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Author(s): Nada Elia

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## Islamophobia and the “Privileging” of Arab American Women

NADA ELIA

*In the present climate of virulent Islamophobia, various U.S. circles are nevertheless opening up to Muslim and Arab American women. This phenomenon must be understood as a contemporary manifestation of colonialist patriarchal racism, which views “other” women as powerless victims of their own culture, while casting the men as threats that must be kept at bay. Consequently, many Arab women are delaying addressing critical gender issues, as they deal with the imprisonment, deportation, and “disappearing” of their male kin.*

**Keywords:** Islamophobia / Arab American women / Muslim Americans / vilification of Arab Americans / “othering” of Arab Americans

In the present climate of virulent Islamophobia, mainstream American culture seems to favor Muslim women who, unlike their brothers, husbands, fathers, or sons, are not seen as a menace to American society, but rather as powerless victims of their own religion. The impulse to save Muslim women from their male kin pervades various social and political movements in the United States, proving to be a common denominator between ideologies as seemingly disparate as Christian fundamentalism and liberal feminism. Even in the twenty-first century, Western feminism retains its highly exploitative approach to other women: “the much touted openness of academic feminists to ‘Third World’ women is predicated upon these women’s indigenization—that is upon their trivialization as native speakers whose role is to provide the occasional piece of up-to-date information, but more importantly to entertain, in one way or another, audiences hungry for tales about women” (Lazreg 2000, 34–5).

The “othering” and rejection of Arabs and Arab Americans is as old as this country,<sup>1</sup> as is the erroneous homogenization of all Arab Americans as Muslims. Despite consistent attempts to separate church from state— attempts that are now fast being openly eroded by a president who claims that his policy and vision are informed by his frequent communications with God (*Frontline* n.d.)—United States policy and overall culture have been steeped in religion, from the country’s Puritan origins to the Christian Zionist worldview currently embraced by the plutocracy. It is no mere coincidence that the nation’s first motto, *E Pluribus Unum*, was replaced in 1956 with the more representative “In God We Trust.” After all, the embrace of plurality had to stop somewhere, and the lines have historically been drawn most clearly with regards to religion. The confluence

of church and state, with the presidential worldview today embracing Christianity and Zionism, is a lethal mix for Arabs and Arab Americans, who are perceived as the quintessential enemy. And as Americans speak today of "the clash of civilizations," the foremost "us and them" binary that comes to their minds is not East and West, North and South, capitalism and communism, rich and poor, but Christianity and Islam (Huntington 1993). *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, (Shaheen 2001) offers a thorough analysis of the negative depiction of Arabs in the American film industry, from its early years until 2000. As it predates 9/11, this rejection cannot be attributed to the trauma of the terrorist attacks, and is quite clearly based in religious intolerance, the assumption that Arabs are irrevocably "other" because they are Muslim, aliens in this Judeo-Christian culture.

Rejection takes on both overt and covert forms. The overt ones need no elaboration. One of the more insidious covert forms of rejection has been the systematic erasure of Arab Americans from the "American" consciousness. Arab Americans are officially erased from American political discourse and representation; they do not exist as a recognized minority group. Until September 11, 2001, Muslim and Arab Americans were also erased from American popular culture. They were completely absent from "progressive" discourse. From the PBS children's television program *Sesame Street*, to the groundbreaking feminist anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983), the discourse of multiculturalism, which claims to represent the wide array of diversity in the United States, excluded Arab Americans.<sup>2</sup> In the nonprogressive media, whenever Muslims were represented, they invariably appeared in the role of villains—and always as foreigners—Arabs, not Arab Americans. This unique "distancing" is best understood when one thinks of other religious minorities in the United States who, while recognized as "minorities," are not necessarily perceived as "foreigners."

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the symbols of United States world hegemony catapulted Arab and Muslim Americans into the floodlights, their presence magnified by the unique brand of American paranoia ("they hate us because they hate freedom"), and aggravated by legalized racial profiling. Vilified in the popular media, the government, and academia, Arab Americans are subjected to a multi-pronged campaign of hatred, generally laced with the accusation that, as Muslims, they are always-already hostile to "democracy," which is proudly represented in the West by the United States, and in the Arab world by Israel, "the region's only democracy." More seriously, the racial profiling of "men with Middle Eastern features" is not only legal today, it is fully embraced by many Americans, as an "acceptable price to pay for security." "Middle Eastern features" are conflated, in the eyes of these same Americans, with Muslim

dress. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, thousands of Arab American men were rounded up, arrested, deported, or otherwise disappeared. Ironically, the women gradually became more visible, as mainstream American culture sought to "liberate" them from their oppressors.

It must be emphasized that a desire to improve women's circumstances, here or abroad, has never characterized the Bush administration, and is in fact at odds with its Christian fundamentalist ideology. Nevertheless, "women's liberation" proved a convenient excuse to attack countries with which the United States was already intent on going to war. At the same time, the centuries-old Western fascination with the veil, now readily visible on American streets, behind the steering wheels of American SUVs, in American malls, and in American college classrooms, was jolted into renewed life, even as Judeo-Christian hatred of Muslim culture was revived. These Muslim women's oppressors were invariably perceived to be their male relatives, rather than the racist, exclusionary, and often violent dominant American discourse.

The failure to identify racism and religious intolerance as a major social wrong in the United States—despite the country's very long history of institutionalized discrimination grounded in these oppressive systems—closely parallels mainstream Western feminism's failure to identify many Arab women's oppressors in their home countries. For these women are veiled, and isn't the veil the region's greatest evil? Thus, many "progressive feminists" fail to acknowledge that Palestinian women's freedom of movement, their freedom to vote, to obtain an education and access to health care, and the basic right to have a roof over their heads in their own historic homeland, is denied them not by Arab men, but by the brutal Israeli occupier, very generously backed by American tax dollars. Similarly, most Americans are reluctant to acknowledge that Iraqi women's circumstances, once among the most enviable in the Arab world, deteriorated very significantly when the United Nations imposed economic sanctions on Iraq, leading to extreme poverty among the civilians, while Saddam and his cronies lived in obscene luxury. While the dictator was, at best, an "equal opportunity oppressor," female literacy in Iraq under Saddam was the highest in the region, and Iraqi women were among the most educated and professional in the Arab world. Additionally, one could argue that the Arab regimes most oppressive of women, such as in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, would not stay in power were it not for their close ties with the American government. And while Arab men must certainly be held accountable for their treatment of Arab women, one must also keep in mind that Arab women are ultimately victimized by the United States and Israel that have very real adverse effects on their everyday lives, and that "Arab women's liberation" (from Arab patriarchy) would be moot in the political context of an ongoing brutal occupation or tyranny kept in place by the West.

The silencing of Arab and Arab American men—through ostracization, intimidation, imprisonment, or deportation—has led to Arab American women becoming more vocal. Suddenly, we are in demand, as our male partners are disappeared. We are asked to speak at political gatherings, at Women's Month events, and in academic settings, when "the Middle East" is discussed. Without our men, we have become exotic once again, "desirable" for all the wrong reasons. Muslim Arab American women must then engage with the double standards that view their husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons, as terrorists who must be indefinitely imprisoned, kept at bay, deported or otherwise eliminated from the American scene, while it views Arab American women as potentially productive, "assimilated," "free" American women who would take their children (no boys? What is the cut-off age for "innocence"?) to soccer games, serve on school PTA boards, and occasionally present their "culture" (food and music, and belly dancing, of course, but no political history) to the broader American community, at school or even church events.

The "privileging" of Muslim and Arab American women over their male compatriots is apparent in numerous forums, revealing a pattern of viewing the women as harmless and redeemable, the men as perennial enemies, never to be trusted. Thus the recent cluster of Arab Fulbright scholars to the United States is overwhelmingly female. And Arab as well as Arab American literature available in the United States is predominantly by women writers because publishers deem that what women have to offer the American readership is more interesting than what men may have to say. One need only recall how Columbia professor of comparative literature, Edward Said was told that Arabic is a "controversial language," when he suggested to a New York publisher promoting "third world literature" that Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz's books be translated into English (Said 2001). This was in 1980, at the time when novels by Mahfouz's compatriot, the feminist Nawal Saadawi—who also wrote in Arabic—were lining the shelves of American bookstores. In her case, the language was not considered "controversial" probably because some of the topics she discussed, clitoridectomy and Arab women's sexuality, were too titillating to pass. Today there is a disproportionate ratio of Arab women to men writers available in libraries and bookstores, and assigned in various book groups and course syllabi.

And while the West favors Arab women writers over their male compatriots, even among female authors, those denouncing Islam are favored over those denouncing the occupation of their country by Israeli or American troops. Thus Muna Hamzeh, author of the deeply touching *Refugees in Our Own Land*, where she narrates her experience in a Palestinian refugee camp, is ignored by most American reviewers, critics, and scholars, despite the fact that her memoir compares, in its existential angst, its fear, its despair and pain, to some of the best narratives in that genre. Similarly,

Liana Badr, an extremely talented Palestinian novelist (who is also Education Minister in occupied Palestine), is shunned in this country. Randa Ghazy, an Italian of Egyptian origin, has been panned in the United States, even as her novel, *Dreaming of Palestine* (2003), continues to reap praise in Europe, having been translated into six languages. Much less qualified writers get rave reviews in the American press, so long as they deal with that favorite American topic: Muslim women's oppressed sexuality.<sup>3</sup>

Even as Arab American women become more vocal, they are not necessarily advancing a mainstream "feminist" agenda—i.e., one focusing almost exclusively on women's gender oppression. Instead, Arab and Arab American women are engaging in what is, at best, a "reactive" agenda, foregrounding Arab and Arab American men's oppression, their deportation, their detention, the increasing harassment these men face as they, but not their male kin, are welcome into ever wider circles of good-intentioned "hosts." They find themselves, in the opening decades of the twenty-first century, following centuries of Arab presence in the United States, still explaining the most basic aspects of their culture, still refuting egregious stereotypes, still on the defensive. In 1982, Egyptian-born Leila Ahmed wrote: "If one is of Arabic or Islamic background in America, one is almost compelled to take that stand. And what compels one is . . . that Americans 'know,' and know without even having to think about it, that [Muslims] are backward, uncivilized peoples totally incapable of rational conduct" (1982, 521). Sadly, there has been little progress since.

One can argue that social acceptance, even at the cost of being exoticized, is better than demonization and detention. One can add that being sought out at public events is preferable to being denied permission to speak. Nevertheless, Arab and Arab American women's causes are not being served by the combination of racism and sexism that allows them a forum of expression. These related systems of discrimination and oppression cannot benefit the disenfranchised. The reality is that the majority of Arab and Arab American women today take the opportunity to speak as an opportunity to denounce mass arrests and detentions of Arab men, and other wrongs faced by the entire community. Critical issues affecting women, issues such as domestic violence in a diaspora context, single parenting away from an extended family, or the increasingly hostile health care system, and the rapidly disappearing social welfare, are pushed to the back burner as women worry about the whereabouts of their brothers, sons, fathers, and husbands.

Two centuries ago, European colonialism, epitomized by France's claim that it was engaging in a "mission civilisatrice," brought about a consolidation of traditional patriarchal values among the colonized Arabs, who were determined not to lose their cultural heritage, and held on, as best they could, to their precolonial ways. In the twenty-first century, the United States is creating an equally counterproductive current.

Today, Arabs, Arab Americans, and “people with Middle Eastern features” everywhere are struggling to merely survive the United States’ aggressive drive to “bring democracy to the Middle East.” In the meantime, Arab and Arab American experiences are converging in novel ways as Western weapons of mass destruction devastate the Arab world, and while Islamophobia thrives in the United States, wreaking havoc in Arab American communities.

*Nada Elia* holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature, is co-founder of RAWAN (the Radical Arab Women’s Activist Network), and serves on the national steering committee of Incite! Women of Color Against Violence. She is the author of *Trances, Dances, and Vociferations: Agency and Resistance in Africana Women’s Narratives* (2000) and is currently at work on a second manuscript, “Work in Progress: Women’s Transnational Activism in the 21st Century.” She has published numerous articles on the sociopolitical factors impacting gender and national identity construction in societies at war and/or occupation. Send correspondence to [nadaelia@yahoo.com](mailto:nadaelia@yahoo.com).

## Notes

1. Arabs have been present in the United States from its earliest days, having first crossed the Atlantic as members of the Spanish colonial fleet. With the exception of the Puritans, who willingly crossed the Atlantic, most colonial endeavors depended on the expatriation of “undesirables”: criminals, prostitutes, and members of the religious and ethnic minorities.
2. The belated inclusion of Arab Americans in multicultural discourse is reflected, for example, in the PBS show, *Postcards from Buster*, which started airing in 2004, and featured a whole episode on a Christian Arab American family living in Brooklyn. While the program must be credited for its positive depiction of an Arab American family, it could be argued that, by not representing Muslims, it is continuing the erasure of this religion as part of the American landscape. Multicultural anthologies published after September 2001 also tend to include at least one Arab American voice, most often a woman’s.
3. Norma Khouri’s *Forbidden Love* (published in the United States as *Honor Lost: Love and Death in Modern Day Jordan*) is supposed to be a “real life memoir” about honor killings in Jordan. When Jordanians read it, they immediately noticed major inconsistencies in the text. After they documented some 70 fabricated “facts,” the book was eventually withdrawn by its publishers, who declared it a hoax. Another equally unconvincing supposedly autobiographical book, *The Almond*, by the pseudonymous Nedjma (whom Arab critics suspect is not even Arab herself) has been reviewed favorably by the *New York Times* (Harrison 2005). The book’s subtitle is: *A Muslim Woman’s Sexual Awakening*.

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