famous women who played a certain role in the social, political and economic development of Damascus. Sakina Shihabi who edited and analyzed this last volume says, "Ibn 'Asakir's women make vibrant five centuries of the political, social, literary and religious life of our civilization." (Quoted in Mernissi, *Women's* 101) There is also the history book written by Muhammad Ibn saad, *Al-Tabakat Al-Kubra* (1321?) whose eighth volume is all about women. There is also *Al-Isaba fi Tamyiizi Al-Sahaba* written by Sheikh Ibn Hajal who devoted the fifth volume of his book to women[2]. Unfortunately all these important books, like many others in the Arab literary heritage, have not been translated into English.

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[2] Fatima Mernissi mentions other references in her *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory* 96-98.

To go back to the main concern of this section, the question of Arab women's agency, it is important to mention that it existed long before the appearance of Islam. During that pre-Islamic period, Arab people had a prosperous culture especially in terms of art, literature and folklore. The poetic inheritance that came to us from that period is among the best Arab poetry that has ever existed. In addition to its artistic beauty, it gives a clear idea of the different aspects of the Arab people's life at that time. Many women were either mentioned in the poems, or were themselves poets who had recourse to poetry to "record" important events in the history of their family or tribe, or to express their ideas about different matters concerning their community. They did not hesitate to rebuke and criticize their tribes' leaders and decision makers as well as other important men in their communities. Think for example of *Al-Khansa`* who was known for her boldness and strong personality which was apparent in her beautiful poetry.

Hind Bint Rabia was also another woman of the pre-Islamic period who was known for her very strong personality. She was a woman who always knew what she wanted. Nawal El-Saadawi, quoting Muhammad Ibn Saad, says that Hind said to her father, "I am a woman who holds her life in her own hands and knows what she wants." And her father answered "So it shall be." (El-Saadawi, *The Hidden* 125) In addition to her wittedness, and her strong argumentation, Hind was also known for her courage and determination. After losing three men of her family (father, brother and uncle) in the first battle fought between the Muslims and the Quraishites, which is known as the '*Battle of Badr*' she "swore to avenge them and took an oath not to perfume herself or go near her husband until this was done. She kept her promise during the Battle of Ahad in which the Quraishites were victorious over the Muslims." (El Saadawi, *The Hidden* 126) Religion and faith aside, Hind

Bint Rabia can be seen as a woman who was full of agency, and who had a very strong sense of self.

After the appearance of Islam, there continued to be many women who had strong agency. Some of them were the prophet's wives such as *Khadija* and *'Aisha*. Indeed, Islam was (and is) not against the female sense of self as many people would think. But I am not going to deal with this point now since we will discuss it fully in the next section. What I want to show here is that Arab women's agency has always existed before and after the appearance of Islam. The prophet's first wife, Khadija, was a well-known tradeswoman. The prophet himself worked for her, which allowed her to know his good qualities and numerous virtues. She was the one who asked him to marry her by sending him an oral message with one of her female slaves; and the prophet accepted in spite of the fact that she was much older than him.

After the golden years of Islam, the Arab world knew a long period of stagnation on different levels. However, female agency continued to exist. There continued to be women known for their strong sense of self. There were wives of kings and Sultans, as there were also women of literature and knowledge from lower social ranks. But patriarchy, with all the constraints and limits it imposed on women, deprived their great majority of their sense of self, as it deprived them of their legitimate rights given to them by Islam. Even nowadays, Arab women continue to be oppressed, but they respond by asking for their rights as given to them by Islam.

2. Woman and Islam: Subjectivity or Subjection

This section will deal with woman's image and rights as mentioned in the Koran and the prophet's sayings (hadeeth). It is important not to confuse this with what is done

now in many Arab or Muslim countries in the name of Islam while it is in fact a matter of culture.

The prophet Muhammad started preaching Islam in the 7th-century C.E. At that time though a great number of Arab women had a strong sense of self, as we have seen above, they generally speaking, did not have many rights. Female infanticide was very widespread among many tribes within Arabia. Girls in those tribes were seen as a burden and a source of shame for their families, so their parents used to get rid of them when still newborns by burying them alive. Besides, in many Arab tribes, a woman was seen as her husband's property. So, in addition to her subordination to him during his life time, if ever the husband died, she could be inherited by his son or another male relative who could in turn marry her, sell her or give her to another man (Ali 257).

With the advent of Islam, these practices ended. God condemned them in different Koranic verses. Such as "When news is brought to one of them of the birth of a female child, his face darkens and he is filled with inward grief. With shame does he hide himself from his people because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain her on contempt or bury her in the dust? Ah! What an evil they decide on?" (16:59) Besides, the prophet Muhammad encouraged people to take care of their daughters by promising them great rewards in the other life. For instance, he said, "He who is involved in bringing up daughters and accords benevolent treatment towards them, they will be protection for him against Hell-fire."(Al-Albani 57)

In addition to putting an end to that kind of practice which not only oppressed women but also dehumanized them, Islam gave women other important rights that Western women could not get till the late 19th-century. More than 1400 years ago Muslim women

were given the right to own property. Single or married, a Muslim woman could dispossess of her own property as she wished. Unlike in the Judaeo-Christian religions, a husband can only take from his wife what she herself gives him voluntarily. If she decides to keep all her property and earnings for herself, she has the right to do so, and the husband cannot complain. On the contrary, he has to provide for her, and on marriage he has to give her a dowery as a free gift, which she has the right to keep for herself even after divorcing him. The Koran has stated its position on this issue quite clearly: "And give the women (on marriage) their dowery as a free gift; but if they, of their own good pleasure, remit any part of it to you, take it and enjoy it with right good cheer" (4:4).

Muslim women also received what can be called "political rights." They obtained the right to "vote" and choose their leader (Koran 60:12), in addition to their other "civil" rights such as the right to be educated, to work, to choose their husbands, to find sexual satisfaction with them, to obtain divorce, to freely express themselves and to take part in decision making. Indeed many Muslim women during the prophet's life did not hesitate to speak out and to object whenever they were not satisfied. 'Aisha, the prophet's youngest and most beloved wife would even argue with Muhammad himself and did not hesitate to blame him and turn away from him on many occasions. (Ibn Saad 76)

Islam does not weaken woman's agency. On the contrary, it even reinforces it and encourages women to be strong and determined as long as they do not infringe moral and religious limits. The Koran stresses the fact that Allah created women and men as equal with no subordination of anyone of them to the other, though it mentions that men are the heads of families which means that they have a little more authority but also more duties and responsibilities. Allah addresses men and women on equal terms. He says, for instance,

"He (God) it is who did create you from a single soul wherefrom he did create his mate, that he might dwell with her (in love)." (7:189) He also said "The believers, men and women, are protectors, one of another: they enjoy what is just, and forbid what is evil, they observe regular prayers, practice regular charity, and obey Allah and his Messenger. On them will Allah pour His Mercy: for Allah is Exalted in power, Wise." (9:71)

It is clear that women in Islam are not put on a lower level than men, nor are they seen as a source of evil and sin as is the case in the Judaeo-Christian religions. Eve is not described in the Koran as the first one who was tempted by the devil and then, in her turn, lured Adam and caused their fall from paradise. The Koran mentions that both Adam and Eve were tempted by Satan, and both of them disobeyed Allah then regretted it:

> O Adam dwell with your wife in the Garden and enjoy as you wish but approach not this tree or you run into harm and transgression. Then Satan whispered to *them* in order to reveal to *them their* shame that was hidden from *them* and he said your Lord only forbade you this tree lest you became angels or such being as live forever. And he swore to *them both* that he was their sincere adviser. So by deceit *he brought them to their fall*: *when they tasted the tree* their shame became manifested to them and they begun to sew together the leaves of the Garden over their bodies. And their Lord called unto them: ""Did I not forbid you that tree and tell you that Satan was your avowed enemy?" They said "our Lord we have wronged our own souls and if you forgive us not and bestow not upon us Your Mercy, we shall certainly be lost." (7: 19: 23) (*My emphasis*).

So women are neither subordinate to men nor are they a source of evil. Women are Allah's creators just like men. They have similar duties and deserve similar rewards or punishments according to their deeds. It is clearly stated in the Koran,

> "For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women. for men and women who are patient, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage more in Allah's praise –for them all has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward." (33:35) or again "And their Lord answered them: truly I will never cause to be lost the work of any of you, be you a male or female, you are members one of another." (3:195)

I do not think that the Westerners who criticize Islam and consider it as a source of oppression for women know much about these Islamic regulations and laws which are for women's benefit. I believe that these Western people make their opinion according to what they see nowadays of women's plight in many Arab and Muslim countries which, as said before, has nothing to do with Islam though it is done in its name. Many other Western people get their ideas about Islam and the Muslims from what they read, see, or hear in Western (especially American) mass-media which tend to magnify and stress the little details that they see as negative in order to give a bad image of that religion and those people. Influenced by Western media, many Western people tend to think "We must bring the Age of Enlightenment to the Muslim World and propagandize in direct opposition to

what the imams and the schoolteachers are pumping into the heads of that younger generation." (Richard Brawer, *Times* 4)

The veil is one of the elements which Western media insist on. They make it seem a source of oppression for Muslim women, those poor females who have to hide their hair and bodies and are not allowed to be sexy and attractive. They see them as imprisoned behind their clothing. Indeed, I frequently see newspaper caricatures or TV programs that show veiled women as oppressed and submissive. After the events of September 11th, 2001, many Western official mass-media, especially those whose countries were supporting the American decision to launch a military attack against Afghanistan (or the Afghani government) spoke a lot about the oppression of Afghani women. They wanted to show the Western operation in Afghanistan as a humane mission aimed at the liberation of a poor oppressed people. Think, for example of the spot broadcast in Winter 2001 on the French-language television, TV5, showing an Afghani woman wearing a burka, and carrying on her head a cage with a bird inside. Of course, the purpose of that spot, which was said to promote the interests of Afghani women, is to show how those women, just like that bird cannot enjoy their freedom because of that imprisoning burka.

Those events made the world again show a great interest in Muslim women's conditions. More than ever before have we seen, heard and read critical comments about the backwardness and aggressiveness of the Muslims who not only loathe the West and try to destroy it, but also oppress their women and prevent them from enjoying their freedom as any worthy human beings. For example, in the magazine *Time* of December 24, 2001, we can read,

> "But in the Middle East, there is little chance for women to shape their destinies. They have had to put up with terror their entire lives in their very homes and societies. Perhaps the war on terrorism will have beneficial results for a long-forgotten, oppressed people: not the men of Islam, but their wives, mothers and sisters." (Katherine Ryan, *Times* 3)

Notice the unrealistic idea which the writer has about Muslim people, and how she thinks of Muslim women as extremely week, subordinated and terrorized. It is also interesting to notice how she, like many other Westerners, tries to legitimize the Western military intervention in Afghanistan by giving it a humane cover.

To come back to the issue of the veil, it is important to say that though it is true that some Muslim women are obliged by their parents and sometimes their husbands or even the government to wear the veil, the great majority of veiled women have made a personal choice. They do not see the veil as a source of oppression or frustration; on the contrary, they even think that it is one of the elements through which Islam elevates woman's status. Madeleine Bunting, the British journalist, made a report about women's rights in Islam which she published in the "*Guardian*" of December 8, 2001 under the title "*Can Islam Liberate Women?"* She interviewed different Muslim women in London who chose to wear the veil (Hijab). One of them named Jasmin who used to be a sex kitten before deciding to veil said, "The attention I got from the other sex changed. Instead of a sexual approach, they had to take interest in what was in my head and in my personality, rather than my body."

Many Western feminists who fight against all sorts of oppression, and seek to liberate all their subordinate "sisters" in the world think that Islamic religion and patriarchy

make women feel ashamed of their bodies and make them want to hide them behind veils and long loose dresses. But the women interviewed by Madeleine Bunting assert that "It is not about shame of the female body, as Western feminists sometimes insist, but about claiming privacy over their bodies." Indeed, the Westerners who accuse Muslim women of being ashamed of their bodies think of the veil from a Christian point of view. I mean that they keep in mind the Christian tradition that relates Eve to sin and guilt, and thinks of sex as the result of the Fall from paradise. That is why many Western feminists (and women in general), in wanting to have control over their bodies, show that they are proud of them by being sexy and attractive. They do not refrain from publicly expressing their sexuality to assert their power. But the veil has nothing to do with all this. Islam recognizes woman's sexuality, and woman's right to have a healthy and satisfying sexual life. Nobody in Islam, not even the prophet Muhammad, or the imams, is required to lead a life of celibacy. On the contrary, marriage is said to be half the religion, and sex, as long as it is within a legal and moral context, is a legitimate right for both men and women. So women "have no need of Madonna-style exhibitionism to assert the power of female sexuality." (Bunting 9) They can wear the veil knowing very well that it is neither a sign of shame of the female body, nor a source of oppression.

Polygamy is the other important detail on which Western people insist to support their arguments concerning the oppression of Muslim women. Polygamy has in fact logical historical, economic and moral reasons. It is not an Islamic innovation. It existed long before the advent of Islam, but the latter limited it to a maximum of four women, and required the necessity of equal treatment of the four co-wives, and the ability to financially support all of them together with their children. If ever a man is incapable of doing so, he had better marry just one woman.

Polygamy is not only related to men's sexuality, it has other more important reasons. With the advent of Islam, there were many wars between Muslims and non-Muslims which resulted in many deaths among men. Consequently, women outnumbered men, which means that many women would be obliged to lead a life of celibacy if each man could have only one wife. So polygamy saved women from loneliness and frustration which could tempt some of them to commit adultery. In addition, it prevented them from suffering great financial difficulties, since a married man, according to Islamic law, must provide his wife with the necessary financial support.

Polygamy, as limited by Islam in its early days, had different positive effects on women and society in general. But nowadays, with the development of Arab and Muslim countries, and with the great changes in women's conditions (education, work, independence…) polygamy is no longer practiced as it was in the past. Some Arab countries such as Tunisia passed laws to forbid polygamy. Others added conditions to limit it to very specific situations. Even in the countries were it is still legalized only 10 to 15 percent of men practice it. (Abu Amineenah, *Islam's position* 2)

Personally, though I cannot imagine myself living with co-wives, as I have never known that in my country, I can tolerate polygamy much easier than a man having one wife and different mistresses. As Dr Tim Winter, a Muslim convert and Cambridge lecturer, says polygamy "is widely practiced in the West, from Bill Clinton to Prince Charles. It is, he says, simply more cruel in the West, because all the "wives" bar one are deprived of legal status and dignity." (Bunting 9)

The great majority of these rights that Muslim women had during the prophet's days and the early years that followed his death, were taken from them by patriarchy. In fact,

Arab women are more oppressed now than they were in the early years of Islam. But the problem is that the conservative men and the Islamists who are against women's rights pretend to be following the Islamic laws and legislation. But in the late nineteenth century, many women and men alike rose against this injustice made in the name of Islam, and opened the gate in front of the following generations to fight against women's oppression. They were the pioneers who established an Arab feminism.

Arab feminists, as it will be shown in the following section, are far more interested in religious doctrine than Western feminists. While the latter, generally speaking, have fought against religious limitations and have been for secular rights and rules, the former turn to religious texts to legitimate their demands. They ask for women's rights as given by Islam (Koran and hadeeth).

3. The Pioneers of Arab Feminism

The Arab movement of women's emancipation became visible in the 19th-century mainly in the Middle East and the Maghreb. It included both educated men and women from the middle and upper classes who believed that improving women's condition was for the good of the whole society. In this section, I will deal with some of the important pioneers of Arab feminism. I will use them as an example to argue that Arab feminism was the product of the particular condition of Arab women and society in general and not an imitation of the Western feminist movements. Given that the context for early Arab feminism was mainly political and social rather than literary, this section will not involve any literary analysis or criticism, but will rather deal with the political demands and social change which the pioneers of Arab feminism were seeking.

The Arab "feminist" men were highly educated and were exposed to European thought. They were influenced by the European women's advancement and social visibility in comparison to the Arab women of that time. But it is important to mention that they, just like Arab women, took Western feminism as an example of a possible revolution to improve women's conditions, but not as ideas and methods. They wanted Arab women to be liberated like Western women but not in the same way. I mean that they did not perceive freedom and rights in the way that Western women did. While Western feminism was, in a sense, a rebellion against all the restraints imposed by society, religion and sometimes even biology, Arab men's (and women's) understanding of feminism was woman's rights within a religious framework.

Many of these intellectual men wrote books to make known their "pro-feminist" views, as Badran prefers to call them. Think for example of the Egyptian Qâcim Amin (1865-1908) whose book, *The Liberation of the Women* (1896), is thought by many people to be the beginning of what we can call Arab feminism. He called for girls' right to be educated just like boys, as he called for the regulation of divorce to give women more rights. This is very important knowing that the Egyptian man of that time had the right to divorce his wife without the latter's presence or knowledge of the matter. Qâsim Amin also called for the limitation of polygamy to certain conditions such as the wife's sterility or sickness. He wanted women to be treated with respect and dignity, and to be considered as worthy human beings and full citizens.

The other important figure whose "feminist" ideas made great echoes in the whole Arab world is the Tunisian social reformist Al-Tahir Al-Haddad. In his book *Our Woman in Islamic Law and Society* (1929), he advocated women's case by clearly stating his views

about women's rights. Like Qâsim Amin, he thought girls' education to be indispensable for the elevation of women's status, and consequently for the development of the whole society. He believed that the Tunisian society could not become prosperous as long as women were ignorant, backward and weak. He was among those who believed that women were the basis of the family and of society in general. He argued that women were the mothers who would educate the coming generations so they could not raise intelligent, well informed, determined youth unless they themselves were educated and liberated from the wrecked traditions that are created by men to dominate them.

Al-Tahir Al-Haddad, like almost all the other male figures of this Arab Renaissance movement (1890s-1920s), called for women's rights as mentioned in the Koran and Hadeeth. He was convinced that Islam gave women their total rights which were taken from them later on by patriarchy. He based his arguments on Koranic verses and showed how the explanations of the Koran were made by men for their own benefit. In addition to girls' education, he called for women's right to work, to unveil and to choose their husbands. His book was considered as a big scandal not only in Tunisia, but also in the whole Arab world. He was severely criticized by conservative men who accused him of secularity and alienation, and declared him to be an enemy of Islam.

Many of these ideas were shared by the first Tunisian president Habib Bourgiba (1956-1987) who gave Tunisian women more rights than what women in any other Arab or Muslim country have. "Shortly after independence from France in 1956, Bourguiba gave women the right to vote, abolished polygamy, forbade marriage under the age of 17 and allowed women equal rights to divorce." (*Arabic News*) He also forbade repudiation, and gave women the right to education, to be elected to parliament, to unveil and to choose their

husbands. As a result, Bourguiba is honored not only as the "father of independence" but also as "the father of female emancipation." Indeed, the headstone in Bourguiba's mausoleum reminds us that he was the "supreme fighter, the builder of modern Tunisia and the liberator of women." (*Arabic News*)

As for women, the first feminists were Egyptian or living in Egypt. They had an awareness of gender different from that of other women in their society. "They published books of poetry and prose, biographical dictionaries, and articles and essays in the (male) press as early as the 1870s and 1880, at a time when publishing itself was still new in Egypt." (Badran, *Feminists* 14) The Syrian Hind Noufal was the editor of the first Arab women's magazine published in Alexandria (Egypt) in 1892. "By the 1910s there were over 15 monthly and fortnightly women's magazines in Cairo and Alexandria." (Hijab 144) Aisha al-Taimuriya (1840-1902), Maryam al Nahhas (1856-1888) and Zaynab Fawwaz (1860-1914) are also among the early Arab women who held feminist ideas. While the first was against women's isolation at home and wrote books based on her own experiences to express her ideas about women's rights, the two others chose to write the biographies of earlier women to stress their achievements as examples of female agency.

The Egyptian feminism of the late 19th and early 20th-centuries, which stands for Arab feminism in general, was not only an awareness about women's situation expressed through writing, but also a strong determinism manifested in action. Huda Sha'rawi, for instance, was one of the two women who "shaped the history of feminism in Egypt in the first half of the twentieth century." (Badran, *Feminists* 31) She was an upper-class woman who experienced gender discrimination, and was aware from an early age of the cruelty of the restraints imposed on her by patriarchy just because of her sex. Her personal

experiences made her grow up as a feminist determined to change Egyptian women's plight. At the beginning of the twentieth-century, she helped to found a philanthropic society and organized lectures for women. Then, from 1919 till 1922, she was an active member of the national independence movement. She "supported the establishment of the Misr Bank, by subscribing 1000 Egyptian pounds to the Bank's capital. She urged her friends to subscribe so that Egypt might become economically "independent"." (Hijab 145) She also sent a petition on behalf of the Egyptian women to the British High Commission asking for Egypt's independence and a memorandum to the 1924 Egyptian parliament arguing against any compromise with Britain. (Hijab 145) Besides, in 1923, when the executive committee formed by women within the Wafd Party was dissolved, Huda Sha'rawi founded the Egyptian Feminist Union, and continued to be the leader of the Egyptian feminist movement till her death in 1947. (Hijab145) She was also the first Egyptian woman to unveil in 1923. (Hijab 145)

Nabawiya Musa was the other important feminist figure of the first half of the twentieth century. She was a self-made intellectual who struggled to pursue her education till she graduated as a teacher in 1906. She wrote books and articles calling for women's rights, and in 1937 she established her own journal. Like Huda Sha'rawi, she was very active during the national independence movement. She was even arrested and jailed in 1942 "for speaking out against the government's compromising position when British tanks drew up in front of Abdin Palace." (Hijab 39) Nabawiya Musa and Huda Sha'rawi were the two most important feminist figures who influenced many other Egyptian women. Thanks to them, a great number of women became aware of their minor position compared to men.

Egyptian feminists continued to publish their writings aimed at defending women, and at the same time they raised the number of women's clubs, unions and associations where they could meet to share their opinions, organize and act to elevate women's status in their country. Almost all women's associations had an intellectual aspect and aimed at educating women, broadening their knowledge and informing them about their different rights and the way they could get them. They alerted women's perception of the world and of themselves as worthy individuals who should be treated with great respect. Following the steps of Huda Sha'rawi, many "Egyptian women who had benefited from school education began to give lectures to women. (Hijab 53) They did it with great determinism as they were convinced that it was the first and most important step towards women's advancement.

Being mainly middle and upper-class women did not make Egyptian feminists forget their poor co-citizens. They founded associations such as "Mabarrat Muhammad 'Ali" and "The New Woman Society" which had charitable goals. They aimed at helping poor Egyptian women not only in terms of money, but also by educating them and giving them "instructions in hygiene and general guidance." (Hijab 51) By acting on a social level, Egyptian feminists gained access to public arena and were able to play an important public role which gave them a strong sense of self-esteem. As for the other women they helped, they were convinced of the necessity of solidarity between them to improve their situation. However, they believed that it was not only for their sake but for the benefit of the whole community; since women, seen mainly as (future) mothers, were thought to be the basis of society. Badran mentions this particular point when she writes, "the EFU (Egyptian Feminist Union) and WWCC (Wafdist Women's Central Committee) framed their seven "female demands" with the liberal nationalist axiom that women mirror the advancement of

society. They stressed, "If we demand special amelioration of the condition of the woman, it is not in preference for our sex to the detriment of other members of the community but because we are convinced that this is the only way to reform society". " (Badrab, *Feminists* 94)

This is, in fact, one of the important elements that distinguish Arab feminism from Western feminisms. Arab women in the turn of the century (and later) did not ask for their rights as individuals as is the case in the West, but rather as members of a group: family, tribe, community, society. That was why they asked for their rights "in accordance with tradition," (Hijab 145) which made their demands seem moderate compared to those of Western feminists. Moreover their concern with their community made them play an important role in nationalist movements. As in the case of Egypt, feminists in many other Arab countries, such as Algeria, Tunisia and Palestine, were very active during the wars against colonization. Wearing the veil and hiding their faces helped them move without any fear of being known. They could even carry tracts and guns under fruits and vegetables in their shopping baskets to give them to their national male heroes who were hiding from colonial police.

Arab feminists were also active in demonstrations. They mobilized other women to participate in mass demonstrations against colonization and against the local governments' compromises and complicity with colonial forces (See Badran, *Feminists* and Hijab). There were even women martyrs who were killed by enemy bullets.

Arab feminists were not only active within national boundaries, but were also pan-national militants. Feminist unions such as the Egyptian Feminist Union played an important role in defending the cause of other colonized Arab countries. Huda Sha`rawi, for

instance, "pressed Prime Minister Mustapha Nahhas to support Palestine."(Badran, *Feminists* 227) Indeed, pan-nationalist militancy made Arab feminists get closer, and helped consolidate pan-Arab feminism.

During their nationalist struggles Arab feminists accepted and sometimes were forced to give up some of their demands concerning women's rights. For instance, many feminists who were against veiling accepted to continue wearing the veil as long as their countries were colonized. At the same time, many of those who wanted to unveil were convinced by their national male heroes not to do so because the veil became a symbol of their identity. Even Habib Bourgiba, the liberator of Tunisian women, and "the man who was responsible for the most progressive family law on women within an Islamic framework," (Hijab 46) did not want Tunisian women to start unveiling while the country was still colonized. He did not want them to look like the women of their colonizing country (France). The veil was one of the obvious elements which distinguished Tunisian women from their enemy-sisters. It became seen as part of their identity that they wanted and were encouraged by nationalist men to preserve.

Arab women are the members of society who are thought to be responsible more than anybody else for the preservation of the national identity. Though this means that their freedom may be more restrained than that of men, it means also that they are given a very important social and cultural role. They are the mirror that reflects the country's identity, and the engine that passes distinguishing cultural codes from generation to generation through their mothering role.

Feminists and nationalists alike were concerned about preserving their identity which they wanted to distinguish from those of their colonizers. This does not mean that

debates on veiling did not start before the end of colonization, but it is only after independence that they became stronger and reached different social classes. When their countries were still under foreign rules, Arab feminists were more concerned about fulfilling their national dreams than their feminist demands; but after independence, they oriented their fights towards getting the rights that were guaranteed by Islam but denied by patriarchy.

The suffragette movement that took place in different Arab countries cannot be said to be a movement as strong as the one that appeared in Europe some decades before. A great number of women believed in the importance of their roles on familial, social and economic levels more than on the political one, so they did not take part in the suffragette movement neither did they encourage other women to do so. They did not exert a real pressure on their governments, which made the latter (in general) refrain from bringing any important changes to women's political rights. While some governments, such as the Tunisian government, passed important laws to give women their rights immediately after the country's independence, the majority waited for many years before changing their family laws and personal status. Consequently, Arab women still have many rights to ask for.

In some Arab countries, women are still not allowed to vote or to be elected to parliament. As men (fathers, brothers and husbands) are seen as responsible for them, it is then for men to represent them in politics and take care of their rights. It is also this wrong notion of responsibility that many Arab men have which makes divorced women and widows, for example, lose much of their personal freedom. By "losing" their husbands through death or divorce, women in different regions within the Arab countries become

once more under the responsibility of their fathers or elder brothers. Many even have to live in their parents' or brothers' house, because if they insisted on living alone, they would, generally, be considered as unworthy of people's respect (mainly when they are still young). They would be thought to be encouraging or at least ignoring the real danger of evil male strangers who are now "invited" by the fact that they have no (male) protectors to take advantage of them. Many Arab people believe that widows and divorced women are not even allowed to wear make-up or to be elegant and attractive. A woman's beauty, according to them, must be reserved for her husband, thereby highlighting her beauty when having no husband is a sign of the immoral intentions of that woman.

These are just some examples of Arab women's problems which need great efforts to be solved. Arab feminists have to work hard not only to get women their political and economic rights, but also to change the mentality of many Arab people and make them look differently at women. In the following chapter, however, I will not deal with Arab women's problems, as it is not the concern of this thesis. I will rather deal with two important feminist figures in the Arab world which will afford us a better understanding of Arab feminism, and a clearer idea of how Arab feminists perceive women and women's rights, and how they ask for those rights. I will also deal with the specificities of the Arab culture that give Arab women have their own feminism, something which is not always recognized by Westerners.

Chapter III

Two Leading figures of Modern Arab Feminism

1. Nawal El-Saadawi

1.1. A Rebel

Nawal El Saadawi is an Egyptian physician and writer who was born to a middle-class family in lower Egypt's Delta in 1931. Though relatively traditional, her parents sent her to school where she did well and continued through university in Cairo. She is not only a feminist writer whose books deal with women's oppression and problems, but also a socialist militant who speaks against all sorts of injustices in the Arab World.

Her ideas and writings have caused her many problems throughout the years. First, her books were banned in most Arab countries because they were considered to be dealing with taboo notions such as women's sexuality. Indeed, her first non-fiction book *Woman and Sex* (1972) which angered political and theological authorities cost her her job as the Director General of Public Health Education in the Egyptian Ministry of Health, which she had occupied since 1958. She also ceased to be editor-in-chief of the *Health* magazine, and Assistant General Secretary for Egypt's Medical Association. In spite of all this, El Saadawi did not give up writing; however she was obliged to publish her books in Lebanon. From 1973 to 1978, she was a writer at the High Institute of Literature and Science, and a researcher at Aïn Shams University's Faculty of Medicine in Cairo. She also worked as the United Nations' advisor for the women's Program in Africa and the Middle East (1978-1980).

After criticizing President Anwar Sadat's politics, Nawal El Saadawi was arrested and jailed in 1981. Although she was denied pen and paper she continued to write in prison, "on toilet rolls and cigarette papers." (El Saadawi, *Women's Prison* 81) She recalls, "Prison taught me that freedom is very important, but it taught me also that I'm ready to lose my freedom…for a different society." (Belton 9) Shortly after the president's death (1982), she

was released by the new president, Hosni Mubarak, and in 1983 she published *Memoirs from the Women's Prison.* She also founded the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, which was "the first legal, independent feminist organization in Egypt. The organization had 500 members locally and more than 2000 internationally," (Belton 9) But it was banned in 1991 because of El Saadawi's criticism of the U.S. involvement in the Gulf War, "which [she] felt should have been solved among the Arabs." (Belton 9)

A rebel as she has always been, Nawal El Saadawi continues to write and criticize all that she sees as unjust practices on the political, social or economic level. "I will continue to criticize, she says, even if it keeps me in prison." (Belton 9) She continues to write, because she considers herself "the voice of the silent majority in Egypt and the Arab world." (McMillan 5) "The pen is the most valuable thing in my life," she says, "My words on paper are more valuable to me than my life itself. More valuable than my children, more than my husband, more than my freedom." (El Saadawi, *The Women's Prison* 116) Yet, she does not want to continue speaking and fighting alone. She writes to awaken the "silent majority": "Young women, young men, young people, writers, students, so that more and more individuals of this silent majority speak up." (McMillan 5)

Though her main concern is women's oppression, and though she deals mainly with women's problems, Nawal El Saadawi does not exclude men. She writes for every (Arab) individual, whether woman or man, who is victim of any kind of oppression caused by the injustice of local and international political systems. For instance, she dedicates *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader* "to women and men who choose to pay the price and be free rather than continue to pay the price of slavery." Gender and class oppressions in the Arab world are, according to her, linked to the corruption of the local political systems, as well as to

international imperialism. So in her feminist writings, there is always a criticism directed to one or the other of these sources of oppression.

Religion, or the religious interpretations made by patriarchy, is also another major topic that keeps reappearing in El Saadawi's literature. Though she occasionally defends Islam against Western prejudices about it, and against the different backward practices that are done in its name, she does not hesitate to criticize what she sees as hindering women's development and freedom, as she also rejects the patriarchal use of Islam to favor men and the powerful classes. In an Interview published in "*Race and Class*" (1980) she clearly points out that "Islam is not the enemy of women, but it has been and is being used by patriarchal systems so that its most repressive and reactionary aspects are emphasized." She also adds that the Arab governments, knowing the importance of Islam for the people, use it "as a political tool" for their own favour (176). Her criticism of certain religious practices along with her dealing with what had for a long time been considered as taboo notions turned Egyptian theological authorities and conservative religious men against her. Her life became threatened, and she found herself obliged to accept "a five-year voluntary exile" in the United States where she had been a visiting professor at different universities from 1993 to 1997. (Ingrid 1)

Once she returns to Egypt, Nawal El Saadawi continues her critical writings of what is according to her gender, political, economic or religious sources of oppression for women and men alike. In Mars 2001, in a newspaper interview, she spoke about Muslim women's rights, and called for more equality between sexes under Muslim laws, which once more raised religious authorities and conservative people against her. This time an Islamist lawyer "sought to forcibly divorce the outspoken feminist, Nawal El Saadawi, from her

Muslim husband on the ground that she had abandoned her Islamic faith[...]which he argued meant she should not be allowed to remain married to her Muslim husband." (Reuters 1) After many postponements, the court turned down the petition against El Saadawi who said "My husband and I are very happy. But we feel the case should have been rejected by the court from the very beginning." (Reuters 1)

El Saadawi's critical boldness has caused her many problems but she has never given up. She has become a symbol for many oppressed Arab women who wish to have her courage and determinism to get rid of the chains that suffocate them, and to stick to their principles no matter what the cost may be. But, at the same time, conservative and fundamentalist men see her as an alienated Westernized woman who must be rejected and excluded from the community for fear that she will corrupt the minds of other women. They think of her as an enemy of Islam who has a bad influence on other members of the female sex in the Arab world. "Certainly, no Arab woman's pen has violated as many sacred enclosures as that of Nawal El Saadawi," writes Fedwa Malti-Douglas. She adds, "A leftist male writer from another part of the Arab world (whose name I omit out of affection and deference) once declared to me in an impassioned tone when I raised the topic of El Saadawi the writer: "She has ruined our daughters"." (Malti-Douglas, *Men* 1-2)

Such men do not want their wives or daughters to be like Nawal El Saadawi or like any one of her female protagonists. They do not want them to be influenced by the images of women that this feminist writer tries to establish through her writings, because they think that it is not convenient for Arab women, and that it is inspired from the West.

1.2. Woman's Image in El Saadawi's Literature

Nawal El Saadawi expresses her feminist ideas and attitudes not only in her articles and non-fiction books, but also in her novels and short stories. Her fiction is greatly based on her personal life and real experiences with patients and other real people she has encountered during her life-time. She affirms

> "I write from my personal life and experiences and the effect of the world and the lives of other women and men whom I meet in my life. I write with my past and present and future, with my soul and body and mind. Writing is a whole process with the whole being involved, including our childhood, our history, and our imagined life in the future." (Al-Ali 31)

Many Egyptian and Arab critics, however, do not think of her as a good novelist. They fault her "for her repetitive style, weak language, and lack of technical development." (Amireh 226) Even those who appreciate her "good scientific research" are convinced that "she writes bad novels." (Amireh 226) Nevertheless, whether artistically good or not, her novels, just like her non-fiction books, "are written in an accessible language that is neither literary nor technical. Her simple diction, crisp sentences, and short paragraphs give her books a journalistic flavor and appeal to a wide reading public" (Amireh 231) In fact what many (women) readers like in El Saadawi's writings is the way she "addresses readers with the confidence of a physician, the passion of an activist, the credibility of an eyewitness, and the pathos of an injured woman," (Amireh 231) which makes them identify with her characters, and see their own image reflected in her literature. El Saadawi is, indeed, a committed feminist who feels it is her duty to report Arab women's plight and stand against

all sorts of injustice they suffer from. By putting her finger on the real origins of Arab women's problems, El Saadawi aims at changing Arab people's mentality and perception of the world. She knows that literature is not like direct action, but she believes in its power and ability to change the world, even if it takes more time.

By examining her works, one gains a good sense of the real situation of Egyptian women and of the majority of Arab women today. One can also understand Arab feminism, though many Arab people, especially men, accuse her of being Westernized, and therefore, of not standing for Arab feminists and/or women. I think that this claim is based on her socialist tendencies, and her dealing with the female body from a liberal point of view. I agree with her when she says, "I live in Egypt. All my consciousness is formed in the Arabic culture [...] Therefore, my frame of reference is my village, Arabic, Egyptian culture and history, and my struggle in my country." (Amireh 32) However, translation and editing may sometimes force her to adjust her books for her new Western audience and give them, to a certain extent, what they want to read about Arab women. By doing so, she gives her critics an additional "proof" of her Westernization. I will not indulge in this point now as I will come back to it later.

In this section, I will be reading in two of her novels, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (1958) and *Two Women in One* (1970). As my aim is looking at the way women are represented in both novels, and not doing a full analysis of each work, I will do a parallel reading of both books, instead of discussing each one separately. This method will allow me to underline the similar and complementary aspects of women representation in both novels. Then, in order to have a more complete idea of the Saadawian representation of women, I will look at her non-fiction work, *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1977). I will also refer

to *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader* (1997). Each one of these two non-fiction books includes a number of articles and essays written for different occasions. Some of them were published in different reviews. Since El Saadawi's fiction is based on real life and is almost always about real people and real incidents, I will analyze her novels and non-fiction books alike, and I will refer to her novels to support my arguments. I, indeed, believe that El Saadawi's fictional and non-fictional works complement each other to give the reader a full idea of her feminist opinions.

The literary genre which El Saadawi chooses for her two novels is very telling. Each of them is a bildungsroman which accounts the inner development of the heroine. It follows her search for her identity through a process of conflicts and struggles. In the following part of this section, I will first show how El Saadawi's novels are novels of development. Second, I will compare their reception in the Arab countries to the reception of a bildungsroman within the West through the example of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. I will finally look at men, or male characters as one of the essential elements which make the difference in reception between the Arab countries and the West.

By writing novels of development, Nawal El Saadawi is following an old tradition in Arab literature. Indeed, the novel of development, what is called in the West the bildungsroman, has existed in Arab literature for many centuries now. Think for example of the old story of Sindbad, the famous character of *The Thousand and One Nights.* It is just an example among many others of the Arab novel of development which does not necessarily follow the same structure nor does it have the same constructs as the Western bildungsroman as defined by theorists such as Barbara White:

> "The bildungsroman, or novel of development [is] a genre in which social realism is apt to become mixed with elements of romance. This mixture of real life and fantasy, or genuine social events and imaginary adventures is appropriate to a fictional genre that delineates a turning point in the hero's life that is of both personal, psychological import and social significance. Since the narratives most often bring the hero from childhood to maturity, moreover, the undertones of the mythic and fantastic are appropriate themes linking the free-ranging imaginative world of childhood to the more soberly social concerns of the adult." (13)

Though El Saadawi's novels, as Arab bildungsromans, do not totally confirm to this Western definition of the genre, they contain certain similarities. Like any novel of development, El Saadawi's novels are about the protagonist's search for her identity. They picture the ups and downs and endurances she goes through to become a mature woman. The dichotomy between the heroine's "desire for her authenticity and society's desire for her femininity" (White 35) makes the protagonist retreat from society (the male world) to nature in Western bildungsromans, and to art in the case of El saadawi's heroines.

Memoirs of a Woman Doctor takes the frame of an autobiography where the protagonist alters chronological narration and flashbacks to tell her life-long experience which made of her a mature woman. As for the heroine of *Two Women in One*, she is the focalizer through which events are looked at and analyzed. She is used by the narrator as the focus through which she allows the reader to look at the world of the novel. Both novels

picture the dichotomy between the heroine's perception of herself and society's view of her as a woman. The unnamed protagonist of the first novel faces her parents' bias to her brother on her own expense. While he is allowed to go out, play, jump around and eat his soup noisily, she has to stay at home, watch every movement she makes and drink her soup without a noise. She also has to make his bed and help her mother in the kitchen when he enjoys himself with his friends (6). Even when she does better than him at school, her parents' attitude does not change which makes her hate her femininity. She recalls, "The first tears I shed in my life weren't because I'd done badly at school or broken something valuable but because I was a girl. I wept over my femininity even before I knew what it was." (El Saadawi, *Memoirs* 10) Early in her childhood, she learns to hate both her "nature" and men. First, she chooses to retreat from others and create her own world in her room, but she soon decides to come out of her isolation to prove to everybody that she is not inferior to anyone from the opposite sex. She decides to become a doctor; a woman whose knowledge and help men will need and come to ask for.

The dichotomy between the heroine's and society's perception of womanhood is even stronger in El Saadawi's *Two Women in One.* It is apparent in the continuous conflict between the protagonist's inner self and her socialized personality. While she proves a strong longing for living her life in the way she wants, she cannot avoid thinking of her parents' reputation and other people's judgment. Clinically speaking, Bahiah Shaheen can be said to be suffering from schizophrenia, but in fact she reflects the Arab woman's struggle for her identity. She is torn between her desire to be herself and society's desire for her to confirm to the norms determined for her sex. Throughout the novel, she tries to free herself from the mold into which she was put by her parents and society in general. She feels suffocated and wants to get out of that mold, but each time her socialized being pulls

her down. This split within her becomes a leitmotif that dominates the novel. But, finally, "her real self, [...] that other self dwelling within her, that devil who moved and saw things with the sharpest power of perception." (El Saadawi, *Two Women* 37) proves to be stronger and more determined than Bahiah Shaheen as educated by her parents and her society, the obedient "hard-working, well-behaved medical student, the pure virgin, untouched by human hands and born without sex organs." (El Saadawi, *Two Women* 75) It succeeds to free her from that image which society wants her to reflect. Now she can be herself.

Both heroines, after going through similar experiences, succeed in fulfilling their dreams and prove that they are full of agency. Similarly to all the Saadawian heroines, they start losing their sense of belonging to their family and community when they are teens. Education helps them understand their situation and rebel against it. In fact, El Saadawi like all the Arab feminists believes in the important role that education plays in changing women's condition. Many of her protagonists are either doctors or medical students who have a certain love of art. While art refines the protagonists' senses and helps them express their ideas, science, and particularly medicine, enables them to look differently at the human body and become convinced that gender differences and discrimination are the result of socialization and have nothing to do with biology.

The protagonist of *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, a medicine student, feels strong while standing in the dissecting room in front of a male corpse with her scalpel ready to go into its heart or stomach. She triumphantly wonders,

> "Man's body! That dreadful thing with which mothers frighten their young daughters, so they are consumed by the fire of the kitchen for the sake of his satiation and they dream of his spectral figure night and

> day! There he is, man, thrown in front of me, naked, ugly, torn to pieces." (25)

Medicine frees her from the fear and humiliation caused by the "male myth" created by patriarchy and transmitted to her by her mother. Like Bahiah Shaheen, she sees man's body as only a number of "muscles, arteries, nerves and bones." (24) She understands that man's superiority is only in people's minds and that it is created by society and has no scientific foundation. The reader can detect here an important similarity between the attitude of El Saadawi's heroines and the Western feminists' (rational) view of sex differences. But it is very important to notice that El Saadawi's heroines' attitude towards men is only transitional, and that it changes as soon as they become mature and find the right men with whom they can continue their ways.

Biology is not destiny for the Saadawian heroines. Being originally ready for change, they are enabled by education to become even more determined to rebel and change the direction of their lives. Their parents help them to a certain extent, since they allow them to get a certain education. Nawal El Saadawi mentions this when speaking about herself in an interview published in *Opening the gates: a Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (1990). She says,

> "What happened in our family is that my father and mother gave us some space to rebel by giving us some freedom and education. They gave us the elements of rebellion. Because in order to rebel, you need some awareness, some knowledge, and also some courage. They gave us this." (396)

However, even when rebelling, they know that there are certain limits that should not be trespassed. These limits are not externally imposed, but rather defined by the heroines themselves. The protagonist of *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, for instance, says, "I impose my own restrictions on myself voluntarily, and experience my freedom, as I understand the word, in the same way." (74) The limits she puts for herself are due to her perception of her freedom, which is the result of the cultural context she lives in. She understands freedom in the way Arab women do. The latter, unlike many Western women, do not try to completely dismantle certain social structures such as the family, but rather democratize them in order to make them give a better place to women. A place wide enough for them to live their lives without feeling suffocated. Arab women, in their demands for their rights, try just to widen the boundaries that are made too narrow for them by patriarchy. They do not want to completely demolish them.

This limited rebellion against patriarchy, and those restrictions defined and respected by women themselves do not make Arab readers deny the Saadawian novels their feminist value. However, a similar work in the West would likely be considered too moderate to be taken as feminist. Think for example of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre.* It is a bildungsroman which follows the protagonist's growth during her pilgrimage from The Reeds' home to Thornfield. It is seen, by many Western critics, as a well written novel which portrays British women's condition in the nineteenth-century, but which is not necessarily feminist. Though Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar consider *Jane Eyre* as a feminist novel, many others do not share their opinion. Jane's silent love for Rochester and her proposal to him in the end, in addition to her being influenced by other men during her pilgrimage are some of the main details which make many Western critics deny the novel its feminist value. Maurianne Adams, for instance, finds in the whole novel only one

sentence which she argues is "the single moment of understanding that might be called feminist. ("Women feel just as men feel; they need experience for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do.") (Adams 180) Though Jane proves, in different instances throughout the novel, that she has a strong personality and strong sense of self, she is not considered by many Western critics as a feminist who challenges patriarchal constraints. Terry Eagleton is another Western critic who does not think of Jane Eyre as a real feminist woman. In *Myths of Power*: *a Marxist Study of the Brontës* (1975), and while dealing with *Jane Eyre,* he argues that Charlotte Brontë has an "impulse to negotiate passionate self-fulfillment on terms which preserve the social and moral conventions, and so preserve intact the submission, enduring, everyday self which adheres to them." (16) He sees Jane Eyre as showing certain protest to male rules, but nonetheless conforming to society's concepts of womanhood.

The literary genre of the novel is also considered as one of the elements which make the work's "feminist" content very negligible. Barbara White argues that "in the bildungsroman proper, with its expectation that the hero is learning to be adult there is the hidden agenda of gender norms, where "adult" means learning to be submissive or "nonadult"." (16) After studying different 19th and early 20th-century bildungsromans, she concludes that women's "bildungsroman plots are [...] shaped by the dominant social norms for womanhood," (16) which makes them provide "models for "growing down" rather than "growing up"." (14) Barbara White even proposes to change the label. She suggests "entwicklungsroman" which according to her is a more appropriate term for women's novels of development since it means "the novel of mere growth, mere physical passage from one age to the other without a psychological development." Barbara White and many other Western critics think that the plots of women's bildungsroman follow the

constructs of patriarchy, in the sense that the heroines become adults in the way society wants them to be. Their maturity is, according to these critics, merely physical. They think that as long as the heroines do not totally overthrow men, they cannot be said to be mature and full of agency, let alone being called feminists.

This kind of perception of the woman's bildungsroman, and this way of understanding feminism as implying a compulsory enmity between both sexes and a total rejection of structures judged as patriarchal such as marriage and family make many Western critics deny a work like *Jane Eyre* its feminist implication. In the Arab countries, however, things are different. The protagonists of El Saadawi's bildungsromans are seen as rebellious feminists although they do not categorically reject men. Like the author, they understand that men just like women are not all the same. In *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* and *Two Women in One* male Characters are divided into two main types. The first ones are those who are completely unaware of the effect of socialization on them, and who believe that it is the right way to be. They are not only the relatively old men such as the protagonists' fathers and male relatives. They can also be young and educated such as the medicine students who go to the same university as Bahiah in *Two Women in One*. This first kind of men is the one which the heroines and the writer criticize and stand against. They are the men who, according to Nawal El Saadawi, hold the Arab society back and hinder its prosperity and development; after all, Arab women's enjoyment of their rights is seen, by Arab feminists, as an element of prosperity for the whole society.

Though in some of her novels such as *Women at Point Zero* and the *Fall of the Imam*, there are only evil male characters, El Saadawi is far from being against men. She thinks that within the Arab society a great number of men oppress women and consider

them as their inferiors, but she does not share the view of many radical Western feminists who think of all men as enemies. El Saadawi speaks for all Arab feminists when she says

> We do not believe that the women's emancipation movement should be developed on the basis of solidarity between women against men, that the struggle is that of woman against man. Women must organize and be able to exert pressure as a political, economic and cultural force. But the aim is a concerted effort to change relations within society –and between men and women– in the direction of greater equality, a more profound understanding and a deeper humanity. This will entail struggle, but we are against animosity, hatred and enmity between the sexes which can only serve to accentuate problems and prevent men and women from being partners in building a better future." (El Saadawi, *Reader* 32)

The men who can be the protagonists' "partners in building a better future" are the second kind of men present in the Saadawian novels and the Arab society alike. Like the artist in *Memoirs of a Women Doctor* and Saleem in *Two Women in One,* they are educated and determined young men who have a view of women, and of the relation between the sexes different from that of other men in their society. Bahiah Shaheen finds in Saleem the only person who can see her real self. When he looked at her for the first time, she felt that "it was the first time she had ever been seen by any eyes other than her own [...] In the street, on the tram, or at collage, she realized that eyes were incapable of seeing her or distinguishing her from thousands of others." (El Saadawi. *Reader* 36) She feels invisible for other people because they do not try to see her real self. They just see her as a girl who

must confirm to the norms predetermined for her sex, which makes her hate her femininity. Only when she meets Saleem, can she reconcile with her nature. His ability to understand her and his help for her to find her own identity make her prove a strong need for him. But, contrary to what some (Western) readers may think, she does not try to hide her feelings, because she does not see her love for a man as a weakness or a deficiency in her strong personality.

This same view of love is shared by the protagonist of *Memoirs of a woman Doctor*. The failure of her two first marriages does not make her reject all relation with the opposite sex. Like Bahiah Shaheen, she is convinced that men are not all the same. They are not all evil, just as women are not all good. She believes that love and marriage do not minimize a woman's sense of self. For that reason she does not hesitate to express her love and need for her beloved (the artist). She recalls, "I'd begun to need a hand to support me. For the first time in my life I felt that I needed someone else, [...] I buried my head in his chest and wept tears of quiet relief." (El Saadawi, *Memoirs* 100) Her love and need for him do not affect her image as a strong, independent woman. Arab readers as well as critics see her, like all other Saadawian heroines, as a woman who has a strong sense of self-esteem. They consider her as a feminist who does not submit to patriarchal injustices, but who, as other Arab feminists, does not try to completely reverse the order of things. Instead of completely rejecting men, she tries to find the right man with whom she can live on terms of complementarity rather than domination.

Both Saadawian heroines find this relationship of complementarity with their beloveds. The latter share with both protagonists their view of gender relations, their attitude towards certain social norms, and their love for art. Thanks to these men the

heroines can reconcile with their femininity, and feel stronger and more determined than before. All the aspects of their relationships are seen as a means of self-fulfillment and not as signs of weakness and submission. Even sex is looked at from this side. Bahiah Shaheen, for instance, does not consider sex as a permission to Saleem to control her body, but she does not see it either as a way for her to prove her strong sexuality as a woman. It is rather a ritual that makes her fulfill herself and merge with Saleem beyond human differences. Describing their love-making experience, the author writes,

> "Like the force of gravity that attracts the body to the earth, his arms moved round her. They embraced with a violent desire to dissolve into the world, to lose all consciousness of the body and its weight, and to be annihilated and vanish in the air."(67)

Sex is not a physical Eros, or a way to prove her powerful sexuality as a woman, as is the case with different Western feminists, it is rather a ritual that makes her rise above human level and unite with the universe. Indeed, Nawal El Saadawi differs from many Western feminists in their view of women's sexuality as a proof of the female power. She does not understand woman's right to control their bodies in the same way as the Western individual feminist who promote the slogan "It's woman's body, it's woman's right" and use it to justify certain social and sexual phenomena such as prostitution and pornography. In this context, Wendy Mc Elroy, the writer of *Woman's Right to Pornography*, Nadine Strossen who wrote *Defending Pornography* and Sallie Tisdale the author of *Talk Dirty to Me* are just some examples among many others.

The feeling of liberation and self-fulfillment which Bahiah proves while making love to Saleem is also experienced by her when she participates in a students'

demonstration against colonialism. The nationalist students who participate in the demonstration are the community to which Bahiah feels she belongs. They are the women and men who stand against injustices and fight for their freedom. A freedom that goes beyond gender and the liberation of one sex to encompass the whole nation. The heroine who identifies with these people describes them as having

> "faces different from those she knew from the dissecting room, bodies different from those she had seen forcing their way into the lecture hall. Their features were as sharp as swords, their complexions muddy, their backs straight and unbending, their eyes raised and their legs firm and rippling with muscles as their feet strode over the earth, shaking sky and trees. (El Saadawi, *Two Women* 82)

These people form the society to which Bahih Shaheen is happy to belong. With them, she can find herself "like part of an immense body with one heart and a single set of features." (El Saadawi, *Two Women* 82) This experience, just like the one with Saleem, makes her have "the strange sensation of blending into the larger world, of becoming part of the infinite extended body of humanity, of dissolving like a drop of water in the sea or a particle of air in the atmosphere." (El Saadawi, *Two Women* 82)

This last passage is, indeed, a wonderful summary of El Saadawi's view of feminism and women's emancipation. Nawal El Saadawi, like all Arab feminists, believe that women's gaining of their rights is a way for them to cross over boundaries and unite with men to build a better society. Women's emancipation is not seen as a goal but a means to prepare, along with men, a better future for the coming generations. Starting by getting

their rights, Arab women will be able to continue fighting against all other sorts of injustices, just like the students in the strike.

Indeed, it is extremely rare to find a woman in the Arab world who wants to be emancipated just for the sake of her personal freedom. Arab women always think of themselves in relation to their families and communities. For instance, they think of how to be better mothers to raise reliable, respectable and intelligent generations, and how to have their places in the employment market to participate in the development of their countries. Of course, there is also a feeling of independence and self achievement which women long for, but that is not the core of their fighting for their rights. It is not as important as in the West, because in the Arab world, what comes first is the family and not the individual. It is indeed, the family which is considered to be the basis of society, an important difference between the Arab World and the West to which I will return in the next chapter.

This being said, it is important to underline the fact that in El Saadawi's novels, not all women are good and positive. Just like the male characters, women are not all the same. They differ in terms of their agency, self-esteem, determination and view of their rights. Nawal El Saadawi does not try to put all women in the same group. She does not think that biology and experience inevitably make women understand and sympathize with each other. On the contrary, El Saadawi always insists on creating one and sometimes several female characters who not only hinder the heroine's emancipation, but also take part in her oppression. Those female characters are not necessarily evil. They may stand against the protagonist's search for her freedom just out of ignorance or weakness.

Such women who really exist in the Arab society are represented in *Two Women in One* by Bahiah's mother who "never understood her." (El Saadawi, *Two Women* 10) and

whose arms when embracing the heroine are compared to gravity which pulls her body down to earth and prevents her from flying. The mother who transmits to Bahiah her own false knowledge of the female body, makes her feel "the tragedy of her own body, carrying it with her at every step and every cell." (El Saadawi, *Two Women* 11) She makes her daughter feel ashamed of her body and cannot stand to look at it naked in the mirror. Her education of her daughter, which is the result of her own education and experience within patriarchy, makes the heroine see the word "female" as an insult. (El Saadawi, *Two Women* 73) That is the same mother who does not react to protect her daughter when the men of the family "sold her to a man for three hundred Egyptian pounds." (El Saadawi, *Two Women* 99) It is again that same mother who earlier brings home Umm Muhammad, the old woman who comes armed with a sharp razor "to cut that small thing" between the thighs of Bahiah's sister, Fawziah. (El Saadawi, *Two Women* 97) Had it not been for Umm Muhammad's death and Bahiah's family moving to Cairo, the protagonist would have undergone the same "surgery" and would have lost for ever the meaning of sexual desire, just like the heroine of *memoirs of a Woman Doctor*. The latter was circumcised when still a little child, and the event marked her for the rest of her life.

Circumcision is indeed one of the topics which Nawal El Saadawi deals with in her books. Being herself circumcised, she knows exactly what it means for a woman to lose her clitoris or even part of it. She knows what it means for a little girl to be hurt, horrified and deprived of her "natural" rights just because she has female organs. As a doctor, she "was called upon many times to treat complications arising from this primitive operation, which very often jeopardized the life of young girls. [...] Severe hemorrhage was therefore a common occurrence and sometimes led to loss of life." (El Saadawi, *The Hidden* 33) As an Arab woman, a feminist and a doctor, Nawal El Saadawi criticizes this practice and calls

for its abolition. She tries to go back to its real origins and explains how it has nothing to do with Islam, as many people think, and how it is a very old practice that had existed even in parts of Europe until the nineteenth-century. She adds

> "It is recorded as going back far into the past under the Pharaonic Kingdoms of Ancient Egypt, and Herodotus mentioned the existence of female circumcision seven hundred years before Christ was born. This is why the operation as practiced in the Sudan is called "Pharaonic excision"." (El Saadawi, *The Hidden* 40)

In her non-fiction writings, Nawal El Saadawi deals with a great number of different topics related to women: education, poverty, work, development, marriage, divorce, abortion, health, religious fundamentalism, women in cross-cultural contexts and many others however, in the West, and particularly in the United States, her name is always associated with circumcision. American feminists see female genital mutilation as the most important issue dealt with by Nawal El Saadawi. The Arab critic Amireh refers to El Saadawi's image in the West saying,

> "The United Nations' declaration of the period from 1975 to 1985 as the decade of Women signaled official international interest in the lives of third world women, provided them a forum in which to speak, and gave an impetus to global feminism. One issue of central interest to Western women was clitoridectomy, a topic addressed at the U.N.-sponsored Copenhagen Conference of 1980. The coverage of this event in the U.S. media linked clitoredoctimy and El Saadawi and gave both a prominent position." (Amireh 220)

In fact El Saadawi's "official crossover to the West", as Amireh calls it, is related to her first book to be translated into English: *The Hidden Face of Eve*, which "became one of her most influential books, often hailed as a "classic"." (Amireh 219) the original Arabic title of the book which is *Al-Wajh al-'ari lilmar'a al-'araiyyah* can be literally translated as "the naked face of the Arab woman." Right from the title, the context is changed: the naked face becomes hidden in the English translation, whereas the Arab woman becomes Eve, a symbol encompassing all women of the world.

Amireh makes a very interesting comparison between the original Arabic edition of the book (1979), and its English translation in both the British and the American editions (1980 and 1982 respectively). She remarks how not only the title of the book changes but also the titles of some sections and the content itself. Before arriving in the United States, and while crossing the Mediterranean to go from Egypt to Europe (Britain), the book undergoes some changes in form and content. Then, in order to make a "successful" crossover to America, it is subject to even more important modifications. Indeed, the early response of British and European people to *The Hidden Face of Eve* in 1980 "seems to have caused El Saadawi to rethink how to frame her book for a Western audience." (Amireh 223) She was severely faulted for her introduction where she praised the Iranian revolution of 1978-79, and for her criticism of Western imperialism. For these reasons, she had to change the introduction to the American edition. Now, she wrote with a tone "more subdued and less militant than in the earlier version [...] She has adjusted her rhetoric to accommodate the expectations of her new audience." (Amireh 224)

Amireh shows how El Saadawi omits some chapters that existed in the Arabic edition as well as some passages such as the one which Amireh translates as "It is important

that Arab women should not feel inferior to Western women, or think that the Arabic tradition and culture are more oppressive to women than Western culture." (Amireh 225) In addition to these omissions, there is also the addition of certain chapters which do not figure in the Arabic edition such as "*The Grandfather with Bad Manners*" and "*Circumcision of Girls*." The last addition is very telling knowing that, "The only time El Saadawi mentions circumcision in the original edition is in the flashback to her childhood in the opening paragraphs. No complete chapter devoted to circumcision appears in any of her other theoretical books either." (Amireh 225) In the introduction to the British edition she disagrees with "those women in America and Europe who concentrate on issues such as female circumcision and depict them as proof of the unusual and barbaric oppression to which women are exposed only in African and Arab countries." (Amireh 221) She argues that these issues cannot be dealt with in isolation from the whole cultural context, as she denounces those who sensationalize these issues and use them to show the Western women's superiority. However, in the American edition, she herself calls circumcision "barbaric." "In order to be heard, El Saadawi seems to have felt that she had to compromise, yielding at least partly to her audience's expectations." (Amireh 224)

Due to all these changes which El Saadawi agreed (or was forced) to make, she, to a certain extent, has given Western readers what they wanted to read about Arab women. This means that in a way, she confirms their prejudices about Arab women, instead of unsettling and correcting them. In fact, the effecting role of the audience and the implied reader as presented by reception theories becomes even more problematic when there is a great difference between the culture of the writer and that of the reader. As Maria Tymoczko, in dealing with the difficulties encountered by a post-colonial or a minority-culture writer, clearly explains

> "The greater the distance between an author's source culture and the receiving culture of an author's work, the greater will be the impetus to simplify. A minority-culture or a post-colonial writer will have to pick aspects of the home culture to convey and to emphasize, particularly if the intended audience includes as a significant component international or dominant-culture readers." (Tymoczko 23) She adds that "the values, the belief system and the nature of the audience determine the norms for the minority-culture or the post-colonial writer and the translator alike." (Tymoczko 32)

Nawal El Saadawi, like any non-Western writer affected by the Western exclusive canonization, had to submit to these "rules" in order to be heard in the West. In the American edition of *The Hidden Face of Eve*, she put more emphasis on circumcision than she usually does when addressing Arab audience, because she knows that Western people are interested in that particular topic. She understood that if she could not bring the Western audience to her text, she would have to bring her text to the audience, by making it conform, to a certain extent, to their culture and to their prejudices and stereotypes about Arab women.

Consequently, the image that she has among Western readers cannot be said to be a faithful reflection of her, just as the ideas she passes through her book are not all purely hers. Actually, Western, mainly American, feminists think of her as a victim of Arab patriarchy standing "alone in the fight for increased justice and democracy for women." (Amerih 227) She is singled out as the only Arab woman and feminist who leads real battles against archaic traditions that still keep oppressing women. Even when interpreting

her books or her conferential speeches, Western people keep in mind the ideas they already have about Arab women and society. Many American university professors indicate that in spite of the great efforts they make, they cannot prevent their students from using El Saadawi's books to confirm their stereotypes about Arab people. The students do not easily break with their essentialist and ethnocentric theoretical perspectives. (Amireh 241)

A great number of Western readers are not aware that their location as readers affects their understanding of the books that come from a totally different culture. Moreover they are not aware of the processes (including translating and editing) which El Saadawi's books went through in order to arrive in their bookstores, in addition to the Western canonization which has an inevitable great effect on non-Western writings. All these factors should be considered by the reader and the critic in order to understand El Saadawi's writings and avoid recoding them in a version completely different from the original one. By making such an effort, Western readers would be able to correct the distorted image they have about Nawal El Saadawi.

Indeed, in the West, Nawal El Saadawi is not seen as an Arab feminist with ideas and views originating within a special Arab context. She is rather seen as a militant adopting Western feminist views and theories to fight against the backwardness of the Arab society, and a courageous woman who dares to say "No" to an extremely patriarchal structure that makes of Arab women the most oppressed women on earth. In her later non-fiction books such as *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader* (1997), she tries to exert more control on her writing. Now, she was already known in the West, and did not need much sacrifice to get a visa to Europe or to America as she did before.

In her *Nawal El Saadawi Reader*, she writes with more boldness and clarity about different issues concerning Arab women such as health and organizing. She also deals with the relation between women in the North and women in the South, and she comes to the conclusion that we cannot "speak about women in the North separate from men in the North." (22) She also claims that we cannot separate feminism from culture. That is why, according to her, western feminists, because they come from imperialist countries and from a totally different culture, cannot liberate Arab women either by exporting their feminism to them, or by acting on their behalf. In an interview published in "*Race and Class*", she says that it is Arab women's duty to liberate themselves from their oppression, and that any Western women's interference to help them "is another type of colonialism in disguise." (El Saadawi, *Arab* 179) She argues that Western feminists do not know the Arab culture and history well enough to be able to analyze Arab women's oppression and find solutions. Furthermore, Western feminists' attempt to help non-Western women means that they are totally liberated from all sorts of oppression and subordination, and that they no longer have any problems to fight against at home, whereas, in fact they still have a long way to go. Nawal El Saadawi rejects the way Western feminists use Arab women's oppression to emphasize their own prosperity. Speaking about many Western feminists' sensationalization of practices like circumcision, she says, "unless we know the roots of [the] habit [...] and understand its origins, we may do more harm than good to the people who practice it." (El Saadawi, *Arab* 177)

Through this interview, El Saadawi tries to exert some control on Western people's understanding of some Arab and Third-World phenomena. While in *The Hidden Face of Eve* she was forced by the different factors discussed earlier to change her original book, and give Western readers what they wanted to read, in this interview, as in the different

conferences she attended, she speaks her mind and expresses her feminist ideas with less reservation. She criticizes The Western feminists who focus on minor issues such as circumcision, and forget about the major problems of Arab and Third-World women. Speaking about the Women's Conference in Copenhagen (1980) she says "one thing I felt strongly in Copenhagen was that Western women continually concentrated on the issue of female circumcision and isolated it from its political, historical and economic context. All that they know about Sudanese women, for instance, is that they are circumcised. They do not even know where Sudan is on the map! This made us angry and we told them that they first had to understand such an issue from all its angles." (El Saadawi, *Arab* 177) She added "there was a sort of illusion that they, as Western women, could help us though they were ignorant of our problems. [...] we must deal with female circumcision ourselves. It is our culture, we understand it, when to fight against it and how." (El Saadawi, *Arab* 179)

I find this a convincing argument. Indeed, the majority of Western feminists look at phenomena like circumcision from a Western point of view, which makes them give it a completely wrong explanation, and that, of course, cannot help the concerned women. For instance, one of the explanations given by Westerners to circumcision is

> "Man is jealous of woman's [clitoral] pleasure because she does not require him to achieve it. When her outer sex is cut off, and she's left with only the smallest, inelastic opening through which to receive him, he can believe that it is only his penis that can reach her inner parts and give her what she craves." (Bastan)

This explanation originates in the mind of a Western feminist whose major problems are fighting gender discriminations and proving woman's superiority. Sexuality is, of course,

one of the important elements used to prove female power and it is frequently used by Western feminists to explain certain kinds of behavior which some times do not seem to have a direct link with it.

Kerry Ann Bastan, here, forgets about the fact that a woman in different third world cultures is linked to the honor of the family, and that having sexual relations, or being pregnant out of marriage is very dishonoring not only to the woman herself but also to her whole family (mainly the men of the family); which explains (though does not justify) circumcision as a practice that puts an end to women's sexual desire that could push them to commit shameful acts (according to their cultures). She also does not go back to the time of slavery when, female genital mutilation was much more practiced as parents were afraid of the masters' sexual abuse of their daughters, who (according to them), if not circumcised, may feel weak and their desire would encourage their masters to continue their evil doing. That was true also during the time of colonization. Though Western colonizers presented themselves as missionaries who would civilize barbaric populations, they did not help third world people put an end to practices like circumcision. On the contrary, their presence in third world countries made native people react in the same way as during slavery era in order to protect their daughters: their honor. Besides, when people are fighting colonizers, they stick to any practice that would assert their difference from the intruders. Even "barbaric" practices become seen as part of their identity. However, Kerry Ann Bastan, like many other Westerners, locates this practice within the narrow limits of gender and sexuality which is an easy argument to make but which is culturally inaccurate.

El Saadawi thinks that the vast gap between Arab and Western cultures makes it impossible for women from both cultures to adopt the same feminism and to react in the same way against the sources of their oppression. She insists that

> "We, in Third World countries are facing life and death issues. We cannot speak about equality for women when many people have no country –When, as in Palestine, they have lost their land, their culture, their history and live in constant insecurity. We cannot speak about equality when most people live in poverty, when there is no pure water, little food, where they work hard all day and bear many children, many of whom die in the first year. We cannot speak about equality when the natural resources of our countries are being exploited and sucked out by imperialist powers and multinationals. In the West today they do not face these problems. For us in the Third World, because capitalism and imperialism have distorted our societies and we live on the margins of existence, the problems that face us as a people, irrespective of gender, bring us together." (El Saadawi, *Arab* 178)

Nawal El Saadawi explains that in Arab and Third World countries, the nature of the struggle makes women take a class position and so liberate men also from capitalist patriarchy. She also sees solidarity between Western and non-Western women as only possible after women of each culture have fought against their oppression within their own

culture, "because then it is on equal terms not paternalist–"them" helping "us"." (El Saadawi, *Arab* 179)

The following chapter will deal more with this notion of cultural differences which make it impossible to have a feminism in the Arab world similar to the feminisms of the West. We will see, through books by Fatima Mernissi, how Arab women and Western women do not have the same perception of things because they do not belong to the same culture.

2. Fatima Mernissi

2.1. Short Biography

The information one can get about Fatima Mernissi cannot be very ample. Unlike Nawal El Saadawi, Mernissi does not allow much to be known about her life. All that I (and readers) know about Mernissi is that she is a famous Moroccan sociologist and feminist writer. She was born in Fez (Morocco) in 1940 and spent the first 10 years of her childhood in a domestic harem. She teaches at the university of Mohammad-V in Rabat, and she is a member of the United Nations University Council. Though Fatima Mernissi is not the kind of rebel and militant that El Saadawi is, she, just like the latter, is internationally renowned.

Her fame is due to the different writings which she devoted to the Arab women's cause. She has dealt with different topics related to women's condition in the Arab countries. For instance, she wrote different books about women and Islam such as *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (1987), *The Veil and the Male Elite: a Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (1991), *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World* (1992) and *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (1993). All her books, which are translated into different languages, are well received both in the Arab

countries and in the West. The only exception is *Scheherazade Goes West* (2000) which made many Westerners criticize Mernissi for being biased to her own culture.

The following section will be devoted to some important differences that exist between Arab and Western cultures. They are dealt with by Fatima Mernissi in *Dreams of Trespass* and *Scheherazade Goes* West. These differences, as it will be shown, explain why feminism cannot be the same in the Arab countries and in Europe or America.

2.2. Cultural Codes

What I mean by cultural codes is the understanding of, and the value given to different cultural aspects, which differ according to the culture. For instance, the same social element is not given the same value and is not seen in the same way in the West and in the Arab world. The main elements this chapter will be dealing with are the family and family ties, the harem and community life. I will deal with the position and importance of these practices within the Arab society, and at the same time show how they change completely when looked at from a Western perspective. This will lead to the conclusion that Arab women do not adopt the same feminism as Westerners because they do not understand things in the same way.

Two books by Fatima Mernissi will allow me to look at this particular point of cultural codes: Her autobiographical novel *Dreams of Trespass* (1994), and her travel journal *Scheherazade Goes West* (2001). In fact the latter was written after Mernissi's tour in Europe and America promoting *Dreams of Trespass*. It is a review of what happened and what she remarked and concluded during her tour.

The journalists she met during her Western journey made it clear to her that their understanding of things was different from hers. The first thing she was asked about was the opening sentence of her novel: "I was born in a harem..." (Mernissi, *Dreams* 1) The question that was asked by all her interviewers without any exception was "So, were you really born in a harem?" (Mernissi, *Scheherazade* 12) The smile that appeared on the face of each of her interviewers whenever she answered "yes", and which showed his embarrassment, shock, astonishment or merry exuberance, depending on what part of the West he came from, confirmed to her that "The journalists were perceiving a "harem" that was invisible to [her]." (Mernissi, *Scheherazade* 13) She understood that she and her interviewers "were not talking about the same thing: Westerners had their harem and I had mine, and the two had nothing in common." (Mernissi, *Scheherazade* 13) This is the starting point of comparison which Mernissi draws between Arab and Western cultures all along her book. The difference of understanding she shows does not concern only special notions such as the harem, but also other more "common" notions, for instance the family. This difference of understanding of the same thing, which is due to cultural difference leads in many cases, as Mernissi shows in her book, to a misunderstanding and a misinterpretation of the other culture.

The harem which Westerners know is the one "created by famous painters such as Ingres, Matisse, Delacroix, or Picasso –who reduced women to odalisques (a Turkish word for a female slave)– or by talented Hollywood movie-makers, who portrayed harem women as scantily clad belly-dancers happy to serve their captors." (Mernissi, *Scheherazade* 14) Many Western writers also assert this image. They also report the female relationship within the harem as full of "beastly uncleanness" and "much unnatural and filthy lust" (Ahmed, *Western* 524-25) According to them, the harem, not only that of Sultans and

Caliphs but also any harem in the Muslim countries, is a synonym of lust. They think that enclosed women are too submissive to resist and stand against men's authority. Within the walls of the harem, their freedom and expectations become very limited, and their life so frustrating that sex becomes their only means of entertainment and way of self fulfillment. Sex not only with their single master, but also with each other, which makes them turn to lesbianism or bisexuality. This image of Muslim harem women as sex objects is reported by Western men who, in fact, had no access to the harem. As Leila Ahmed remarks,

> "What recurs in Western men's accounts of the harem is prurient speculation, often taking the form of downright assertion, about women's sexual relations with each other within the harem. Yet however confident their statements were, Western men had in fact no conceivable means of access to harems. Nevertheless, they wrote often with great assurance." (Ahmed, *Western* 524)

Given that the harem is a female environment completely forbidden to men, except for the master and the servants, it is interesting to ask how these foreign (Western) male authors had the possibility to witness all that they report in their books about life within the harem. And if they were not witnesses themselves, but imagined that from what they heard from other people, how could they write with great confidence and assertion?

Indeed, Westerners' perception of the harem is part of their general view of Arab and Muslim people, a view which they have had for centuries now. The image that Westerners have of Arab people does not date from colonization; it is much older than that. It goes back in history to the time of the Crusades.

> From the time of the Crusades, until the disintegration of the Islamic empire early in this century, for nearly a thousand years, the Western world and the Muslim world have been intermittently at war; or they have been in the state of no-war that the United Stated and the Soviet Union are in now. Unlike the United States and the Soviet Union, however, they were locked in geographic proximity with Islam straddling And controlling the central regions of the known world and completely blocking Europe's horizons and its access to the East and its Wealth [...] Throughout this time the guardians of Western civilization, with the clergy at their head, produced volumes about the evil, irrational, and so forth, condition of the Muslim –naturally including statements about the degraded condition of the Muslim women." (Ahmed, *Western* 524)

It is clear, then, that the portrait of Arab people drawn by Westerners is neither real nor objective. However, this portrait is the origin of the Western view of the Arabs. It established in Westerners' minds ideas that were kept unchallenged for centuries. Even the very few pioneers who questioned that perception of Arab people and tried to correct it, such as Lady Mary Worthley Montagu whose husband was an English ambassador in Turkey in 1716, did not have a great effect on their contemporaries' view of Arab and Muslim people. It is only recently that Westerners started a serious rereading, and reinterpretation of other cultures including Arab and Muslim culture. But, still their new reading is not always the correct one.

To go back to the harem, Mernissi as any Arab and Muslim person, knows a totally different version which is the original one. The harem she knows is that of Harun Ar-Rachid and other Muslim Caliphs on the one hand, and the harem she lived in during her childhood in the other. The first one is what she calls an "imperial harem" where one man 'owns' many women. It started with the 7th-century Arab dynasty, the Umayyads and ended with the Turkish dynasty, the Ottomans. The second, as portrayed in *Dreams of Trespass* is a domestic harem where women of the family live together and share most of their time. Both Mernissi's father and uncle were monogamous. As they shared the same house, the harem included their wives and children as well as some other female relatives who did not have other tutors. Though the two harems are different, neither of them is a synonym of lust nor a symbol of women's passivity and total submission as reported by Western writers.

A Muslim harem is by no means "an orgiastic feast where men benefited from a true miracle: receiving sexual pleasure without resistance or trouble from the women they had reduced to slaves. In Muslim harems, men expect their enslaved women to fight back ferociously and abort their schemes for pleasure." (Mernissi, *Scheherazade* 14) In fact, any one who reads classic Arabic poems by poets who lived before and after the advent of Islam is fascinated by the image given to women in those wonderful pieces of art. Arab poets always portrayed their beloved as strong and resistant, even when in love with them. They even excelled in expressing their frustration as they rarely, if ever, get the physical pleasure they want of them[3]. This image is also true among women of the harem. In the comparison she draws between Muslim and Western view of harem women, Fatima Mernissi notices that

[3] The best famous examples are Qais Ibn Al-Mulawah, Qais Ibn Thareeh, Jamil and Al 'Abbas Ibn Al-Ahnaf.

> "In both miniatures and literature, Muslim men represent women as active participants, while Westerners such as Matisse, Ingres and Picasso show them as nude and passive. Muslim painters imagine harem women as riding fast horses, armed with bows and arrows and dressed in heavy coats. Muslim men portray harem women as uncontrollable sexual partners. But Westerners, I have come to realize, see the harem as a peaceful pleasure-garden where omnipotent men reign supreme over obedient women." (Mernissi, *Scheherazade* 16)

This idea which many Western people have of harem life is not accurate even when applied to harems of the most famous Caliphs and Sultans. While nobody can deny the importance given by the master to his sexual adventures within his harem, sex was by no means the only or the most important occupation of the master. Moreover, harem women were not easily accessible to him. Though in the Sultans' and Caliphs' harems women were slaves, they were not the nude, dull, unintelligent and sex-starved women as imagined by Westerners. Fatima Mernissi, the expert of Medieval Arab history, tells her readers about the harem of the most famous Arab Caliph of the Middle-Ages: Harun Ar-Rachid. In addition to his first wife Zubeida who in spite of her vanity and love of luxury was never dismissed by Muslim historians as a brainless creature, for she was not only beautiful but also intelligent and politically involved, Harun Ar-Rachid had a great number of slaves from all over the world (Mernissi, *Scheherazade* 122). The physical beauty of a slave was not enough to please her master and become one of his favorites. She had to be intelligent and witty, and had to excel in playing chess, singing, music, poetry, and so on. Many were even well informed about what was going on in different parts of the world, and had great scientific knowledge.

The great majority of Arab Caliphs, like Harun Ar-Rachid preferred the kind of women who combined physical and intellectual talents. Seduction of the master through an intense physical and intellectual exchange was considered "one of the most irresistible and dangerous kinds of seductions." (Mernissi, *Scheherazade* 135) The intellectual and artistic talents of women slaves

> "heightened their sexual attraction. This opened up enormous opportunities for women slaves who came to Baghdad as booty after conquests. By competing in the arts and sciences they could not only climb the social ladder, but also raise their value in the slave market, and thereby subvert the ruling male hierarchy altogether." (Mernissi, *Scheherazade* 134)

As for the harem Mernissi knew during her childhood, though it disappeared from the great majority of the Arab countries, it still exists in some parts of the Mashriq. That harem is the one Leila Ahmed defines as "a system whereby the female relatives of a man –wives, sisters, mother, aunts, daughters– share much of their time and their living space, and further, which enables women to have frequent and easy access to other women in their community, vertically, across class lines, as well as horizontally." (524) That cohabitation, however, does not lead to inevitable lesbianism as many Westerners assert. In the case of Mernissi's childhood harem, it leads to free exchanges of opinions and information as well as mutual support. Harem women

> have been practicing for centuries what feminist communes in America are now just beginning to explore and rediscover, [...] [They] have been practicing a form of women's communes for several

> centuries, and have from within that exclusively female space developed strengths and skills and analytical and imaginative resources that it would perhaps take centuries to develop again. (Ahmed, *Western* 531)

Indeed, the harem within which Fatima Mernissi was born is not a closed space, where oppressed and submissive women lived without any hope for a better life; it is rather a house where women relatives can enjoy their family life in spite of all the restraints. Despite its high walls and locked gate, and in spite of the fact that women dream of trespassing its boundaries, Mernissi's childhood harem is not the kind of prison which the word harem evokes for many Westerners.

In *Dreams of Trespass*, the sociologist Fatima Mernissi portrays the women of her family who succeed in giving sense to their lives within the high walls of the harem. Their daily life is not only doing chores and rearing children, it is also full of "intellectual" and political discussions as well as artistic performances through which they express their "feminist" ideas and dreams of a better future. Through the discussions about the harem and women's rights which take place between the "pro-harem camp" and the "anti-harem camp" to which Mernissi's mother belongs, the little Fatima and her cousin Samir, together with the reader, understand those harem women's view of their rights. Her paternal grandmother and her uncle's wife are convinced that "if women were free to run about in the streets, men would stop working because they would want to have fun. And unfortunately, fun did not help a society produce the food and goods it needed to survive. So if famine were to be avoided, women had to stay in their place at home." (Mernissi, *Dreams* 40) Her mother, however, along with her aunt and her maternal grandmother teach

her lessons of rebellion against those limiting walls and gate. They teach her how to build a strong personality and how to protest and fight for her rights. "You have to learn to scream and protest, just the way you learned to walk and talk," her mother tells her "crying when you are insulted is like asking for more." (Mernissi, *Dreams* 9) Fatima's mother wants her daughter to lead a life different from hers. "Times are going to get better for women now," she tells her,

> "you and your sister will get a good education and you'll walk freely in the streets and discover the world. I want you to become independent, independent and happy. I want you to shine like moons. I want your lives to be cascaded of serene delights. One hundred percent happiness. Nothing more, nothing less." (Mernissi, *Dreams* 81)

Mernissi's mother, that rebel who cannot get all that she dreams of, wants her daughters to be strong enough to get all their rights and "take her revenge." (Mernissi, D*reams* 79) She says to Fatima who wants to know how to create that hundred percent happiness "You have to work at it. One develops the muscles for happiness, just like for walking and breathing." (Mernissi, *Dreams* 81) It is within that harem that Fatima Mernissi learns her first feminist lessons. Her mother "had always rejected male superiority as non-sense and totally anti-Muslim." (Mernissi, *Dreams* 9) She wants her daughter to be treated on equal terms with her cousin Samir who happens to be born on the same day as her. She also fights to change what she can of her condition and that of other women in the harem.

Her aunt Habiba teaches her the importance of dreams. "They give a sense of direction," she tells her. "It is not enough to reject this courtyard –you need to have a vision of the meadows with which you want to replace it." (215) Dreams, according to her, help

women develop wings and trespass boundaries. As for her grandmother Yesmina, who lives in a harem totally different from theirs, for it is in a farm where there are not any high walls and no closed gate, and where women ride horses, she teaches her that "harem was about private space and the rules regulating it. [...] It did not need walls. Once you knew what was forbidden, you carried the harem within." (61) She also told her that the rules regulating those private spaces are most of the time against women (62). From these feminists, Fatima Mernissi learns that all women whose lives are constrained according to men-made rules are stuck within a harem even if there are no visible boundaries. She also learns that in order to change her situation, a woman needs first to feel encircled, which means that she needs first to be aware of the limits set for her as a woman. Then she has to believe in her ability to break the circle, and fly beyond the boundaries. But she has to understand that before stretching one's wings to fly, one has to think, not about the take off but about the landing, about how and where one will end up. (60)

Through *Dreams of Trespass*, Fatima Mernissi gives the reader a clear idea of what a domestic harem is. And it is clear that her view of the harem from an Arab woman's perspective and personal experience is different from the image that Westerners may have of it. Mernissi's relatives are by no means more oppressed than other "liberated" women. They have their own rules which define their space like any other woman or person in the world; and the fact that their space is narrower than that of other women does not make them turn into weak and submissive human beings.

Fatima's mother, her cousin Chama, her aunt Habiba and her maternal grandmother are harem women who know how to defend themselves and rebel when necessary. They are full of agency and have a strong sense of self. They feel encircled and want to liberate

themselves, but their rebellion is more against tradition and men's promotion of it than against the men of the family as an opposite sex. Fatima's mother for instance wants to liberate herself from the tradition which imposes on her chains in the form of a veil or a harem and so on, but she does not imagine herself free without her husband and children around her. She does not want to free herself from her responsibilities as a wife and a mother. She rather wants to have better conditions that would facilitate her assumption of her roles. She wants to flee "from the crowd" and escape the group rules that organized harem life, not for the sake of her own freedom, but in order to enjoy some privacy with her husband and children. Fatima's mother stands for the great majority of Arab women who always think of themselves in relation to their families. For "the family is the basic unit of social organization in traditional and contemporary Arab society." (Barakat 27)

Indeed, one of the important differences between Arab and Western societies is the importance given to family ties, and to the family as a basic social unit. While in Western societies in general the individual is the center, in the Arab countries, the individual has almost no existence by himself/herself. Not only women, but also men are known in relation to the other members of the family. A person is almost always presented as someone's son, daughter, brother, sister, wife and so on. Unlike in the West where the autonomous and individualized self is the norm, in the Arab countries, as in many other Third World countries, relationality is the common process of selving. Relationality for Arab people is not an obstacle to maturity as is the case in the West, where psychological theory sees it as destructive of agency. (Joseph 4) Arab people do not believe in the notion of an autonomous self which is "separated from the other by clear and firm boundaries," (Joseph 4) but rather a self crafted in diffuse boundaries.

The relationship between the different members of the family is so strong that the individual and private life of each one of them is considered as secondary. And whenever the interest of one member is in conflict with the interest of the whole family, the former is sacrificed for the sake of the latter. In the West, however, the opposite is true. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, one of the rare Western feminists who deal with different issues concerning Arab women with great objectivity, notices this important difference between Western and Arab cultures. "Coming from the West, she writes, We take for granted that in a battle between the good of the individual man or woman and the good of the family group, The good of the individual often takes first place. But in the Middle East, the balance tips the other way –toward the group." (Fernea, *In Search* 102)

Unlike in the West, in the Arab countries, a person –be it a boy or a girl– lives in the parents' house until getting married. Before marriage a person leaves his/her parents' house only if he/she needs to go to another city or country to continue his/her studies or get a job, though the latter is more applicable for boys than for girls. No one leaves his or her parents' house just because he/she is mature and wants to be independent and have some privacy. This fusion of the member within the family means that the family is seen as responsible for one's success or failure and good or bad behavior. "The sexual misbehavior of a girl, for example, reflects not just upon herself but upon her father, brother, her family as a whole. Thus the "crime of honor," which sometimes still occurs in tightly knit communities, is an attempt to restore the family's honor and place in the community." (Barakat 28) Indeed, when one member of the family has a behavior which is judged as unrespectable according to the societal moral norms, the whole family feels ashamed and dishonored; though it is important to notice that a girl is much more severely punished for

her misbehavior than a boy; for society, as a patriarchal structure, tends to excuse men for their "mistakes" far easier than women.

These strong family relationships mean great commitment to the family which "may involve considerable self-denial." (Barakat 28) This is true for all the members of the family and especially parents. Both "parents, and particularly the mother, deny themselves for the sake of their children. The source of the mother's happiness is the happiness and prosperity of her children." (Barakat 28) The great majority of Arab women, even those who are thought to have strong personalities, do not hesitate to devote themselves to their children, and sacrifice much of their liberties and rights. On the other hand, children are expected to love and respect their parents, and take care of them especially when they are sick or old. After getting married and settling in a separate house, a child is supposed to pay frequent visits to his parents or at least make frequent calls. Indeed, Islam assigns one's care for one's parents as a duty which one is punished (by God) for not assuming. Consequently, Arab society, as deeply rooted in religion, does not respect a man who does not take care of his parents and support them financially when they become old and cannot provide for themselves. It is only when that man is extremely poor, or has disabling health problems that he is not blamed for not helping his parents and caring for them.

It is also one's duty to respect one's (old) parents' wishes even if one is not really comfortable with them. Mernissi's father, for instance, stands for hundreds of Arab men who, out of love and respect to their parents, are ready to sacrifice their personal happiness. In *Dreams of Trespass*, Fatima Mernissi shows her father as a man who "loved his wife so much" and felt "miserable for not giving up to her wishes" to leave the big family house and live alone with her and their children, But who, nevertheless, chose to keep the tradition

of living in an extended family simply because it was his mother's wish. ""As long as [my] mother lives," he often said, "I would not betray the tradition"." (77) This behavior which may be seen, by people who do not know the Arab culture, as a sign of weakness is, in indeed, a reason for great respect of that man by other members of the community (They do not necessarily include his wife.) He himself, though not really happy with living with a large group, feels satisfied because he respects his old mother's wish. As a Syrian peasant quoted by Barakat puts it, "The son realizes all his dreams if he has the blessings of his parents." (Barakat 29)

That same peasant, in a tape he sent for his parents who went for two months to the United States to visit their elder sons, gives a good example of the Arab man's love for his parents and family. Addressing his mother he says,

> "I don't know what to say to you. First, your hands and feet I kiss...I always, always miss you. I miss the times when I say, "Mother, give me my allowance," when I embrace you, I kiss you, I cause you trouble and suffering...When I say "my mother" tears burn in my eyes." (Barakat 29)

He also addresses his father and two brothers, then in the end of his taped letter he says, "I conclude by kissing your hands and feet, my father, and you my mother, I kiss your hands and feet. I ask for your blessing. With your blessings, my father, I can face anything." (30) This letter might be for Western researchers, fond of studying and discovering the other, proof of the man's sexual and psychological disequilibrium. For no "normal" adult would address his parents in that way. However, an Arab reader will not be the least shocked, or amazed because the way that Syrian peasant expresses his love for his parents is, for Arab

people, very natural and spontaneous, and is a proof that this man is a grateful son who knows the sacred value of parents. Perhaps not every single Arab man would express himself with all that sentimentality, but certainly the great majority (if not all) of them carry it deep in their hearts. Self denial and devotion to the family is then a natural behavior of all the members of the family. The parents' sacrifices for the sake of their children are rewarded by extremely strong love and respect from their sons and daughters.

These differences between the Arab and Western cultures make many people from both sides misunderstand each other. I remember when in England some years ago, while extremely enjoying myself, I missed my family very much. One day, I listened for the first time to Daniel O'Donnell's song "*Modals for Mothers*" which touched me so deeply that I cried. An English friend of mine sitting next to me was so surprised and asked almost angrily "Why are you crying now?" After I told her how that beautiful song made me think of my mother whom I missed very much, I asked her, "Aren't you moved by this wonderful song?" "Certainly not," she affirmed, "at least not in this way." Then, she added that she was surprised by my reaction which was, according to her, very childish and baby-like. I wanted to tell her that I was the one who was surprised to see how a person cannot be deeply moved by a wonderful song about mothers, but then I said, "You are judging me from your position as an Englishwoman. You cannot understand my reaction simply because our cultures are different."

That same friend told me, some days later, that many people she knew thought that my friends, the two girls who came from the same country as me, were lesbians, simply because they walked in the street hand-in-hand, a thing very "normal" and common in my country. Before I could say anything she went on, "I know what you'll say: "it is a matter of

culture." But, I'd rather you tell them, as long as they are in England, to behave, as much as they can, like English people, if they don't want people here to take them for what they're not." Years later, when taking my first M.A. course here in Montreal, which was about early twentieth-century American literature, I was the only student in the group (about 10 people) who did not "understand" a passage in one of the novels we studied. While everybody else concluded that the two little boys who were playing together and hugging were homosexuals, I was the only one to think of that behavior as "natural" among little kids, be it of the same or of opposite sexes. My colleagues were Canadians and French. I was the only Arab.

These incidents helped me understand how the differences of culture may lead to totally different understanding of the same thing. While in the beginning I used, sometimes, to feel embarrassed and think of myself as odd, or to be shocked by the "bizarreness" of the other person, I learned, later on, how to think of myself and accept the other as different.

To come back to the main concern of this section, which is family ties, it is important to underline that cultural differences make many Western people think of the "natural" way of Arab people's behavior towards their families as a sign of weakness, submission, and excessive and unnecessary sentimentality. For an Arab woman, being a good mother and an "obedient" daughter is not an obstacle to being feminist. To become a feminist, the Arab woman does not need to give up her role of mother and wife with all that it means of sacrifices and self denial. Nor does she need to stop loving and respecting her parents in the way Arab people do, that is denying herself for their sake, listening to them and not doing anything that would offend them or distort their image in the community. All this means following very strict rules which many people would see as sources of

oppression whose acceptance would contradict the (Western) norms of female agency and feminism. Consequently, a woman accepting these rules can never be considered (by many Western feminists) as a feminist.

A feminist for Arab people can be a woman at home who makes sure she gives a good education to her children. A feminist can be like Mernissi's mother who is aware that she is encircled but she knows that the circle is not formed by her husband and family but rather by traditions which are promoted by men but also by women. Though she knows that, as a woman, her freedom is more restricted than her husband's, she never thinks of fleeing her responsibilities as a wife and a mother. She never considers her husband and children as a heavy burden which her weak position as a woman obliges her to carry. However, she insists on teaching her children the importance of women's liberation and the equality between the sexes. It is important to notice though that gender equality does not invalidate the notion of hierarchy within the family which is set with respect to age and sex. But, while age is always a reason for more privileges, gender bias is more and more challenged mainly on the level of siblings, as the father is still considered as the head of the family and the one who has more authority. Even equality between brothers and sisters depends so much on the social class of the family. Rich families, who do not worry about their future financial condition, tend to treat their children on equal terms, but it is not the case for poor families. The latter, in general, tend to privilege their sons. For instance, as they cannot afford a good education for all their children, they prefer to educate their sons, because, as mentioned before, they know that their sons will support them and continue to do when they (parents) get older. They know that single or married, they will not let them down. Besides, without a job, a man cannot get married as he is supposed to be the one who provides for his family (wife and children). This is not the case for a girl. A daughter, even

if she's not educated and does not have a job, would be provided for by her husband whenever she gets married. That is why her parents do not worry about her. They also know that even if she does odd jobs and helps support the family (her parents and siblings) when she is still single, she is not supposed to continue doing so when she gets married. So the son has greater need to be privileged by his parents. It is no wonder then that gender discrimination continues to exist and to be promoted by women themselves, mainly as mothers.

Though gender is among the problems which Arab feminists deal with, it is not what preoccupies them the most. The major problem they face, as explained by El Saadawi in the previous chapter, is economic. They deal with poverty and unemployment and all that they engender of health problems, hunger, illiteracy, and so on. Speaking about a poor Moroccan woman named Aicha, Elizabeth Warnock Fernea says, "For people like Aicha, unemployment was at the core of her life." (Fernea, *Search* 125) The Moroccan woman said to the author, "What I want more than anything in the world is a house of my own." (Fernea, *Search* 138) She does not speak of equality with her husband, or the right to control her body, or those other demands articulated by Western feminists and seen by many Arab women as "feminist fantasies." (Fernea, *Search* 84) She just dreamt of a house of her own where she could feel secure with her family, and would not fear being thrown out for any reason by the proprietor. The Arab women, whose majority does not have the mere basic elements for a healthy and secure life, would not fantasize about "sophisticated" demands.

A feminist in the Arab world "can't forget religion, illiteracy, the economic situation in rural areas." (Fernea, *In Search* 121) In the Arab world, where women are seen

by many Westerners as among (if not) the most oppressed women in the world, a woman "would rather be a rich upper-class woman than a poor working class man any day." (Fernea, *Search* 106) The problem is more of money and class than of men and woman. It is more of economy than of gender. Consequently, a feminist in the Arab world is not necessarily a woman who makes speeches, writes books or attends conferences asking for women's liberation and gender equality. She can simply be a woman who works hard to find solutions for the economic, social and health problems of women but also men. A feminist can be a woman who wants to have control over her life, but who never offends certain social and moral limits such as her parents' consent for her marriage and their acceptance of her general trend of life. An Arab feminist would always respect and assume her role as daughter, wife and mother.

In addition to her roles within the family, an Arab woman thinks of herself also in relation to the community. First of all, she would always avoid behaving in a way that would disgrace her in the eyes of other people. For example, she would avoid wearing something that is likely to make her a subject of criticism, mockery or humiliation. Unlike in the West where people are, generally, free to wear what they like, in the Arab world, there are limits that one must not transgress if one wants to be integrated and respected in the community. Before leaving the house, a person always thinks of what the other (neighbors, people in the street, colleagues…) would think of him/her. That is why he/she tries always to make sure that his/her appearances and behavior are acceptable according to the community moral norms. That is why an Arab woman who forgets about community rules and frees herself of its ethical constraints is rejected by others, who consider her as a wrongdoer who dares to transgress the group's sacred moral rules, and must, then, be excluded and avoided. This does not mean that nobody can challenge those rules, but there

are always certain limits to be respected. People are only allowed a limited space to react, but it is enough for them to change many things without forgetting the community's ethical laws.

This is one of the reasons why feminism was not welcomed, especially in the beginning, in the Arab countries. People (men and women) linked it to total freedom of behavior and carelessness about ethics which are the basis of people's relationships within the community. People were afraid that in the name of personal rights women would exhibit their bodies, forget about their responsibilities as mothers and wives and ignore their parents' authority which, according to Arab people, would make life turn into a mess. Of course this has not happened because those kinds of rights are not what interests Arab women the most. Arab feminists have not forgotten religion, neither have they ignored family ties and community life. They are interested in improving women's conditions with respect to all those sacred values. They, for instance, do not want women to stop getting married and having children, because that would limit their freedom and make them even more subordinate to men; they rather want them to be better prepared for that role which is considered by Arab women to be their sacred mission on earth. They want them to be better educated, have better jobs, be more informed about their rights as well as their duties so that they become better mothers able to rear reliable generations.

Arab feminists fight to change the family laws within their respective countries so that women can get more rights and stop being oppressed in the name of the law. In Morocco, for example, the "Union de l'Action Féminin" in 1992 sent the King a petition with one million signatures asking for the reform of family law. The King ordered a special commission including the leader of the "Union de l'Action Féminin" to revise the

Mudawana (family law). Though the Mudawana needs more rectifications, this was an important step towards establishing more rights for Moroccan women. (Fernea, *In Search* 111) Similar feminist achievements have happened in different other Arab countries where women have kept struggling to get more rights without forgetting about their communities' moral constitutions.

The Arab women's relationship with the community is not only in terms of boundaries to be respected. Women are getting more and more deeply involved in their communities. One of the important rights they want is to have the chance to do something for the group. They want to be given the opportunity to show their usefulness for the community, because they know that society needs their contribution to develop and be able to stand in front of national and international challenges. What oppresses Arab women the most is to feel useless and unneeded by others either in the family or the community. As Aunt Habiba tells the child Fatima Mernissi,

> "You are in a harem when the world does not need you. You are in a harem when what you can contribute does not make a difference. You are in a harem when what you do is useless. You are in a harem when the planet swirls around, with you buried up to your neck in scorn and neglect." (Mernissi, *Dreams* 124)

This is the kind of harem from which Arab women need to free themselves. They do not want to be kept aside; they want to be useful for their families and communities. They believe that as it is their duty to help support their families and do their best to better their conditions, it is also their duty to assume their responsibilities within their bigger family: the community.

Like other Third World women, the majority of Arab women are aware that their countries which have for a long time experienced the bitterness of colonialism, neocolonialism, poverty, high unemployment rates, famine and various disasters need the effort of every one of their citizens to help them develop, prosper and stand up to international injustices and unequal competitions. Among the women interviewed by Perdita Hutson in *Third World Women Speak Out*, there is a twenty-six-year-old Soudani woman learning to become a midwife. She explains,

> "I want to become a midwife, because my father and mother are old. My brothers and sisters have not been to school. They are only digging in the field. I thought it would be good to become a midwife so I could help my parents by earning a wage. I met some girls who had taken this course, and I saw that they learned good things. Also if someone becomes a midwife, it will help the country. That's why I have chosen it. Now I can help my country." (Hutson 87)

Though Perdita Hutson does not report the tone she uses to express herself, one can imagine her happiness and pride when she says "Now I can help my country." Being educated and having a diploma makes her feel better placed to serve both her family and country, which makes her proud of herself. She does not speak of gender discrimination and women's subordination to men, or women's freedom and their right to control their bodies. Her main concern is to find the way that helps her become a useful member both of the family and the community (country). This is one of the major differences between Arab and Western women. They have not lived the same experiences because not only their cultures but also their histories are different. Arab women do not see their rights as Western women

do, neither do they understand feminism in the same way. Western women think of "feminism as a movement to allow women to develop a sense of their own worth and value, a more positive sense of themselves." Arab women, like Third World women in general, believe that "first one must take care of the conditions which prevent women from doing so –conditions like poverty, illiteracy, lack of contraceptive methods other than abortion. When those obstacles were overcome, one could "nourish the self"." (Fernea, *In Search* 415)

CONCLUSION

This thesis has dealt with the complex notion of feminism from a cultural perspective. I have tried to show that Arab feminism really exists, but as a different form of feminism inspired from the specific context of the Arab culture, and not as another version of Western feminism readapted to a new context, as many Westerners think. Indeed, many Western feminists do not believe in the existence of Arab feminism, and think that what exists in the Arab countries is just another imitated form of their own "authentic" version. Many others think that Arab people's concern with Arab women cannot be called feminism because it does not show the categorical separation and enmity between sexes implied in the term "feminism" as understood by these Western feminists. Indeed, the latter fix the definition(s) of feminism and decide that any discourse which does not totally conform to this definition cannot be considered as (real) feminism. But they forget that their definition is made from a Western perspective and do not take into consideration the non-Western contexts within which other forms of feminism emerge. This means that we cannot use Western criteria to understand Arab feminism. In Other words, we cannot understand Arab feminism by looking at it from a Western perspective, and by keeping in mind the Western definitions of feminism, which insist on the notions of "gender," "equality" and "Movement."

Indeed, looking at Arab women from a Western perspective makes Western feminists unfairly judge them as very weak and submissive, and as not (real) feminists. This is why I have tried in this thesis, to contextualize Arab feminism and make the reader look at it from a different perspective. Arab feminism started in the late nineteenth-century mainly in the Middle East and North Africa. Though its pioneers were influenced by the Western feminist movement of that time, they did not adopt its ideas and methods. Arab women and men looked at Western feminism just as an example of a possible revolution

that can bring much change not only to women's lives but also to society in general. In fact, social development was the starting point of the pioneers' demands for Arab women's rights. They argued that by giving women their rights, the whole society would benefit. Women, mainly (future) mothers, would be able to bring up intelligent and reliable citizens who would work together to build a better future for men as well as women.

The first Arab women feminists such as Huda Sha'rawi and Nabawiya Musa and many others in the countries of the Middle East and the Maghreb were mainly middle and upper class women who had the privilege of being educated. Education helped them understand their situation and know their rights and duties. They created clubs and associations where women could meet to share their opinions, and where they could teach illiterate women and give them advice about hygiene and health, and help them discover new ways of being better mothers. In fact, from the very beginning, Arab feminism has been family oriented. While asking for their rights, Arab women think of themselves not only as individuals but also and mainly as members of their families. They think of better ways of fulfilling their natural roles without being oppressed or treated as inferior. Indeed, Arab feminists, unlike their Western "sisters," have never wanted to completely dismantle certain social structures such as marriage and family. They have simply tried to found better places for women within these same structures. Similarly, they have never fought against men in order to overthrow them. They have just fought against men's absolute power. They wanted them to be more democratic in order to allow women broader spaces to practice their roles without feeling inferior or subordinated.

Arab women believe that their demands are legitimate because they have only asked for their rights as given by Islam. Contrary to the great majority of Western feminists who

have rebelled against religious restraints of women's freedom, Arab women went back to religion and asked for their rights as mentioned in the Koran and Hadeeth. In fact, Islam is not a source of oppression for women as many people think. On the contrary, more than 1400 years ago, it gave women rights which Western women could get only in the late nineteenth-century. So while it is true to say that Arab women are oppressed, it is not correct to think that Islam is one of the sources of their oppression. It is also equally incorrect to think that Arab women are more oppressed than others simply because they still wear veils or because they neglect themselves for the sake of their families. Arab women are not more oppressed than other women; they are rather differently oppressed. I mean that the sources of their oppression are different because their culture is different. For this reason they have created their own feminism.

In the last chapter of this thesis, I dealt with two important feminist figures in the Arab world today to show the difference of their (the Arab) feminism from those of the West. I showed how Arab women can be strong, active and determined like the heroines of Nawal El Saadawi, but they almost never trespass certain moral limits respected by the whole community. Indeed, the community and the family are very important elements in determining a person's behavior and freedom. Unlike in Western societies where the individual is the center, in the Arab countries the family is the basis of society. It is seen as natural that a person denies himself/ herself for the sake of the family. For this reason, self-denial does not conflict with women's rights and freedom. A woman can be full of agency and can be considered as feminist, while she continues to deny herself for the sake of her parents and/or children. This is in fact one of the reasons why many Western people refuse to call Arab women feminists. They do not accept to give the same label to a radical Western woman who rejects any sort of restraint and rebels against patriarchal structures

such as marriage, family and religion, and an Arab woman who sticks to religious rules and denies herself for the sake of her family. As the West is always the norm, it is then the Arab woman who cannot be called feminist. But, these Western people forget that feminist trends are numerous and different within the West itself. So, if they acknowledge the diversity within a limited part of the world, they should accept greater variety on a larger scale. They should admit the existence of Arab feminism but as a different form of feminism born within a different context and not as an unsuccessful imitation of their own "authentic" version. Besides, they should now let Arab women speak for themselves, because no one knows their problems and needs better than they do. They should also accept the fact that no other form of feminism can work for Arab women but their own Arab feminism, because it is the product of their own culture which does not allow enmity between sexes.

In fact now, even within the West, many feminists have come to understand that feminism must not be for the benefit of women as individuals. They now believe that it must not be against the family. We can hear few Western feminist voices calling for "family feminism" and asking other feminists to rethink their definitions of feminism as exclusively woman oriented. The French feminist Elisabeth Badinter, for instance, dares now to criticize other Western feminists who, according to her went too far in their views and attitudes. She uses the expression "*Féminisme victimaire*" she criticizes the aggressive attitude of many Western feminists towards men. She thinks that by always looking at men as guilty, they ended up by creating a huge gap between both sexes and turned women into weak victims of men's violence, mistreatment, rape and so on. In an interview made with her by Stephan Bureau in "*Le point*" of March 6, 2003 on the Canadian TV channel RDI, she said that Western (radical) feminism is not an advantage for women, but rather a loss. She also added that it was high time Western feminists learned how to live happily with

men, or as she said it, "Vivre heureux à deux." she continued, "On ne peut pas vivre heureux en culpabilisant l'autre tout le temps." This is the truth which Arab women have understood from the very beginning. They fight to get their rights without fighting against men. They are gaining rights and progressing, maybe not in a high speed, but with sure steps. They struggle without creating deep fissures between both sexes and without turning the whole society against them.

There is no doubt that feminism is not an easy topic to deal with. It is a very complex notion, and it becomes more complex when dealt with from a cultural perspective as in this thesis. This is why it is important to mention that I do not pretend to have covered the topic with all its related issues. The complexity of the topic makes it almost impossible to cover it with great depth and extended analysis in a thesis limited in terms of volume. But, I hope I will have the opportunity to do deeper and more extended research in a PhD thesis in the same department.

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