

**DISCOURSE ON WOMEN IN THE CONTEMPORARY  
ARAB WORLD: TRENDS AND ISSUES**

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## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that this dissertation entitled 'Discourse on Women in the Contemporary Arab World: Trends and Issues' submitted by P.K. Abdul Rahiman in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy of this University is a bonafide work and has not been submitted for the award of any other degree.

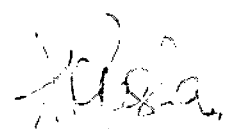
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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

The universality of Western model of development and modernity was represented in various forms like orientalism and modernization theory in the field of West Asian studies. The same theoretical framework was followed in the conventional scholarship on the region. But with the development of the feminist thought, new approaches representing various trends with the feminist movement and Islamic feminism found their space in the discourses on women in the region. Despite the development of the new alternative methodologies, many stereotype assumptions and images of the region influenced the feminist analyses.

The orientalist approach considered Islam as the sole designator of Muslim society and the main determinant of women's status. This depiction of Muslim societies as inherently traditional while associating traditionalism with backwardness and stagnation, thus oppressive, created the image of Muslim women as oppressed and subjugated. The ethno-centrist portrayal of the West as rational, developed and superior however suggested that the changing positions of women could only be explained in the context of the declining influence of Islam and the increasing influence of the West in the Arab-Islamic societies.

Similarly, the modernization theory turned `modernity' as a process into the `Westernisation' of different societies. The arguments of the modernisation theorists were based on the conviction that the establishment of Western institutions in the `backward' countries would introduce changes in different facets of the society as in the West.

The developmentalist theorists identify the market economy as a liberating force by equating market economy with economic development and progress. But the proletarianisation does not guarantee either economic freedom or breakdown of the patriarchal structures in the existing social and economic conditions. Rather, the capitalist development has redefined the concept of work and thus undermines the contribution of domestic work to the national economy.

These methodological frameworks failed to account for the changing socio-political and economic conditions and for the raise of Islamism and other movements in the 1970s. Rather, this approaches have tried to reduce the scope and possibilities of the movements by using the concept of socialist parameters. Moreover, the conceptualization of women as the core beneficiaries of modernisation did not stand up to the challenges posed by other emerging trends in the gender discourse.

The emergence of the Islamic modernism in the mid nineteenth century challenged the analytical framework which celebrated the essentialisation of the confrontations between tradition and modernity. The essence of the Islamic modernist thought was the creation of positive links between the Quranic principles and modern thought leading to the integration of modern institutions with the moral and social orientation of Quran. The Islamic modernists argued that the backwardness in the Muslim societies was due to their deviation from Islam and because of the negation of the free interpretation of the Islamic scriptures. The gender inequalities existed in Muslim societies were largely due to social customs and the misrepresentation of the Quranic world view by the medieval jurists. Nonetheless, the critics of Islamic modernism have perceived the modernists as excessively pro-Western.

This trend continued into the twentieth century and grew into a popular movement through out the region, which is now being called as Islamism. Though different from Islamic modernism at certain points, this could be called as an Islamic attempt to rediscover the original meaning of Islamic messages without distortions and deviations aiming to challenge the existing systems, and the West and its models. Moreover, it suggested an Islamic alternative system including a system of governance as a practical solution.

Similarly, a trend which could be called as Islamic feminism emerged suggesting an effective methodology for the liberation of Muslim women. While sympathizing with the issues addressed by the feminists, the Islamic feminists argued that the lack of a comprehensive analysis of the Quran and other religious sources has led the feminists to the misrepresentation of Islam and Muslim women. However, the Islamic feminists have demonstrated the link between women's liberation and the Quran, suggesting a reading of the Quran from a female perspective. The frame works of the Islamic feminists and the liberal trends within the Islamist movements have shown strong similarities at many points.

Despite the existence of strong alternative movements and the emergence of deep consciousness of gender identities, the ethnocentric and orientalist approaches have conveniently overlooked the gender dynamics of the Arab societies. Moreover, the stereotyping of the Arab societies has led to ignore the gender discourses representing various ideological formations. Similarly, many studies have not attempted to assess the role of the state in maintaining the patriarchal structures through its legal and development policies.

In this context, this study attempts to throw light on the discourses on women in the Arab world in the contemporary Arab world. This also



undertakes an analysis of the role of the state in altering or maintaining the existing gender roles and models.

As the discourse on women in the Arab world is common to every Arab country, the study has not been limited to a particular country or a geographical area. This however, had posed a problem during the study. As the examination of a wide range of literature has not been within the limited time span of this study. So, only a selected number of literature has been subjected to the analysis.

The source materials used for this study are mainly books and article by the authors representing different ideological and religious formations in the Arab world. Books and articles on related topics by non-Arab scholars and academicians also have been used extensively.

### **Chapterization**

Apart from the introductory chapter, there are four chapters in this study. The second chapter “Historical Background of the Discourse on Women in the Arab World’ throws light on the role of Islam in the liberation of women from subjugation and oppression. The emancipatory content of Islam was hijacked by the religious scholars who closed the doors of *ijtihad* (independent interpretation) in the course of time. Since then, the conservatives tried to give religious authenticity for their

misogynic and patriarchal practices. It also led to the institutionalisation of conservatism in the Islamic tradition.

The Islamic modernist attempts, represented by the eminent reformists of the nineteenth century, to link the Quranic principles with the modern thought suggested an Islamic framework for the eradication of gender discrimination. Along with this Islamic reformist discourse, the western feminist thought started creeping into the Arab world. The early Arab feminists, constituted by the educated, urban, upper class women demanded legal changes with regard to women. This chapter also looks at the strategies, framework and complexities of the movement in the context of the nationalist movement.

The Third chapter 'Contemporary Discourse on Women' is an overview of the discourse on women representing various ideologies and religious denominations. There had been constant attempt on the part of the Western Media and the Orientalist Scholarship to homogenise the varied trends within the Islamic tradition. The general tendency is to describe the chane wary conservatives, radicals and all others trends within the Islamist movement has as fundamentalist. An attempt is made to differentiate between these trends in this chapter. While the traditionalists stubbornly opposed any attempt to alter the existing gender hierarchies, the Islamists offered a reformist agenda upholding the economic and political rights of

women. The Islamists, though with conservative undertones at times, recognised the need for a break with the conservative gender ideology, so as to counter the Western model of women's liberation and equality.

The feminist movement which reemerged in the eighties, mainly led by Nawal El Sadaawi, suggested socialism as a model for the elimination of patriarchal and class domination. Fathima Mermissi, another Arab feminist, distinguished the scriptural purity and the popular practices of patriarchy. However, this movement has not gained much popular support. The contrasting positions of conservatives, Islamists and the feminists in the last couple of decades have been discussed in this chapter.

As the state is a product of a particular configuration of socio-economic conditions and institutions, it plays a major role in shaping and maintaining a particular social structure. The economic policies and the economic development patterns of the Arab states have consolidated the power and authority of the state and the ruling elites. The proletarianisation due to the industrialization undermined the agrarian economy and did not provide economic freedom. Rather, the economic policies restricted women's labour participation and their role in the economic development. The state sponsored so called political liberalization intended to regain legitimacy has helped the ruling elite to resort to oppressive measures

against the political opposition movements. The Fourth the chapter, "State, Development, and Gender' analyses the gender politics of the state, development and female labour participation, attitude of the state towards competing political and gender ideologies, while attempting to trace a link between the economic development and political conditions.

The final chapter includes the conclusions derived from the study.

## Chapter II

### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF DISCOURSE ON WOMEN IN THE ARAB WORLD**

The history of discourse on women in the Arab world, perhaps, dates back to the Jahiliya period when the birth of a female child was abominable to the pagan Arabs, who opted for an indefensible and cruel alternative—either to keep the girl as a thing of sufferance and contempt, bringing disgrace on the family, or to get rid of 'it' by burying her alive.<sup>1</sup> Majority of women in that age of ignorance lived in a male dominated society, in which her status was low and her rights were negligible.

It was at this time, Khansa, the great Arab poetess, whose life time spanned both the Jahiliya and Islamic periods vaxed eloquent on the distinctive virtues of femininity. She embraced Islam only to be reassured of what she stood for.<sup>2</sup>

Since the rise of this emancipatory ideology i.e. Islam started a new era, where in the marginalised sections of the society including slaves and

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<sup>1</sup> Ali Shariati, Women in the Eyes and Heart of Mohammed (Areekode, 1990) p.12.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed Hasan Zayat, Thareekh al-Adab al-Arabi (History of Arabic Literature) (Lebanon, 1993) p.109.

women-rediscovered their lost selves. Historical evidences give a good account of women in the period of Prophet Mohammed, raising heads from slavery and subjugation to claim their right to join as equal contributors to the making of their Arab history. Islam gave women their right to life by condemning the cruel practice of female infanticide in scathing terms.<sup>3</sup> Islam conferred the rights of individual ownership and economic independence on women, while simultaneously obligating men to secure all her material needs. The advocates of Islamic modernism, such as Ali Shariati and Mohammed-al-Ghazali, have argued that the concepts of voting rights and citizenship for women can be found in the traditions of Prophet Mohammed as he had extracted allegiance from both women and men and had included women among the rank of his companions.<sup>4</sup> He invalidated the marriages which were without the authority and consent of women and allowed her to participate in wars, bringing water and nursing the injured.<sup>5</sup> It was because of the social transformation Islam brought about in the Arab World, the young wife of prophet mohammed, A'isha, found her active participation in the political affairs of Muslims totally consonant with the Quran and the Prophetic tradition at a critical juncture of the political history of Islam. A'isha advised

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<sup>3</sup> Quran: 16: 58-59.

<sup>4</sup> Shariati, n.1, p.11.

<sup>5</sup> Hasan Turabi, Women in Islam and Muslim Society (Nigeria, 1993),p.17.

civil disobedience and herself joined the troops in the battle field, armed in opposition to the fourth Caliph Ali Ibn Abi Talib.<sup>6</sup> Her involvement in this battle which is commonly known as the battle of *Jamal*, became a highly controversial matter in the Arab World. It is often cited as an example to refute the claim of women to political participation. Moreover, contrary to the Arab practice, the likes of Aisha, were consulted by the Arab patriarchs in the matters of Islamic jurisprudence, preempting the possibility of the masculinization of the religion.

After the demise of Prophet Mohammed his first four successors also followed this flexible tradition in which women enjoyed their freedom and space in all the spheres of life. They believed that laws had to be understood and interpreted in order to remain true to their original purpose.

However, patriarchy staged a come back and segregated women from public sphere by taking a hegemonic order, in the Islamic society after the period of the four Caliphs, and by the establishment of the first dynastic regime of the Islamic history. It has been viewed that under the Umayyad rule, the law became more rigid as it was employed by the rulers as a

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<sup>6</sup> Fathima Mermissi, "Women in Muslim History: Traditional Perspective and New Strategies", In S. Jay Kleinberg, ed., Retrieving Women's History: Changing Perceptions of the Role of Women in Politics and Society (France, 1992), p.339.

theoretical justification for state control.<sup>7</sup> A legal system was developed by organizing the various rulings of the Prophet and his successors. Scholars like Leila Ahmed have maintained that "the ethical injunctions of Islam enjoying fair treatment of women did not reflect in these laws"<sup>8</sup>, which attained the authenticity in the debates related to Islam and the Muslim society.

It was because of the conservative nature of the Islamic scholarship which gained supremacy in the Abbasid period, debates pertaining to the issues of women did not yield any progressive results. It rather produced volumes of religious works, with predominantly misogynic ideas pushing downward the women's status. This conservative character of the religious scholarship as well as the establishment, brought back the patriarchal nature of the society, throwing the feminine scriptural experience into the dark. This pre-empted the possibility of a female assertion on religious grounds. Nonetheless, the voices of protest against the masculinisation of religion, and the rigid interpretation of the religious texts could be heard from who argued for the reestablishment of the Prophetic tradition of flexibility.

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<sup>7</sup> Munira Fakhro, "Gulf Women and Islamic Law" in Mary Yamani, ed., Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives, (New York, 1996), p.251.

<sup>8</sup> Leila Ahmed, "Early Islam and the Position of Women: The Problem of Interpretation" In Nikki R. Kiddie and Beth Baron ed., Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender (New Haven & London, 1991), p.58.



## **Reformism and Gender Discourse**

By the end of the 19th century the question of women's rights became the bone of contention in the Arab World, as part of the historic awakening which set the background for social reforms and modernization. The colonial conditions in Egypt and other parts of the Arab world in the 1880s, that strengthened the nationalist consciousness on the one hand, and the influence of the liberal thought on the other, paved the way for intellectual debates encompassing all aspects of modern Arab life. Significantly, all these debates took place mainly in Egypt due to the impacts of modernisation introduced by Mohammad Ali and because of the advancement the country made in the field of education.

With the strengthening of the modernization process of Egypt by Mohammed Ali in the first half of the 19th century, contradictions and confusions in everyday life started creeping in and the role of the existing cultural values and religious practices were questioned. Then, attempts were made to overcome this challenge with the initiative of liberal scholars.

However, the modernization discourse represented two streams of thoughts. As the first one was opposed to the idea of accommodating the

'age old' traditional practices, and religious beliefs, the other found the religious values totally in coherence with modernity. Interestingly, the rejection of the traditions and the religious beliefs did not yield much fruit, as the latter found its way in to the society. However, the conservatives showed their reluctance to accommodate any change even within the religious framework.

Rifa Rafi al-Tahtawi, Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Muhammed Abduh and Qasim Amin, the great liberal Islamic reformists of the 19th century, believed that the corrupted Islamic traditions could be rectified only through a proper understanding of the message of Islam. They realized the urgency of reforms in order to lift the age old stagnation that had afflicted the Islamic society under the Ottoman rule, and to build up resistance as the Arab world was falling prey to the European colonial hegemony.<sup>9</sup>

The great task which these modernists set themselves primarily in Egypt where they were centred, but ultimately for the Arab world – was to break down the diehard conservatism of the Muslim canon lawyers to accustom the Muslim population to a gradual revision of Muslim law in the light of modern tradition. The reformers believed that the social

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<sup>9</sup> Kumari Jagawardena, Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World in the 19th and 20th Centuries, (The Hague, 1982) p.20.

transformation was possible only when the status of the traditionally disadvantaged one-half of the society i.e. women, was improved.

Tahtawi (1801-1871) was one of the first 19th century reformists to write about the need for women's education. He urged the people to ignore the conservative views pertaining to women which led to her segregation and to the present lamentable state.<sup>10</sup> His two books "A Guide to the Education of Girls and Boys", published in 1872 and 'A Summary Framework on Paris' published in 1902 are considered to be milestones in the struggle for women's emancipation.<sup>11</sup>

Jamaluddin al-Afghani (1839-1897) was one of the key influences on the intellectuals and the masses of the period. He advocated the reform of the traditional structures and promoted alliances of religious and radical forces in the society. He mobilized the masses against the oppressive and corrupt regimes and called for the unity of the Islamic world, in order to fight colonial powers. He urged the muslims to sensitize themselves about the traditionally deprived one-half of the population i.e. women in order to fight the external powers. He held that, women, the pillars of the educated, family

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<sup>10</sup> Nadia Hijab, Women Power: The Arab Debate on Woman at Work (New York, 1988) pp.38-39.

<sup>11</sup> Nawall El Saadawi, The Hidden Face of Eve, (London, 1980) p.170.

must be educated, so that, they build up a healthy society. He maintained that the scriptures did not condone the anti-women social practices.

These arguments were followed by those of Sheikh Mohammed Adbuh (1849-1905) of al-Azhar University, the centre of Islamic Scholarship, who argued that Muslims would find necessary answers to the problem and predicaments of modern life, if the holy Quran and other religious sources are properly studied, re-establishing the practice of *ijtihad*. This approach of Muhammed Adbuh is known as Islamic modernism. He argued that "the problem is not with Islam only with Muslims".<sup>12</sup>

He criticized the inferior position allotted to women, and held that the oppression of women in the name of Islam, especially the abuses connected with divorce, and polygamy, was among the ills which contributed to the stagnant nature of the Muslim societies. He upheld the principle of equality of sexes as the essence of the Islamic values. He maintained that the imposition of face veil on women was unislamic.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Gordon E. Pruet, "Islam and Orientalism" in Asaf Hussain, Robert Olson, Jamil Qureshi, eds., Orientalism, Islam and Islamists, (UAS, 1984), P.64.

<sup>13</sup> Margot Badran, "The Origins of Feminism in Egypt" in Arina Angerman, Greerte Binnema, Annemieka Keunen, Vefie Poles and Jarquclien Zikzee, ed., Current Issues in Women's History (London and New York, 1989) p.159.

He called upon the people to educate their girls he related the backwardness and passivity which had assailed the Arab society with the lack of women's education. He held that women were deprived of their right to education, and were kept away from its sources in contradiction to what was required and necessitated both by life and the religions".<sup>14</sup> These reformist ideas which challenged the conservative establishments he drew a lot of flak from his opponents.

In the early 1890s, Marqus Fahmi, a coptic Christian, in his analysis of the backwardness of Egypt, like his contemporary reformer, that the backwardness of the country was due to the backwardness of its women, and this backwardness resultant of the oppression in the patriarchal system of family. He gave vent to his systematic critique of patriarchy through a four-act play `al-Mara' al-Sharq (The Women in the East), published in 1894.<sup>15</sup> He attacked the claim of the patriarchs that men confined women to protect them, as they were weak and were vulnerable to treachery and sexual infidelity, and argued that it was only to control the patrimony.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> El Sadaawi, n.11, p.171.

<sup>15</sup> Margot Badran, Feminists, Islam and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt (Cairo, 1996) p.17.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.17.

Linking the private and public domains, Fahmi argued that the lack of family unity is reflected in the lack of national unity, and called for a society governed by secular laws.<sup>17</sup>

In 1899, Qasim Amin (1865-1908) one of the disciples of Mohammed Abuh, published a book, *Thahreerul Mar'ah* (Women's Liberation), which shook the whole Arab world. In this book he elaborated the liberal ideas of Mohammed Abduh and Jamaluddin-al-Afghani and it has been considered as a formal call for women's liberation, and therefore he is called the father of Egyptian feminism.<sup>18</sup> He called for putting an end to the practice of face veiling, female seclusion, and the prevailing practices of polygamy and divorce, which had nothing to do with Islam. Employing Islamic modernist arguments, he called for reforms in gender relations and roles within an Islamic framework, as articulated by many of the Islamists of today's Arab World.<sup>19</sup> He argued that "the Islamic law had been the first one to provide for equality between men and women but it had been corrupted".<sup>20</sup> He advocated the right of women to education and work, and also called for legal reforms to improve their status and maintained that there could be no upswing in the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.18.

<sup>18</sup> Badran, n.13, p.154.

<sup>19</sup> People like Zainab al Gazali, Sayyid Qutub and Hasan Turabi have asserted the need to transform the Muslim Societies in an Islamic framework., as shall be seen in the next chapter.

<sup>20</sup> Hijab, n.10, p.39.

state of the nation without improving the position of women.<sup>21</sup>

His book was denounced by the conservative religious authorities and scholars of al-Azhar university, while the views vented by Fahmi did not draw much criticism. It is not surprising that these conservatives developed an alliance with the oppressive regime of Khedive Ismail,<sup>22</sup> a strong alliance, which existed through out the history between the oppressive system and the conservative clerical establishment.

Amin's ideas faced severe criticisms from the nationalists too, who argued that the debate on the question of women's liberation would weaken and dilute the struggle against foreign domination. Some of the nationalists like Mustapha Kamil, Abdul Hameed Khairi and Ahmed al Boulaki were opposed to the very idea of women's liberation.<sup>23</sup> They gave vent to their misogynic attitudes through their books and newspaper articles. Amin answered the conservatives through another of his book, 'al-Mara'h al-Jadeedah (The new women) which he published in 1900 linking women's liberation with national liberation.

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<sup>21</sup> Jayawardena, n.9, p.23.

<sup>22</sup> El-Saadawi, n.11, p.171.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.171.

Though men dominated these debates, female writers like A'isha Taymuriya (1840-1902), who wrote against the domestic seclusion of women were also there in the picture. But, her arguments were considered as a development of the ideas of people like Talitani and Abdulh, whom she regarded as reformers of the time because of the importance given for female education in her arguments. She had to confront not only her male counterparts, but also the conservatives of her own sex.

Studies reveal that a distinct form of feminist consciousness developed during this period among the educated middle class women. When Hanna Kawarani opposed women's suffrage, in an article in 1892, an issue which was being debated in Britain at that time, Zainab Fawaz, a woman of Lebanese origin, challenged this argument and demanded women's right to political participation.<sup>24</sup> This was a major diversion from the conventional demands as this issue of high importance had not attracted much of an attention of the pioneers of women's liberation of her time. She argued that women have complete mental faculties and capabilities to perform her duties, and maintained that there is no law in Islam which prohibited women from any occupation.

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<sup>24</sup> Badran, n.15, p.15.



All these reformers, both men and women, held the institution of family as the basic foundation of the Arab society. It resulted in the close examination of the role of the family in the Arab society, the role women played in such an institution, and the damages it would cause to the society, if it remained backward. They also believed that a weak and backward society cannot fight the colonial powers which extracted the blood and wealth of the indigenous people, and posed a great threat to their culture and religious beliefs. It was for this reason that the debates on social reforms and national liberation revolved around the question of women's liberation and their right as members of the society.

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However, the nationalist and reformist debates accorded a space for a feminism which did not contradict the Islamic values. The feminist discourse of this period could be legitimized only within the Islamic and nationalist frameworks. Because of the strong identification of cultural authenticity with Islam, the feminist discourse had to either deny that Islamic practices are necessarily oppressive or assert that oppressive practices are not necessarily Islamic.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, "Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and Middle Eastern Studies". In Deniz Kandiyoti, ed., Gendering Middle East : Emerging Perspectives (London & New York, 1991) p.9.

## **The Rise of Feminist Movement**

The growth of feminist movement in the Arab world started in Egypt as a result of the attempts to reform the society as discussed earlier. This development was marked by the establishment of women's cultural and literary associations, voluntary organizations, intellectual and literary activities and the establishment of women's journals. The feminists organized several lectures for women and by women on issues related to them.

The first talk which was organized by Huda Sharawi was given by Marguerite Clement, a French lady who compared the lives of European and Egyptian women and also talked about the practice of veiling. She was again called in 1914 to speak on the role of Egyptian women in social and national work. She acknowledged Islam as the source of Muslim women's rights, and argued that the freedom and accomplishments of women in the early days of Islam were contrasted with later backwardness resulting from domestic confinement and suggested women to become active in social welfare work to legitimise their presence.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Badran, n.15, p.57.

The debates and discourses carried out by women's journals were not different from that of the lectures. Labiba Hashim, founder and editor of "Fatal al-Sharq (The young women of the East) and Malik Hifni Nasif of Nisaiyat acknowledged the strides European women had made but warned against the blind imitation of the West.

The feminists articulated their demands for educational facilities for girls in their journals and various main stream newspapers.

The idea that, 'to educate a mother was to educate the nation', was infused into the nationalist discourse at a time when Egypt was intent upon revitalization as part of the struggle to free itself from colonial domination.

With an increase in the number of female students in schools, discussion was focussed on the subjects to be taught in the schools. For the different role attributed to women it was argued that the curriculum in girls' schools should be different from that in the boys' schools. But, Nabawiya Musa argued for same academic curriculum for both, but suggested additional instructions in domestic subjects.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.64.

When women started entering the public domains, especially the work force, people feared the mixing up of sexes and raised fears of endangered female morality. Responding to these fears, the feminists, Nabwiya Musa, Huda Sharawi, Zainab Fawaz, and Bahithat al-Badiya, argued that gender roles were socially constructed rather than ordained by nature or divinely prescribed. They refuted the construction of sexuality, which portrayed women with uncontrollable sexual appetites, and thus raising a fear of unleashing social chaos.

However, Nabawiya Musa adhered to the local norms of dress, without veiling her face, and thus endorsed the prevailing Islamic modernist arguments she upheld gender segregation for moral reasons and expected both the sexes stick to to the conventional moral code governing gender relations. Badran has viewed this separation “as a way to limit the power of men in the works place, turning a code meant to contain women to one contain men”.<sup>28</sup>

The first articulation of Egyptian women's feminist demands was made in 1911 in a nationalist forum. Bahithat al-Badiya sent to the forum a set of demands, including women's access to all educational and occupational

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.60.

opportunities, women's right to worship in mosques, a practice which prevailed since the early days of Islam, and family reforms, especially provisions relating to marriage and divorce.

The role played by the Egyptian feminists in the struggle for independence was commentable. Nabawiya Musa, the pioneer of Egyptian feminism, wrote in her book 'Women and Work' that spreading education among women was the best service to the nation. However, paradoxical enough, she, on the pretext that men do not know the meaning of decency, dissuaded her female students from going out on demonstrations, even while it was against colonialism.<sup>29</sup> This was more consonant with the conservative articulation of gender segregation. But, the Islamists like Zainab al Ghazali, in contrast, favoured the cooperation and unity of men and women against the imperial and zionist powers.

The formation of Ittihad al-Nisai al-Misri (The Egyptian Feminist Union) in 1920, Huda Sharawi as its president, marked the beginning of an organized feminist movement in Egypt. The EFU declared its first feminist programme at the International Women Suffrage Alliance Congress in Rome in 1923. Huda Sharawi made it clear that Egyptian feminist movement is an

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.69.

indigenous one and not an imitation of the Western model. This was important at a time when the Arab world was in the process of fighting for freedom and re-establishing its identity. Moreover, she understood the reverence people had for their inherited practices or she herself had a sense of affinity to it.

In 1924 the EFU and the Wafd Women's Central Committee (WWCC) jointly announced their agenda which included, along with demands particularly pertaining to women, issues concerning national liberation and sovereignty, and education.

The EFU's mainly concentrated on issues like, the seclusion of women through veil and the *harem* system, which was a middle and upper class phenomenon, education for women and women's access to the work force. Nonetheless, the agenda of the EFU did not accommodate the aspirations and demands of the poor and working class women, and therefore failed to evoke much enthusiasm amongst them.

The feminist movement, as stated before, derived the legitimacy for its agenda by appropriating the Islamic modernist discourse. The Christians in the movement neither involved themselves in the drive to reform the Muslim

personal laws nor they endeavoured to changes their own personal codes.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the feminists did not challenge the existing notion of the family, rather, they insisted that a strong and united family was important to a strong nation.<sup>31</sup>

However, the EFU succeeded in raising the age of marriage for girls to 16 year, but proved to be a failure in bringing out changes in the laws related to marriage, divorce, or right to political participation and legislation inspite of its consistent efforts.

The political atmosphere in the Arab world was conducive for the feminist movement to reach out to other Arab states, during the 1930s and 1940s. In 1914 Syrian women joined the secret societies in opposition to the to change the administration and the life of the people so as to conform with the Turkish pattern. In 1919 women poured into the streets against the French occupation.

Palestinian women faught, along with their men, both the colonialism and zionism together. Women in Iraq, Sudan, and Jordan joined the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.95.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.125

mass movements against imperial order or oppressive regimes at different periods.

The polarization of the Arab states in favour of the Palestinians was another factor which helped the growth of Egyptian feminism not a pan-Arab feminism. But the reach of the EFU and the Arab Feminists Union (AFU) which was established in 1945 was limited to the upper middle class and upper class, as argued by Juan Cole.<sup>32</sup>

As the AFU and the EFU continued their activism in the struggle for national liberation, majority of the nationalist leaders showed their reluctance to accommodate a gender agenda in the struggle for independence. Turkey remained an exception to Ataturk's initiatives to westernize Turkey, which had its impact on the existing patterns of gender relations, proved to be unpopular, as the emergence of the Islamists as the single largest party indicates.

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<sup>32</sup> Juan R. Cole, 'Feminism, Class and Islam, in Turn of the Century Egypt', International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, (Cambridge), 13 (1981) pp.397-07.



The conservatives of the Arab world remained rigid and intransigent to accommodate any kind of change, even within the religious framework, whereas the Islamists, though with conservative intones at times, and the progressive nationalists, have showed their willingness to accommodate the new social roles of women in the changing order well within the Islamic framework.

## Chapter III

### CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE ON WOMEN

The years after the Second World War were marked by many changes in the political and social spheres of the Arab world. The anti-colonial struggle rooted in the Islamic and Arab consciousness reached its logical conclusion-that is independence. The days to come witnessed the nationalist leaders and the ruling elite seeking formulas to build up legitimate, independent states with `Islamic' principles and legal system as foundation.

The new states' modernization attempts altered the existing socio-economic conditions considerably, and current of discontent and utrest swept the society, as these efforts failed to translate their celebrated slogans into concrete realities. The feminist movements were forced to back track and the Islamists also faced problems as they challenged the `official Islam of the regimes. It has been argued that the growing influence of the Islamic revivalism stems from 'the disillusionment with the west, a tendency to blame the westernization and secularization for the social disruption and

moral decline that has accompanied modernization and the desire to prove more cultural continuity between modernity and tradition.<sup>1</sup>

The growing trends of Islamic opposition, the influence of feminist writings, and the link between the conservative clerical establishment and the state culminated in a sharp polarization on the question of women's rights and gender equality. Even the conservatives adamantly stuck to their inherent prejudices, the feminist writings showed incredible courage in exploding the age-old myths on women. Many of the Islamist scholars also recognized the need to depart from the conservative gender ideology. Though both the conservatives and reformist Islamists ensured women's rights within the framework of Islamic principles and values, they differed deeply on their definition of these rights and interpretation of Islam.

### **Conservatives and Women's Rights**

The institutionalization of conservatism in Islamic history and scholarship owes its origin to the tenth century when of the majority of legal scholars reached on a consensus that the elaboration of the Islamic law was

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<sup>1</sup> John L. Esposito, Women in Muslim Family Law (New York, 1982), pp.ix-x.

complete. The independent reasoning was considered to be unnecessary and the doors of *ijtihad* (reasoning) was closed.<sup>2</sup> Since then, the jurists were to imitate the established authoritative doctrines of the law, thus weakening the relationship between *ijihihad* and *ijma* (consensus). This ultimately led to the legal conservatism among the religious scholars.

The conservatives in the Arab world, as any where else, have adhered to a very strict, rigid and literal interpretation, rather misinterpretation, of the religious texts. This rigidity jeopardised the evolution of a framework within which Muslims of today's modern world can lead an Islamic life.

Any attempt at reforming the Muslim societies was stubbornly suspended. They misquoted the scriptures in defence of their misogynic attitudes. Volumes of theological works were produced mainly to warn the pious of the possible danger to the Muslim community, if women were 'allowed' to venture out of their houses. In one of the pamphlets of the Saudi religious establishment, Sheikh Abdullah ibn Baz stated that the Holy

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<sup>2</sup> For further details on the closure of the doors of *ijtihad* see Wael B. Hallaq, "Was the Doors of Ijtihad Closed?", International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, (Cambridge) Vol.16, 1984, pp.3-41.

Quran ordered women to keep to their homes, to veil and to mind the words of men. The Quranic verse, which the reformist Islamists and the liberals consider to be specific to the wives of prophet Mohammed was quoted in supporting his views and argued that if the prophet's wives who were very pious had to keep to their homes, it was more necessary to warn other women about the need to abide by these rules.<sup>3</sup>

• Similar misogynic views were articulated by another Saudi theologian in his book 'Fatayatuna bayna al-Taghrib wa al-Afaf' (Our Women Between Westernization and Chastity). He, using strong theological language, warned the women against driving cars or even venturing out of their houses.<sup>4</sup>

• Most of the conservative theologians have been part of the official religious establishment. They argued for the preservation of the 'traditional order of Islam' with its segregation of sexes. For instance, Sheikh Mohammed Hasanaya Makhluf, in his famous and controversial fatwa of 1952, denied women their right to vote or to be elected to the parliament on

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<sup>3</sup> Nadia Hijab, Women Power: The Arab Debates on Women at Work, (Cambridge, 1988), p.45.

<sup>4</sup> Fadia Faqir, "Engendering Democracy and Islam in the Arab World," Third World Quarterly, (London), Vol.18, No.1, (1997), p.168.

the grounds of 'their inherently unsuitable nature' and as a 'protective measure'.<sup>5</sup>

It has been argued that the segregation of the sexes is strictly enforced in Islam as it would lure man and women into the pits of unbridled sexual desire and lust.<sup>6</sup>

Conservatives like Salih Ibn Fowzan al Fowzan did not oppose women working outside homes. But this 'allowance' was conditional. It was argued that in case of urgency, women are allowed to work, if they performed their primary duty of a wife and mother, only in selected professions such as nursing and teaching women, in segregated work facilities.<sup>7</sup> He further supplements Ibn Baz's view on veiling by saying that women need to cover their face except before her close relatives.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Freyer Stowosser, "The Status of Women in Early Islam," In Freda Hussain, ed., Muslim Women (beckenham, 1984), p.32.

<sup>6</sup> Muhammed Imran, Ideal Women in Islam (Delhi, 1995) p.120.

<sup>7</sup> Salih Ibn Fawzan al Fawzan, Tambihat Ala Ahkani Takhtassu bil Muminat (Informations About the Rules Partaining to Muslim Women) (Riyad, 1996) p.11

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.44.

This anti-women attitude of the conservatives took clearer shape when the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia vehemently opposed women's right to drive cars. In November 1990, a group of Saudi women led a demonstration driving their cars in a grave violation of the Saudi tradition.<sup>9</sup>

The uncompromising rigidity of the conservatives who legitimized the anti-women policies and laws of the state and the misogynic attitudes of the people, through their religious decrees (fatwa) and theological works opened up the battle ground for the feminists.

### **Feminist Discourse**

As examined in the previous chapter, nationalism was the rallying point for of Arab feminists in its formative stage. Though, the feminists, during this period, did not challenge the religious framework propogated reformists like Mohammed Abduh, they later argued for the secularization and democratization of the Arab society on the Western lines. Fathima Mernissi, and Nawal El Saadawi, two Arab feminists, have been very active

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<sup>9</sup> A.K. Pasha, "Aspects of Political Participation in Saudi Arabia" (Working Paper Gulf Studies Programme, Jawaharlal Nehru University, School of International Studies, New Delhi, June, 1996) p.4.

in the feminist discourse and have contributed considerably to the feminist literature.

Nawal El Saadawi, founder of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, examines the existing gender relations from a left-wing perspective. The most important struggle women faces in the Arab world, according to her, is not that of secularism versus religion or feminists rights versus male chauvinism, rather it is to achieve all the progressive toosl to crush the foreign capitalist interest.<sup>10</sup> The links between the western interests and the people would encourage the traditionalist forces, and as a result, the return to dogma and orthodoxy will be boosted. This inevitably leads to violation of freedom and rights to which women become the first victims. She also held that sexual rights enjoyed in many western countries have led to a grave situation where in female body became commercialized exhibits for capitalist profits.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> El Saadawi, Hidden Face of Eve (London, 1980), p.ix.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.x



Though the framework was different, her arguments regarding the Western claims of achieving women's liberation and freedom resembled with the views of the Islamist scholars like Sayyid Qutb. He warns the Muslims of getting trapped in the fictitious and superficial western model of liberation.<sup>12</sup>

The oppression of women in any society is an expression of an economic structure based on land ownership, system of inheritance, parenthood and the patriarchal family as an in built social unit. The attempts to preserve the formal structure of the family is related to the exploitative class and political system which burdens the family with the costs and trouble of rearing children, instead of this becoming the responsibility of the social system.<sup>13</sup>

Sexual abuse of women, the concept of virginity prevalent in the society, and the practice of the female circumcision which is meant to minimize the female sexual desire are basically the result of the economic interests that govern the society. Therefore, the reasons for the lower status

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<sup>12</sup> Sayyid Qutb, Islamile Samuhya Neethi (Malayalam) (Social Justice in Islam), V.P. Ahmed Kutty trans. (Calicut, 1987) p.95.

<sup>13</sup> El Saadawi, n.10, p.xiii.

of women in Arab societies is not due to Islam, but due to certain economic and political forces of foreign imperialism and the reactionary classes operate from within.<sup>14</sup> Islam had progressive tendencies as it defended women and slaves in the seventh century, but in the course of time, it was made use of defend the state and ruling class.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, most Islamic laws are lenient towards the secular freedom of men and gives him the freedom to have sexual relations with any women, who is not his wife without being guilty of adultery, on the condition that at the time he regarded the woman as his wife.<sup>16</sup>

Here Sadaawi's reference is to a law meant to decide the fatherhood of a child in a specific situation in which a man and a woman who are close relatives, and whose marriage is not allowed, marry without knowing this fact, and realize it only after their sexual intercourse. Then both of them would be exempted from the charge of adultery and he is considered as the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.41.

<sup>15</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, "Arab Women and Western Feminism," Race and Class, (Nottingham), Vol.21, No.4, Spring (1980) p.176.

<sup>16</sup> El Saadawi, n.10, p.54.

legal father of the child, according to the law. The deconstruction of the above said law in such a vicious way is either due to her ignorance, or because of her animosity towards Islam.

The unit of family, the core of the patriarchal system, necessitates the imposition of one husband on woman, where as, man can have several wives. Any change in this hostility towards female sexuality would lead to confusions in succession and inheritance, and thus to the collapse of the patriarchal family system.<sup>17</sup>

It is contradictory, according to Saadawi, that people are preaching and practicing Islamic principles and values, and the call to regain to Islamic doctrines is becoming much stronger on the one hand, and on the other, consumerism is creeping in and female body and sexuality are being commercialized.<sup>18</sup> As a result of these capitalist tendencies, prostitution and alchoholism spread in the high class especially in the name of tourism. As a

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pp.40-41.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, pp.82-83

counter mechanism she suggested that “an authentic religious rationale should lead us to activate and reinforce Islam at the expense of tourism.”<sup>19</sup>

In contrast she opposed any attempt to revive Islamic dress code for women as it is not possible in a capitalist atmosphere which incites her to be attractive and discarded the religious movements as a strategy of the feudal and capitalist classes to hold back the movements towards progress.

Though the Quran has stipulated the same punishment for both man and women for committing adultery, the provisions which allowed men to have more than one wife checked the need for adultery. But Saadawi viewed the restrictions on women, by the Islamic law, to have more than one partner, as male centric and meant to be applied only to women.<sup>20</sup>

As per the feminists view, the employment of women outside home helps them to attain greater degrees of freedom and independence from the husband or father. However, for the socialist feminists, women’s work

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.84

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.192

outside home does not lead to the true liberation of women as long as it is within the framework of a class society and patriarchal system.<sup>21</sup>

Saadavi has rightly pointed out the need to develop strategies for the eastern and Arab women's movement, rather than imitating the western movements, and suggests a socialist system leading to the true emancipation.

Fathima Mernissi adopted a different strategy to confront the conservative or Islamist arguments, which are often legitimised by a reference to the Quran or the prophetic traditions. According to her, any one who sympathises with and fights for women's rights in particular and human rights in general, understands that the enemy can be fought by basing his/her political claims on religious history, as the religion is not separate from the state.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p.192.

<sup>22</sup> Fathima Mernissi, "Women in Muslim History: Traditional Perspectives and New Strategies" In S. Jay Klienber, ed. Retrieving Women's History: Changing Perception of the Role of Women in Politics and Society (France, 1992), p.338.

The debates on women's rights to political power in the Arab world revolve around the highly controversial role of Aisha, who led troops against the fourth caliph Ali Ibn Abi Talib in the battle of Jamal. The conservatives who oppose women's political rights defend their claims by referring to this battle and the problem it created in the Muslim society. The conservatives also quote a Hadith in their support.

In her analysis of the religious authenticity of the prohibitions inflicted upon women, with respect to their right to political participation, Mernissi evaluates the *Hadith* (Prophetic tradition), which has been used to oppose women's political rights. According to al-Bukhari, the authentic scholar of Hadith, it is supposed to have been Abu Bakra who heard the prophet as saying: "Those who entrust their affairs to a women will never know prosperity". Analysing the complexities involved in the process of the 'battle of camel', the first civil war in the Islamic history and the political conditions in which Abu Bakra is supposed to have reported the prophet's statement, Mernissi argues that it was only Abu Bakra who gave gender of

the opponents, among the Hadith collected and verified by al-Bukhari on the subject of civil war, as a reason for his neutrality.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, Abu Bakra's words cannot be given legal authenticity, as he was flogged for slander, during the period of second Caliph Umar in a case of accused fornication. She further argued that the concept of the veil does not have any base in the tradition of prophet Mohammed who did not separate between his public life and private life.

She rightly points out that it was not Islam or prophet Mohammed, rather it was the religious scholars who consolidated the misogynic attitudes without giving much of importance for the world view of the Holy Quran and the prophetic tradition.

The concept of *nushuz* in verse 34 of Sura 4 in the Quran has been used by men as to sanctify the physical violence against their wives. For Memissi *nushuz* means women's disobedience to male authority and asserts that women's disobedience's so feared in the Muslim world because it

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<sup>23</sup> Fathima Mernissi, The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam (New York, 1991) p.58.

promotes individualism against the concept of Umma. Similarly the women's movements are being suppressed and branded as Western due to the same fear, she argued.<sup>24</sup>

The feminists discourse on gender discrimination in various forms, raises many important problems women facing today. But in the portrayal of Islam and Islamic laws, or movements, many mis-representation and distortions have been made. As Edward W. Said pointed out, these mis-representations and distortions in the portrayal of Islam today “do not argue either a genuine desire to understand nor a willingness to listen and see what there is to see and listen to”<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, it is important to understand the varying views of the Islamists on gender equality, who submit Islam as an alternative system for the Arab world as to fight the western cultural and political domination.

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<sup>24</sup> Fathima Mernissi, 'Femininity as Subversion: Refluctions on the Muslim Concept of Nushuz', In Diana L. Eck and Devaki Jain, ed. Speaking of Faith: Cross Cultural Perspectives on Women, Religion and Sowa Change (New Delhi, 1986) p.89.

<sup>25</sup> Edward W. Said, Covering Islam, (New York, 1997) p.xivii.



## **Islamists and Women's Rights**

The Islamist views on gender roles and equality need to be contextualised and evaluated in their local and regional settings and traditional conditions. It is always overlooked or conveniently by passed that it was the Islamists and reformists who opposed conservatism which showed bitter reluctance to accept any change and held back the Arab societies, and upheld a reformative agenda regarding women.<sup>26</sup>

The Islamists emerged in the Arab world in the context of conservatism and secular women's liberation movements, as far as their gender ideology was concerned. As pointed out in the previous chapter, the Arab world has a history of centuries of the violation of women's rights, and Islam emerged as an emancipatory ideology for women and other oppressed section of the society. During the course of history, Islam was used to legitimise the misogynic attitudes of the conservatives, who opposed independent interpretation of Islam.

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<sup>26</sup> Najib Ghabbian, 'Islamists and Women in the Arab World: From Reaction to Reform?', American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences, (USA), vol.12, No.1, Spring 1995, p.20.

In this context of suffocating conservatism, which warned the pious of the moral turpitudes if women were “allowed” to venture out of their houses, and of a feminism which derived its inspiration from the West, the Islamists provided another model. Rather than dwelling on woman role as temptress, one who plays havoc with men’s lives and keeps them from fulfilling their religious duties, the Islamist writings depict women as a partner in a family structure predicated by divine design as the paradigmatic social unit.

The establishment of Muslim Brotherhood and the Muslim Women’s Association of Zainab al-Ghazali in Egypt in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a clear break from the conservative Islamic ideology. The position taken by the Islamists on women’s issues during 1950s and 1960s was more liberal and flexible. But it was a defensive reaction against the Western cultural and political imperialism and challenge posed by the feminism to the Islamic values.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.23.

It was in this historical context of anti-Western struggle that the early Islamist writings appeared attacking the western model of equality and freedom, and suggesting an Islamic alternative. The question of women's liberation was considered to be a Western strategy to misrepresent Islam and to hegemonise the Arab world with the pretension to 'civilize' it.

Mahammed Qutab, a scholar and leader of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, dismissed the relevance of a women's liberation movement of the feminist in the Arab world, as the historical background which led to the feminist mobilization in the west differed from that of the Arab world. The feminist movement in the west was the product of the industrial revolution and capitalism which burdened the women folk. But it is strange, he argued, that women in Britain do not enjoy the right to equal wages, a right which Islam stipulated fourteen centuries before.<sup>28</sup>

As the Islamists are not a static or homogenous group, their views on the question of gender equality are diverse. The wide range of Islamist views

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<sup>28</sup> Muhammad Qutb, Islam the Misunderstood Religion (Delhi, 1996) pp.90-96.

on gender equality can be categorized into three - conservative, extremist, and reformist.<sup>29</sup>

The early Islamist writings differed from the conservatives as they recognised equality of men and women as human beings with equal souls as a fundamental principle of their ideology. They argued that Islam gave her the right to live, to honour, and to property like men,.....No one is permitted to hold her in contempt due to her functions as women .<sup>30</sup>

But their arguments certainly had the conservative undertones. Many of the early Islamist writings considered house the best place for women, and suggested different functions for men and women in life. As women by nature have to perform the role of a wife and mother, it was argued, that men are expected to discharge quite different duties such as engaging in the struggle of life going on in the outside world and forming a government or legislating about national economy<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ghabbian, n.26, p.25.

<sup>30</sup> Qutb, n.28, p.96

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.101.

The conservative Islamists argued that in most of the cases women are illogical and men are found to act more rationally than a normal women does.

This clearly suggested that female role expectations are different from that of men and they are by 'nature' expected to be 'active' actors in the household. These arguments own its origin to the assumption that women are emotionally valuable creatures, and therefore, they are not capable of discharging the functions which men are doing in the outside world which needs intellectual abilities. This questions the rational qualities and intellectual faculties of women and thus, encourages the oppressive conditions by negating women's rights to runfor public offices.

At the same time, argued that though they have different functions in life, men and women are not fundamentally different from each other, nor all the members of a sex lack all the potentialities necessary for the functions which the members of the opposite sex alone by nature are fit to perform..<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.103.

Muhammed Qutb who held the above view can not be considered strictly a conservative as his positions on polygamy, divorce, women's education, right to ownership... etc. were in consonance with the reformists of the early twentieth century and the moderate Islamists of his own time.

The conservative Islamists discouraged women's entry into the work force and regarded politics an unsuitable realm for women. Mustafa Sibai, founder of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the mid 1950s resisted women's entry into politics as it would cause them to neglect their wifely and motherly roles and cause mixing up of sexes. Islamists in Kuwait opposed women's suffrage in the 1980s.<sup>33</sup>

It does not suggest that the Islamist movement in early period was completely conservative. Hasan al Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood did not believe in the strict segregation of both sexes and did not oppose women taking active participation in the political process. This is evident from the fact that he himself worked closely with Zainab al

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<sup>33</sup> Ghadbian, n.27, p.26.

Ghazali.<sup>34</sup> In her memoir *Zainab al-Ghazali*, a prominent woman in the leadership of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and founder of Muslim Women's Association, gives a moving account of her political struggle and the hardships she underwent in the Egyptian prisons for her active participation in Islamist politics.<sup>35</sup> What comes emphatically is her strong and confident assertions that a Muslim women can be politically active within the Islamic framework, without hindering her primary function as a mother.

The extremist trends in the Islamist movement have not got much popular support in the Arab world. The extremists groups like al-Jihad and al-Jama'a al-Islamiya, both of Egypt, have been a de-legitimizing force for other Islamist groups. Because of their narrow and literal interpretation of the Islamic texts, their views on gender issues are highly oppressive and reactive. They strictly adhered to the conservative positions, according to which women belonging in the private sphere and men in the public.

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<sup>34</sup> Marvat F. Hatem, "Egyptian Discourse on Gender and Political Liberalisation" Do Secularist and Islamist views Really differ", *Middle Eastern Journal*, (Washington), Vol.48, No.4, Autumn 1994, pp.672-73.

<sup>35</sup> Zainab al Ghazali, *Ayyam min Itayati* (days from my life) (Cairo, 1986).

With the reexamination of the dominant conservative positions on gender roles and women's rights, many Islamists realised that the inclusion of women in all facets of political process was totally in consistency with Islam. People like Hasan Turabi, the prominent Islamist leader of Sudan's Islamic National Front (INF), (formally Muslim Brotherhood), Muhammed al Ghazali, renowned Islamist scholar, Yusuf al-Qardawi, a scholar and Islamist leader among others recognised the need for a clear break with the conservative gender ideology.

At a critical juncture of the Sudanese Islamist its movement, when the Islamists were accused of harbouring reactionary views which held women with contempt, and when they were on defensive, Hasan Turabi circulated a semi-anonymous document entitled 'Women in Islam and Muslim society' among the ranks of the INF for discussion. Before the appearance of this book, the Islamist strategy to counter the challenges posed by conservatives and communists had lost its coherence and a clear theoretical framework.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Abdual Wahab al Affendi, In Hasan Turabi, Women in Islam and Muslim Society (Nigeria, 1993) pp.1-2.



Turabi argued that the restrictions imposed on women and their rights in traditional societies had nothing to do with Islam, and that Islam had treated women as an independent entity and as a responsible human being.<sup>37</sup> Though Islam relieved women a certain responsibilities such as maintenance of the family and participation in war; they are not barred from doing these things, as women used to participate in military expeditions during the prophetic period.<sup>38</sup>

In defence of other collective duties of public life, he opined that Muslim women may participate but are not duty-bound to do so, except during emergency. And, women should acquire any kind of education without any limit or hindrance, and that they are entitled to freedom of expression.<sup>39</sup>

The reformist Islamists are not opposed to the idea of women's rights to political participation and to run for public office. After the death of Caliph Umar, Muslim ladies did participate in the process of consultation

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<sup>37</sup> Hasan Turabi, *Women in Islam and Muslim Society* (Nigeria, 1993) p.5.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, pp.12-13.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p.15

during the election of the next Caliph.<sup>40</sup> Women, as they stipulated, had the right to engage themselves in commerce, trade, and business and to go out to the public places for their spiritual and material needs.

Refuting the conservative claims, as enunciated by the Islamist reformists, Islam does not call for segregation between men and women, as it denies women her social life and the legitimate rights and roles in the process of socio-economic development.<sup>41</sup> Turabi has legitimized his arguments by giving examples from the Quran or the prophetic tradition.

Similar reformist views were articulated by Yusuf al Qardawi. The Islamic dress code he said it was not because Islam fears women to commit mistakes, but it was an instrument to check the physical harassment and to differentiate themselves from the Jahiliya women in the early days of Islam. At the same time he argued that Islam did not insist on face veiling by women.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p.17.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p.34.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p.34.

Similarly, Yousuf-al-Qardawi pointed out that women could contest parliamentary elections, and be judges and have equal authority as men.<sup>43</sup>

The 1980s and 1990s heard much more liberal and reformist Islamist voices in the gender debate. Muhammed-al-Ghazali challenged the conservative methodologies of religious interpretation in his writings. He argued that the Islamic laws allow women to serve in any public office as judges, ambassadors, cabinet members and ruler.<sup>44</sup>

As a result of these reformists liberal Islamist views on gender equality and women's rights, the Islamist groups could attract more women folk. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the female university students and educated middle class women joining the ranks of Islamist groups, in Egypt, Sudan, Algeria, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and many other countries in the Arab World.

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<sup>43</sup> Yusuf al Qardawi, Fatawa al Muasira vol.2, (Cairo, 1993), p.388.

<sup>44</sup> Yusuf al Qardawi, Vidhi Vilakkukal (Malayalam) Shiekh Mohammed Karakkunu , trans. (Calicut, 1987), pp.186-88.

Despite these changes in the gender ideology of the Islamists, they have not succeeded in overcoming the hurdles on women's way to the highest decision making bodies, of course with a few exceptions. The examples of Sudan and Egypt can be cited as starting points in this regard.

After the 1989 military coup in Sudan, the Islamists shared power with the new military government. As part of the government's attempts to alter the gender roles, it appointed a female judge in the Supreme Court. Moreover, 10 percent of the appointed parliament members is women. Three state level ministers, special quotas for women to raise their number in office, and physical training for women in the armed forces, are the other significant reforms brought about by the government.<sup>45</sup>

These significant changes which altered the existing gender roles and the Islamist call for a revolution for women's liberation and gender equality,<sup>46</sup> which would ultimately challenge the existing alliances between the conservative, official religious establishment and the monarchical

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<sup>45</sup> Ghadbian, n.27, p.31.

<sup>46</sup> Turabi, no.38, p.43.

regimes, would mark the ignition of the democratization process in the Arab world.

## Chapter IV

### STATE, DEVELOPMENT AND GENDER

Many studies on gender and women's empowerment focus their attention on the cultural and religious dynamics of the social formations, while the implications of economic development and class formations were deemed as the central points of the discourse by some others. Though some feminist studies have recently developed a methodology to analyse the gender dynamics of the state, feminism has no significantly developed or widely accepted theory of state.<sup>1</sup>

The issue of gender finds only minor elaborations in the Classical theories of state. The liberal tradition presents 'citizen' as an unsexed individual abstracted from a social context. But in the liberalist articulation of the rights of individuals to life, liberty and property, it was generally the male, the property owning individual, who was the key figure and the new freedoms were mainly for men of the new middle class.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R.W. Conwell, "The State, Gender and Sexual Politics: Theory and Appraisal", Theory and Society (Netherlands) vol.19 (1990), p.508.

<sup>2</sup> David Held, "Central Perspectives on the Modern State" In Gregor McLennan, David Held and Stuart Hall, eds., The Idea of the Modern State (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia, 1993), p.32.

The Marxist theory of the state is based on a specific conception of class, and considers a manifestation of class antagonisms.<sup>3</sup> It, however, does not provide a methodology to analyze the public and private dichotomy which is the fundamental feature of the patriarchal conception of gender roles.<sup>4</sup> The socialist and anarchist analyses of the state as an agent of domination add an account of social context, but only in the form of class. According to these analyses, the contending classes seem to be all of the same sex.<sup>5</sup>

The family, with the authority lying with the male head of the household, has been considered as the actual origin and model of the state. This later developed into the clan and tribe system, and then to the monarchy, in which the authority and power was centred in the male head. This gendered character of the state suggested the 'public' as the sphere of work, authority and management of the world by men, and 'private' as the arena of women and feminine virtues.<sup>6</sup>

However, the evolution of the concept of a modern state is difficult to date exactly in terms of chronological time scale. But a concept of a

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<sup>3</sup> Lenin, State and Revolution, (Moscow, 1969), pp.8-12.

<sup>4</sup> R.W. Cornwell, no.1, p.511.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.510.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Hall, "The State in Question" In Gregor McLennen, David Held and Stuart Hall, eds., The Idea of the Modern State (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia, 1993), p.22.

sovereign state with territorial boundaries and peoples obedience to the state existed in Britain in eighteenth century. This system in which people had the right to participation developed unevenly across Europe.<sup>7</sup> Since then evolved different types of modern states in different socio-economic environments, which accelerated the evolution of particular kinds of political movements and structures with their gender implications.

With the industrial revolution, social conditions in both the urban and rural life underwent radical changes in Europe. The social convulsions which followed the transfer of an agrarian pattern to a capitalist one loosened the traditional ties of men to their inherited land. At the same time, the insatiable demand of the new industries and urban occupations for labour, and the growing gap between the backward economies and the industrial and advancing cities, ignited and accelerated large-scale migration. The peasantry was constantly eroded by this proletarianisation of those whose holdings were too small to support them, or by the migration and high demographic growth rates.<sup>8</sup>

These developments were, however, a tragedy in terms of human sufferings which reduced the rural poor to demoralizing destitution, and disintegrated the family structures. This over burdened the women and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp.9-10.



children with work. Moreover, she was paid far less than the men in the same occupation. Many studies indicate the high rate of female labour force participation during the development of the capitalist economy. More than half of the labour force in Britain during this period was constituted by women and children, as they were 'tactable' and cheaper.<sup>9</sup>

This demoralizing sufferings of women necessitated a movement by and for them, in order to achieve their right to equal wages, to property and to political participation in the early nineteenth century Europe. Though these movements could not materialize many of their demands, they achieved their right to vote in America in 1920-the right which was extended to the black men only after fifty five years.<sup>10</sup>

This, however, establishes the link between the economic development and political conditions and their gender implications.

### **The Arab Case**

Similarly, the Arab world also witnessed changes in the economic structure with due implications for the political development of the region. Like the cultural and traditional practices, these developments also became

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<sup>8</sup> E.J. Hobsbawm, The Age of Capital: 1848-1875 (Delhi, 1992), p.221.

<sup>9</sup> E.J. Hobsbawm, The age of Revolution: 1789-1849 (Delhi, 1992), p.66.

<sup>10</sup> George Ritzer, Contemporary Sociological Theory (New York, 1988), p.69.

a determinant in the evolution of various types of governing systems in the region. However, these developments in general, and the systems in particular, had their implications for gender relations and women's status. This suggests an evaluation of the state system, and its policies.

### **The Typology and Origin of the Arab State System**

The Arab states manifest considerable amount of heterogeneity in their socio-economic conditions and mode of life. But at the same time, their language and the majority religion act as unifying forces, and provide an Arab-Islamic identity which prepared the ground for the Pan-Islamic and Pan-Arab nationalist movements under the leadership of Jamaluddin al-Afghani and Gamal Abdul Nasser respectively.

Though the role of the colonial powers in the emergence of a new Arab state system is significant, the state system was the operation of indigenous and regional forces, and enjoyed domestic legitimacy. Moreover, in most cases, it predates the European colonialism<sup>11</sup>

The factors which enabled the evolution of the Arab state system during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can be identified as religion, traditions, and dominion. Though these principles overlap quite

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<sup>11</sup> Iliya Harik, "The origins of Arab state systems" In Giacomo Luciani, ed., The Arab States (London, 1990), p.4.

often, either of these principles had pre-dominated the evolution process of different Arab states, and, thus, provided different systems and structures.

The states which evolved and existed in different historical contexts provided a variety of models :

1. The religious leader (imam) became the ruler, as was the case in Oman and Hijaz.
2. Rule of the tribal leader with the support of the religious establishment as in Saudi Arabia.
3. The rule with the support of the military like that of Egypt
4. A traditional system of authority of the tribal Sheikh, without much religious attribute to their rule, like the ones in Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain.<sup>12</sup>

As the Arab states came under the Ottoman rule, they ruled these states indirectly through the conformation of local rulers. Arabs under Ottoman rule did not consider themselves as subjects of a foreign ruler, rather, they identified the Sultan as the head of the *Ummah* (the community of the believers), until it showed the signs of weakness.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pp. 12-13.

Though the Ottoman power had declined in the eighteenth century, it could stage a come back and reassert in the nineteenth century. This period was also marked by the intrusion of the European powers to the region. Nonetheless, because of the colonial expansions the Ottomans suffered major losses. Many Arab states came under the direct rule of the French and the British, while many others such as Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait were reduced to dependencies of the British Crown. The colonial powers created five new states in the Fertile Crescent which was under the direct rule of the Ottoman Government, Lebanon being the only exception. Other states were Iraq, Syria, Transjordan, and Palestine.<sup>13</sup>

The centralised administrative system of the colonial rule, which altered the old geographical boundaries, gave birth to the concept of nation in its modern sense. The colonial rule with its socio-economic and cultural impacts motivated the growth of a nationalist consciousness in the Arab world. Consequently, a resistance movement started gaining its momentum which ultimately led to independence and freedom from the colonial rule.

Even after independence, the systems of governance in the states did not find much changes from the old traditional patterns. The states derived their legitimacy from different sources such as the tribal establishment, the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.19.

merchant class, the religious establishment, and military. But these were quite overlapping in many cases.<sup>14</sup>

Kuwait and UAE found the tribal establishment and the merchant class as the main sources of their legitimacy, while Saudi Arabia derived authority and legitimacy with the help of the conservative religious establishment and tribal affinities. But, Iraq and the Maghrib states found their strength and authenticity in the authority of military. Significantly, all these states shared a common nature-authoritarianism.

Despite the oil discovery in the 1930s, the state dependence on oil revenues started only after the second World War, when most of the oil exporting countries achieved independence. With the oil price hike of the 1970s, the oil rich states could provide free education, other welfare services and basic food subsidies, without taxation. The flow of large amount of capital which is not generated from the productive operations of the national economy, but from the 'rent' from the oil export, reduced the states' dependence on people for its resource mobilization. This allowed the state interference in the economy to a great extent with its political repercussions in the region.

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<sup>14</sup> Khaldoun Hasan al Naqeeb, Society and state in the Gulf and Arab Peninsula : A different Perspective (London and New York, 1990), p. 106

This environment in which the state supported the domestic economy through public expenditure, instead of the economy supporting the state, consolidated the power of the authoritarian rulers.<sup>15</sup>

But the economic crisis engulfed the Arab states in the mid 1980s and early 1990s with the sharp decline in the oil revenues, the economic stagnation, deterioration of oil economy resulted from the decline in the oil reserves and price, and the rise of international debt.

The oil price declined from just under \$40 a barrel in the early 1980s to slightly over \$15 a barrel in 1995. The Saudi oil reserves declined from the estimated \$120 billion before the Gulf War to \$64.9 billion after the war.<sup>16</sup> Moreover the war imposed a total cost of \$120 billion on Saudi Arabia.<sup>17</sup>

The decline in the revenues led to a structural economic crisis. For instance, Egypt's debt increased from roughly 22.5 per cent of the GNP, in

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<sup>15</sup> Giacomo Luciani, "Resources, Revenues and Authoritarianism in the Arab World : Beyond Rentier state" In Rex Bryners Bahgat Korani, and Poul Noble, eds., Political Liberalization and Democratisation in the Arab World : Theoretical Perspectives, (Boulder & London, 1995), p. 211

<sup>16</sup> Madawi al-Rasheed, "Saudi Arabia's Islamic Opposition" *Current History* (Philadelphia), January 1996, p. 18

<sup>17</sup> Yousef M. Ibrahim, "Infidels or Protectors", The Hindu (New Delhi), 5 July 1996.

1970 to 51.7 per cent of the GNP, in 1980, and to 123.4 per cent of the GNP in 1990.<sup>18</sup>

The government adopted some structural adjustment programmes during the crisis. This led to the integration of the oil-exporting economies into international capital. Similarly, the government intervened to transfer the economic resources from public investments, welfare services and basic food subsidies to subsidies for export and foreign investment.

This promoted downward mobility, poverty, economic exploitation and inequality, and ignited popular resentments throughout the region.

### **Economic Development and Female Labour Participation**

With the changes in the economic structure of the Arab states due to the sudden increase in the oil revenues in the early 1970s, industrial development projects and national development plans were launched by the regimes. This provided new employment opportunities and offered changes in the occupational structures. These structural transformations led to the rise of non-agrarian urban sector and thus produced new class participants in the economic process. These development also created educational and

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<sup>18</sup> Sanih K. Farsoun and Christina Zecharia, "Class, Economic Change, and Political Liberalisation in the Arab World", In Rex Bryhen, Bahgat Korani, and Poul Noble, eds., Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World : Theoretical Perspectives, (Boulder & London, 1995) p. 264.

employment opportunities for women. Paradoxically, the structure of this limited industrialization has served to limit female labour participation.

The oil economies which are poor in other resources, such as UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait and Libya, adopted an industrial strategy based on petroleum products and petrochemicals. This strategy being heavily capital-intensive, minimised the use of labour, and provided opportunities most of which are not conducive to female employment.<sup>19</sup>

The mixed oil economies, like Algeria, Egypt, Iraq etc. followed the Import-Substitution Industrialisation (ISI) pattern, where machinery was imported to run local industries. However, the ISI pattern in these economies did not develop into manufacturing for export and remained capital intensive, consequence of which was less female activity in the productive sectors. The investment in the industries like iron and steel was very costly and the occupation opportunities it offered was not conducive to female employment.<sup>20</sup>

The economic crisis due to the drop in the oil price in the 1980s also affected women's economic status and employment possibilities. Moreover, the occupational stereotyping prevalent on the region has forced

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<sup>19</sup> Valentine M. Moghadam, Modernizing Women : Gender and Social Change in the Middle East (Bolder and London, 1993), p.37

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, pp. 37-38.



women to cluster around specific jobs such as teaching and nursing. The lack of a state policy to promote female labour participation has also controlled women's entry to the work place.

### **State Policies and Female Labour Participation**

The character of the state and its policies varied through out the region, especially with regard to the mobilisation of female labour and their integration to the public life. Countries like Tunisia, Iraq and Egypt encouraged women's participation in the health, education and welfare sectors, while Saudi Arabia discouraged female participation on the public spheres.

Under the nationalization Programme of Gamal Abdul Nasser, the support for female education and employment as to cater the increasing demand for the expanding public sector, facilitated women's participation. This policy continued during the periods of his successors. With the galloping birth rate and unemployment, development strategies which did not provide much employment opportunities, and the conservatism of the political leadership contributed considerably to the lower level of female labor participation in Algeria. Similarly, due to the high level of

unemployment and large external debt, the Jordanian government has adopted a policy to discourage female employment.<sup>21</sup>

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Iraqi government encouraged women's entry into the labour force, so as to alleviate the continuing labour shortage. It also promoted literacy campaigns and education. The female labour participation increased considerably on the 1980s as a result of the government policy to fill the vacancies created by men at the war front.<sup>22</sup>

This, however, suggests that the state policies toward women's participation on the labour force was determined by the need of the state to cater the labour requirements of the expanding state apparatus or to meet the challenges in the productive or service sectors, during the periods of national crisis. This could be argued on the ground that none of these governments has developed or promoted any strategies that would increase the employment rate in general and employment opportunities for women in particular. This could be understood from the attitude of the state towards women's organizations and people who demand changes in the policies of the state.

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<sup>21</sup> Nadia Hijab, *Women Power : The Arab Debate on Women and Work* (Cambridge, 1988) p.114

<sup>22</sup> Valentine M. Moghadam, no. 20, p. 58.

## State and Gender Politics

The personal status codes concerning women and family, and state attitude towards gender equality varied from one state to the other. While Saudi Arabia provided very rigid and conservative family laws, Tunisian, and Egyptian family laws stipulated better treatments for women. Though these authoritarian states championed women's cause, they adopted oppressive mechanisms which challenged the state policies

The personal law adopted by Habib Bourgiba in 1956 had been hailed as establishing legal bases for gender equality. The regime had incorporated some of the demands of the feminists. But, later in 1979, the regime responded to the women's club which was opposed to the authoritarian state and its gendered policies.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, the regime of Jafar al-Numayri in Sudan adopted some of the demands of the Sudanese Women's Union, which was later replaced by the state feminist organization in order to give the regime a progressive facade. The state feminism which did not challenge the regime offered strong support to the ruling elite. The Numayri regime did not tolerate any

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<sup>23</sup> Marvat F Hatem, "Political Liberalization, Gender and the State", In Rex Brynne, Bahgat Korani and Poul Noble eds. Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World : Theoretical Perspectives (Boulder 58 London, 1995), pp. 191-196.

non-governmental women's organisation with competing political visions and agenda.

For the regimes of Zain al Abidin Bin Ali of Sudan and Anwar Sadat of Egypt, the gender issue was an instrument to debar the alNahda party and Muslim Brotherhood from the political process. Zainal Abidin declared that the formulation of a group can not be justified as far as it is not committed to equality of rights and duties of all citizens, irrespective of their sex.

In response to this the Islamist leader articulated the Islamist position on personal status code. According to him the personal laws are a body of choices and decisions which are part of different schools of Islamic thought thus, it can not be sacrosanct. Therefore it may need to be reevaluated from time to time, without its essence being questioned.<sup>24</sup> He thus followed the Islamic modernist methodology providing a space for flexibility and change.

The discriminative attitudes of the state remained static in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, while Oman offered some reforms and granted women's right to political participation. Saudi Arabia bars women from entering certain fields, such as engineering and pharmacy even today, as to

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.198.

steer the female students towards 'feminine disciplines' and to avoid 'unnecessary competition' with men in disciplines that are not suited to their nature.<sup>25</sup> The regime officially permitted women to work in selected fields but only in strictly segregated work facilities. Though the Basic Law of 1993 has been hailed as a step towards democracy and freedom, it has turned a deaf ear to the resenting voices of women against the regimes uncompromising rigidity. The instances of educated middle class women driving cars in encounter with the established Saudi traditions is a manifestation of the quest for a relaxed social and legal systems in which their social mobility and political rights are not restricted.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the provisions for an elected Parliament were stipulated in the constitution of Kuwait, it does not provide women's right to vote and political participation. The demands for women's suffrage was echoed in the Kuwaiti media and political debates right from 1963. In response to the feminist and Islamist women's associations for women's suffrage, the state operated to undo the nascent broadening of these women's groups. Meanwhile, due to their differing ideological views, these associations

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<sup>25</sup> A. Michael Tarazi, "Saudi Arabia's New Basic Laws : The struggle for participatory Islamic Government", Harvard International Law Journal (Harvard), Vol. 34 (winter 1993), p. 261-62

<sup>26</sup> A.K. Pasha, "Aspects of Political Participation in Saudi Arabia" (Working Paper, Gulf studies Programme, Jawaharlal Nehru University, School of International studies, New Delhi, June 1996), p.4

remained far from achieving a broad solidarity around the common cause of their political rights.

Women were active players in the resistance movement, during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. With the newfound gender solidarity they achieved under the occupation and resistance, women brought the issue of female suffrage back to the centre stage after the liberation. They argued that the denial of political rights to women is a form of discrimination against them as human beings and citizens, and thus fought their case on the grounds of human rights and equality of all sexes.<sup>27</sup>

The Kuwaiti Amir in exile applauded the role of women in the resistance movement and affirmed his commitment to grant them the complete political rights after the liberation. He reiterated his commitment at many occasions shortly after the liberation, but did not do any thing to its effect. Ironically, in both the elections of 1992 and 1996 women were not granted their right to vote and were turned back.

Islamists in Kuwait who initially opposed women's political participation, however, relented and supported women's suffrage. Paradoxical enough, the secular progressives appeared reluctant to translate

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<sup>27</sup> Margot Badran, "Gender, Islam and the State : Kuwaiti Women in struggle, Pre-Invasion to Postliberation" In Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito, eds., Islam, Gender and social Change (New York and Oxford, 1998), p. 199

their progressive rhetoric into reality because of the fear that the Islamists might gain more power if women had the right to vote.<sup>28</sup> This apprehension of the secularists and the authoritarian and misogynic policies of the state that denied or restricted women's rights as human beings, further widened the active participation of women in the Islamist opposition movement which offered an alternative agenda.

### **The Opposition Movements and Women's Rights**

The erosion of the state legitimacy due to the interstate and intrastate conflicts, the impacts of structural adjustment on the economic conditions of the people, the exacerbating unemployment among the youth, and lack of self-reliant defense system, all fanned the flames of unrest and evoked popular movements throughout the region. Many civil formations and political parties revitalized themselves and new ones were established. But many of these organizations and parties were not effective enough in the political process of the region. In most cases the Islamists spearheaded the opposition movement. The voices of dissent were heard in demonstrations, public debates and media, where a free political atmosphere existed or a limited freedom was granted. But, in oppressive environments, like Saudi Arabia, where political activities and public

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.202.

debates are strictly prohibited, the anger was articulated in the petitions submitted to the king. These petitions were signed by the non-conformist scholars and professors.<sup>29</sup>

The Islamist opposition movements suggested an alternative Islamic system, while the secularist mobilization revolved mainly around socialist ideology, but without winning much mass support. The Islamists some times forged alliances with the secular parties. The Muslim Brotherhood struck an electoral alliance with the Neo-Wafd party in 1984, which was later shifted to the Socialist Labor and Liberal parties in 1987.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, the opposition movements with active female participation had a wider impetus after the Gulf war.

The popular movements demanded the accountability of the ruling elite, equality, right to political participation irrespective of the sex, and rejected the American presence in the region.

However, attempts were made by the ruling elite to regain their legitimacy. Elections were held in Algeria, Kuwait, Oman, Lebanon and Morocco without much complaint regarding their integrity. But, in many

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<sup>29</sup> Mordechai Abir, Saudi Arabia: Government, Society and the Gulf Crisis (London, 1993), p.190.

<sup>30</sup> Gudrun Kramer, "Islam and Pluralism" In Rex Brynne, Bahgat Korani and Poul Noble, eds., Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World: Theoretical Perspectives (Boulder and London, 1995), p.121.



cases, the Islamists, the largest opposition in the region, were either denied the right to contest elections, or were denied power even after winning a thumbing majority.<sup>31</sup> The denial of the political rights to the Islamists was on the ground that their influence is 'likely' to be detrimental to the development of a liberal political system.

But the positions taken by the Islamist movements vis-à-vis political liberalization and gender equality represent different strategies. As the extremist militant Islamist movements like al-Jihad of Egypt conceive change as result of a war waged against the state the society by the believers, the moderate reformist trends see change as the outcome of the democratic process of elections.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, the Islamist positions on gender equality and women's rights also varied from place to place. But all these groups virtually favoured women's right to political participation.<sup>33</sup> According to the Islamists like Rashid al-Ganushi, the leader of al -Nahda party in Tunisia,

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<sup>31</sup> Al-Nahda in Tunisian and Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt are not permitted to contest elections, while the elections in which the Islamic Salvation Front (IFS) won majority of the seats, were cancelled and the Front was outlawed in Algeria.

<sup>32</sup> Salwa Ismail, "Democracy in Contemporary Arab Discourse" In Rex Brynne, Bahgat Korani, and Paul Noble, eds., Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World: Theoretical Perspectives (Boulder and London, 1995), p.102.

<sup>33</sup> Margot Badran, no.28, p.203.

women cannot be ignored or relegated to a secondary role. Any movement which does not provide a scope for change, and teach women to cover themselves and to perform only religious duties, according to him, will be elitist and not populist. Moreover, for the Islamists, Islam does not stipulate women take care of household and remain in the 'private' sphere, but requires them to participate in the political, cultural, and social fields as to challenge the existing models. In addition, the reformist's trends in the Islamist movement present the educated Islamic women as a model to achieve equality and freedom.<sup>34</sup>

With these positions the Islamists have distinguished themselves from the traditional conservatives. Though there are doubts and fears about the implications of the Islamist movement for gender, the new found consciousness of the Islamist women and the emergence of an independent female Islamist strand within the movement have grown powerful enough to undo the attempts to roll back the process of social change. It is also powerful enough to challenge the masculinisation of the religion and the system based on the religious principles.

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<sup>34</sup> Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "Islam and Gender: Dilemmas in the Changing Arab World", In Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito, eds., Islam, Gender and Social Change (New York and Oxford, 1998), pp.20-21.

As it was mentioned above, the state is the key player, which produces social changes, or maintains status quo. It can maintain existing gender arrangements, or alter social policies, or impose greater restrictions on women. It can also foster more equality and raise women's social and economic structures. Though some of the states in the region had introduced some legal reforms, they have maintained the patriarchal nature of the state. The policies and laws enacted by the states are meant not to alter and improve the status and rights of women, but to strengthen the position and authority of the state. In the final analysis it could be said that it is not Islam or the Islamist movement which undermined their rights. But it was the patriarchal state and its policies, which benefited only the ruling and rich classes, and the alliance between the state and the conservative religious establishment, which strengthened the patriarchal social structure and misogynic policies.

## Chapter V

### CONCLUSION

The depiction of Muslim societies as inherently traditional, and the portrayal of Islam as a synonym for tradition, while associating tradition as stagnation and backwardness, is bound to lead any one to assume Islam as stagnant and backward. The identification of Islam as the only designator of Muslim societies and the main determinant of women's status has created the image of Muslim women as oppressed and subjugated. A whole range of political, cultural, and even economic events have often seemed reducible to Islam.

It was not Islam which curtailed the freedom of women or endangered gender equality. But it was the conservative religious establishment which controlled the society, using religion and the state which promoted and nurtured the patriarchal structures of the society.

By stipulating women's rights to life, property freedom and political rights, Islam acted to undermine the patriarchal social systems. It emerged as a liberating force for women by strongly

opposing female infanticide and other misogynic practices. The flexible and accommodative nature of the prophetic traditions continued during the period of the Caliphs. But the patriarchal practices resurfaced with the establishment of the first dynasty in the Islamic history, as the Islamic principles and laws were used as a theoretical justification for the state control. Moreover, the development of the Islamic legal systems during Abbasid period was not in tune with the injunctions and prophetic traditions enjoining women's rights. The closure of the doors of *ijtihad* undermined the possibilities of developing a solution for the new set of problems, in accordance with the time and environment. This, however, institutionalized the conservatism in Muslim societies. The emergence of the conservative clerical establishment led to the monopolization of Islamic scholarship by men, and as a result masculinization of religion became the order of the day.

The emergence of an unprecedented challenge to the conservative Ulema, in the mid nineteenth century, seeking the right to interpret Islamic texts according to the modern times, made significant polarisation among the Islamic scholars of the day. This challenge, posed by the Islamic modernists suggested solutions for the new sets of problems in Islamic framework, often influenced by the

modern thought. Though Islamic modernism could not grow into a popular movement, it left its influences on various Muslim societies, and later became the theoretical corner-stone of Islamic revivalism.

The reformist discourse on women took place in the context of the colonial domination. It was an attempt to build up a strong Islamic society in order to build up a strong resistance. The reformists rightly conceived the importance of women in the political process and the resistance movement. It was in this context they suggested changes in the anti-women traditions and customs which do not have any justification in Islam.

The early feminist movement derived its legitimacy by appropriating the Islamic modernists reformist arguments. Issues addressed by the feminists did not challenge the family structures. Rather, they insisted on building up strong families, so as to build up a strong nation. The early feminist movement which often worked within the Islamic framework spared doubts in the Arab world due to its solidarity with the Western feminist groups.

Nawal El Sadaawi who spearheaded the Arab feminist discourse since the 1970s placed her arguments in a socialist framework. She rightly points out the need of a gender agenda for

Arab women, different from that of the Western radical feminism, as the problems of women in these societies were drastically different.

However, her argument is that the oppression of women in any society is an expression of an economic structure based on a system of inheritance and parenthood. This poses some analytical problem, especially with regard to Muslim societies. According to the Islamic law, inheritance right has been stipulated for both men and women. Moreover, the family property is not transferred to the male dependents only. Rather, it is distributed among a wide range of dependents, restricting accumulation of wealth and property to a male dependent setup, and thus in fact, undermines the patriarchal structure in which the property and authority lay with the male head of the family. The economic reductionism of the class analysis is one of the major shortcomings of her framework. As the socialist feminists consider the state as the agent of class domination, she uses the term 'social system' for the state. In her opinion, the responsibility of child rearing lies with this social system, but she fails to suggest a practical method for such a system. It is a fact that, even in the dictatorship of the proletariat, which is supposed to have existed and later collapsed, this kind of a system could not prevail, as it would have led to anarchy and social unrest. Moreover, by not

accounting the contributions of the domestic work of women in to the national economy, she gets trapped in the capitalist conception of labour and work. Contrary to her argument, it was not the economic interest of the *daya* (midwife) which gave birth to the custom of female circumcetion. On the other hand, it was this custom that produced this class.

Though, Sadaawi does not find fault with Islam for the gender discrimination, this is merely a strategy to work in the Arab society. This is clear from her attitude towards the Islamic laws and Quranic injunctions. The deconstruction of Islamic laws, which do not give any misogynic ideas is either due to ignorance or the animosity towards Islam.

However, Fathima Mernissi draws a clear distinction between the scriptural purity and popular parties of patriarchy, and suggests that a re-interpretation of the religious sources has to counter the patriarchal practices which are often legitimized by references to the past. However, the issues addressed by the feminists are relevant and need to be treated with practical solutions.



Coming to the questions of the state and gender, it could be argued that it is the state which maintain the patriarchal structure and practices forging alliances with the conservative religious establishments. While the conservative forces are opposed to any change, they strongly opposed women's participation in the public sphere, and rejected the women's demands for the right to political participation. The political participation of women and other marginalized sections are bound to undermine the control of the clergy over the society. The opposition of the clergy to reforms and changes has forced the state and the ruling elites, who derived their legitimacy through religious decrees (fatwa) of the clergy, to initiate the economic and legal policies maintaining the patriarchal structures. The authoritarianism of these states supported by oil revenues, restricted the people's participation and role in the national affairs. It was the pattern of economic development and state policies which restricted women's labour participation in the Arab states. Moreover, the gender question was an instrument for the state to prevent the opposition movements and other competing ideologies. Similarly, some of the Arab state promoted 'state feminism' so as to prevent the growth of other feminist or Islamist assertions and to mobilize support for the state.

The voice of women against the gender policies of the regimes and the conservative religious establishment could be heard throughout the Arab world demanding relaxed social and legal systems in which their social mobility and political rights are not restricted. Public demonstrations were held even in the highly restricted and rigid atmosphere of Saudi Arabia. These are manifestation of the intense and strong consciousness of women in the contemporary Arab World.

The Arab states have made some attempts to regain their eroding legitimacy in the eyes of the people. In order to calm down the unrest resulted from the economic and political conditions, the regimes showed signs of limited political liberalization, especially after the Gulf War. Though democratization and political liberalization are processes of empowerment, it is bound to marginalize the already disadvantaged masses, if it is instituted and controlled from above to promote the elite and foreign interests.

However, the growth of Islamist opposition movements throughout the region poses important questions with regard to women. The Islamists have been accused of restricting women into their houses and of abusing their fundamental rights. This stereotype

of the Islamists is clearly a creation of the West, as they are fundamentally anti-imperialist. The growth of the Islamists in the Arab World is detrimental to the Western interests in the region. This is the reason why the Western watchdogs of democracy and freedom are very supportive of the present regimes in the Arab World, including Saudi Arabia.

Significantly, there were fundamental shift, in the gender ideology of the Islamists in the seventies, marking a break with that of the conservative Ulemas and the establishment. This provides a scope for the gender ideology of the Islamists in the Arab world. This is manifested in the active participation of women in the Islamist movement in the contemporary Arab World.

The gender ideology represented mainly by Hasan Turabi, Rashid al Ghanushi, can be compare with the Islamic feminist methodologies. Both Turabi and Al Ganushi have tried to analyse the problems of gender equality and freedom in the Arab World. As there is no dispute about the secondary status assigned to women in the Arab World, the need for a movement for women's liberation is unquestionable. The point of dispute for Turabi and other Islamists is the strategies and framework of the movement. He suggests that the liberation is possible within the Islamic framework. The Islamists

have developed comprehensive reading of Quran and the prophetic tradition, in connection with the issues of women. Similarly, the initiatives of the Islamist leaders to formulate strategies for a women's liberation movement is indicative of the emerging possibilities of an Islamic alternative.

The fear about the implications of Islamism for women has always bypassed the dynamic and active participation of women in these movements. Moreover, the new found gender consciousness has grown powerful enough to challenge any efforts to roll back the process of social transformation and to restrict women's rights and roles.

In the final analysis, it can be said that it is not Islam or the Islamists who are endangering democratization and political liberalization in the Arab world. It is also not Islam, which endangers women's right and gender equality. But it is the religious conservatism and the conservative clergy in association with the state and the colonial interests which curtail freedom and gender equality, and limit the scope for democratization.

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