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Arab Muslim Women between Religion and Culture: An Islamic Feminist Study of Selected Contemporary Arab and American Speculative Fiction

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Dedications

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father, may Allah grant him a place in heaven. I also wish to dedicate this work to my mother, for her continuous prayers and for her patience through the years. I would like to thank my wife and son, Adam. I am truly thankful for all the support and encouragement I received from you during the past four years. I also dedicate this work to my brother and sisters, my friends and colleagues who have been supportive during my ups and downs. I thank you all for everything.

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to explore representations of Arab Muslim women's rights between religion and culture in three contemporary speculative fiction works by Arab, American and American Muslim female authors from an Islamic feminist lens. Islamic feminism endeavors to confront both the male-dominated cultural misinterpretations of the egalitarian message of Islam, and the Western misrepresentations and prejudice towards gender and Islam. This thesis employs close reading through a socio-historical approach. As such, it uses textual analysis as a main method for the analyses of the novels in question. The three literary works exhibit different standpoints on the topic. In Abdel Aziz's dystopia *The Queue* (2013), women undergo injustice in their cultures with an aid from politics and certain understandings of Islam. Alternatively, McHugh's sci-fi dystopia *Nekropolis* (2001) depicts Islam as a misogynist religion, the Arab cultures as backward and static, and women to be in perpetual submissiveness. On the other hand, Wilson's cyberpunk fantasy *Alif the Unseen* (2012) portrays assertive women who are empowered rather than oppressed by Islam.

Key words: culture, injustice, Islamic feminism, patriarchy, speculative fiction.

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الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى البحث في تمثيل المرأة العربية المسلمة بين الإسلام والثقافة ضمن ثلاثة أعمال ذات طابع خيالي تأملي معاصر لكاتبات مختلفات الثقافة- عربية،أمريكية، وأمريكية مسلمة- من منظور نسوي إسلامي، و تسعى النسوية الإسلامية للوقوف أمام التفسيرات الثقافية الخاطئة لرسالة المساواة في الإسلام والتي يهيمن عليها الذكور، والتحيز والتحريفات الغربية تجاه الجنس ونظرتهم للإسلام. تستخدم هذه الأطروحة القراءة الفاحصة من خلال منهج اجتماعي تاريخي. وعلى هذا النحو، قمنا باستخدام التحليل النصي كوسيلة رئيسية لتحليل الروايات المعنية. وتعرض لنا الأعمال الأدبية وجهات نظر مختلفة حول الموضوع؛ ففي ديستوبيا *"الطابور"* لعبد العزيز (2013) ، نجد أن النساء تتعرضن للاضطهاد في ثقافتهن بإيعاز من الساسة وبعض المفاهيم الخاطئة للإسلام و من جانب آخر، تصور رواية الخيال العلمي *"ليكروبوليس"* (2001) لماكهيو" الإسلام على أنه دين ممقت للنساء وبأنهن في حالة خضوع دائم للسلطة الذكورية، و بأن الثقافات العربية متخلفة بينما تصورلنا رواية الفانتازيا لويلسون *"ألف الخفي"* (2012) نساء واثقات فاعلات يحفظ لهن الإسلام مكانتهن.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الثقافة، الظلم، النسوية الإسلامية، السلطة الأبوية، الخيال التأملي.

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Résumé

L'objectif de la présente thèse et de s'arrêter devant les représentations de la femme arabe musulmane dans trois œuvres de fiction spéculative contemporaines d'auteures arabes, américaines et américaines musulmanes à travers une perspective féministe islamique. Ce féminisme islamique cherche à confronter la partialité et les fausses interprétations culturelles d'égalité dans l'islam qui sont dominées par l'homme. Cette thèse fait appel à une lecture attentive à travers une approche socio-historique. À ce titre, il utilise l'analyse textuelle comme méthode principale pour les analyses des romans en question. Les trois œuvres littéraires présentent des points de vue différents, dans la dystopie d'Abdel Aziz *The Queue* (2013), les femmes subissent l'injustice dans leurs cultures par l'aide des politiciens et de certaines conceptions erronées de l'islam. D'autre part la dystopie de science-fiction de McHugh *Nekropolis* (2001) dépeint l'islam comme une religion misogyne et la femme reste toujours sous l'autorité du patriarcat – l'homme- et que la culture arabe reste sous développées. Alors que le fantasme cyberpunk de Wilson *Alif the Unseen* (2012) dépeigne les femmes comme un facteur vital sous le ciel de l'islamique qui maintient leur position et leur statut.

Mots clés: culture, injustice, féminisme islamique, patriarcat, fiction spéculative.

General Introduction

Background of the Study

Arab Muslim women are considered to be marginalized and to suffer binary gender injustice within their societies and cultures. The roots and nature of such injustice and marginalization raise multiple discourses. Westerners tend to believe that Islam is a misogynist and sexist religion that is strongly prejudiced against women, and that the Arab culture is inherently patriarchal and backward. On the other hand, Arabs and Muslims either think that injustice stems from society, culture, politics and/or certain understandings of Islam; or that women are not primarily prejudiced against. Western and Muslim feminists approach the solution to the issues of Muslim women differently based on different standpoints and experiences. Under the banner of 'save Muslim women' from their oppressive cultures and religion, many Western feminists propagate certain ideas to accentuate Western superiority and to achieve certain political interventionist ends (Abu Lughod 26). Muslim secular feminists insist on adopting the principles of Human Rights to advance women's rights in the MENA region. Islamic feminists seek to resolve women's issues by resorting to the Quran, the *hadiths* of the Prophet and the Islamic history and literature.

Based on the premise that literature is the mouthpiece of its creator and the underlying social and political currents, many works of fiction by Muslim and Western authors have addressed the topic of Islam and gender, each from one's own standpoint and perspective. The wide range of literature from across the world is, without a doubt, congested with various differing forms and loaded with images of the East that are sometimes muddled with misrepresentations, and other times packed with representations that are fueled by resistance of a local and universal nature. Influenced by political, socio-cultural and religious realities and orientations, a literary work is inevitably a product liable on the authorial intent, the context of its production and the images it attempts to transmit. Although some components of the trio of 'author, text and context' are overlooked in literary criticism of the past century when Roland Barthes introduced 'the death of the author' (Barthes 148) which suggests an anti-authorial theoretical shift, and due to the cross-cultural nature of this study, the 'text, author and context' of the novels in this study are equally important. This study views the author as 'an ideological

product' (Foucault 119) who promotes certain ideas and worldviews prevalent in one's own culture. The author, then, functions as a spokesperson of certain mindsets and ideologies.

This study transcends cultural, religious, linguistic and national boundaries in that it brings closer three works of literature by female authors from different cultural backgrounds. The works under discussion are Egyptian author Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue*, American Maureen McHugh's *Nekropolis* and American convert Gwendolyn Willow Wilson's *Alif the Unseen*. One of the apparent advantages of conducting cross-cultural research is adding to the dialogue between cultures by approximating different views from world literature. In the contemporary connected world, "cross-cultural studies have become more and more necessary" (Zhang 70) for developing perceptions and understandings of other cultures. Cross-cultural literary studies is a field that focuses on works that exceed national borders by placing global literatures side by side. This dissertation discusses contemporary speculative Arab and American works of literature and their portrayals of Arab Muslim women. Speculative fiction is an umbrella term that refers to certain genres in fiction and encompasses science fiction, fantasy and dystopia. Because of the different backgrounds of the authors, there will naturally be diverging views in their respective works. Depictions of Arab Muslim women have different forms including resistance of patriarchal norms, images of empowerment or oppression by culture and religion, and there will certainly be stereotypical representations of Arab Muslim women.

Muslim women's rights in Islam have been discussed and advocated by the Islamic feminist school of thought. Islamic feminism is based on the argument that in Islam, a woman is "intended to [be] primordially, cosmologically, eschatologically, spiritually, and morally a full human being" (Wadud "Quran and Woman" x). Islamic feminists believe that women are biologically different but equal in value. There is textual evidence in the Quran[1] that support the claim that the only difference between men and women is the quality of *taqwa* or piety. By studying the religious scriptures from a feminist egalitarian perspective and revisiting Islamic history, Islamic feminists advocate the egalitarian message of Islam which has been subject to centuries-old alterations and misinterpretations by the male-dominated culture. Shirin Ebadi argues that "[t]he discriminatory plight of women in Islamic societies, whether in the sphere of

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[1] "Oh humankind. We have created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into tribes and nations that you may know each other. The most honored of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you" (The Quran 13:49).

civil law or in the realm of social, political and cultural justice, has its roots in the male-dominated culture prevailing in these societies, not in Islam" (qtd in Badran "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s" 22). Islamic feminism, with its double commitment to expose and fight the un-Islamic patriarchal interpretations and practices in Islamic societies on one hand and to confront Western prejudice and its fallacious arguments about Islam on the other, will be used as a lens for the analysis of the selected literary works. Due to its comprehensive intellectual contribution, Islamic feminism posits answers for Arab, Muslim and Western dilemmas about the often-misunderstood Islam.

Statement of the Problem

This thesis aims to explore the interplay between gender, religion and culture from Arab and American, Muslim and non-Muslim, perspectives in female contemporary speculative fiction. Because the focus is on how religion is used and misused, interpreted and misinterpreted, represented and misrepresented, the study adopts Islamic feminism as a lens, which neither approves of Islamist orthodoxies, nor tolerates Western prejudices on Islam (Pepicelli 99). The selected literary works for this study are Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue*, Maureen McHugh's *Nekropolis*, and G. Willow Wilson's *Alif the Unseen*. By discussing the works of three authors from different cultural backgrounds in light of the Islamic feminist school of thought, this study assumes a comprehensive, neutral position on perspectives about the injustice towards Arab Muslim women through the eyes of Arabs, Muslims and non-Muslims. By analyzing works that offer an 'insider' and 'outsider' vantage points, this study seeks to scrutinize different issues in the different portrayals of Arab Muslim women in Arab Muslim speculated societies. The issues include the oppression of women in the name of religion by the male-dominated culture and the Western misrepresentations and fabrications of Islam as part of Western dominance agendas.

Islamic feminism is used in this thesis to expose both the social and cultural institutions responsible for the marginalization of women, and the Western discourses on Islam and Muslim women in the literary production of female contemporary authors. Issues including patriarchy, the veil, marriage, polygamy, work, female political participation, sexual violence and rape, women's agency and other issues in the novels are to be discussed with reference to Islamic feminism and the Arab social contexts. As the Islamic feminist school of thought informs the methodology of this thesis, the aim is to tackle problems that include the use of religion as a

means to marginalize women by the patriarchal culture; and differently, the perception of religion as misogynist and oppressive of women in the Western feminist point of view; and inversely the belief in religion as a means to empower women. The literary works, having different points of view on the issues of Arab Muslim women, will provide competing, analogous and opposing discourses with regard to their respective authors' identities, beliefs, experiences and understandings of the Arab socio-cultural contexts. Therefore, the authors' feminist orientations will be explored through their backgrounds and fiction writing. This is to investigate the perspectives of Western feminists on Muslim women, and to explore Islamic feminist consciousness of the Muslim authors of the works in question.

The thesis also aims at exploring the role that the genres of speculative fiction play to emphasize gender-related issues. Although labelled as a 'future-oriented' genre, speculative fiction explores "new models of the old world" (Lane and Bellis 133). Sub-genres such as fantasy, science fiction and dystopia are based on elements that readers recognize about the actual world. Through the defamiliarization of settings, authors seek to accentuate certain issues such as government-based oppression, totalitarianism, the steep rise in technological advancements, artificial intelligence, and gender inequality. With a focus on gender-related themes, the selected speculative fiction works explore gender inequality, questions on sexuality and the agency of the female body. Those works reveal that although the Arab world is being recreated in future speculated worlds, there are still various similarities with the world we attach to. The purpose of writing such works of speculative fiction is to intensify and exaggerate gender issues in order to highlight the problems underlying society in general, and women in specific. Helford argues that "[n]o other genres so actively invite representations of the ultimate goals of feminism" (291) in a similar manner as does speculative fiction.

Research Questions and Significance

The question of Arab Muslim women between Islam and culture poses a thorny predicament for Muslim and Western audiences alike. An adequate approach to such an unfathomably difficult problem requires broadening the scope of research to include different worldviews on the topic. Bringing closer Arab and American, Muslim and non-Muslim views on the matter will help clear the haze on the issue and avoid reductive and oblique conclusions. For this purpose, the study at hand will not only approach the topic from the singular perspective of

Arab Muslim women, but also from American non-Muslim and Muslim perspectives. With Islamic feminism as a frame of reference that helps understand the nuances of the Arab Islamic culture, the works under discussion are Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue*, Maureen McHugh's *Nekropolis* and G. Willow Wilson's *Alif the Unseen*. Therefore, the guiding question for this study is: How do the aforementioned speculative fiction works by authors from different cultural backgrounds reflect on religion and culture as oppressive or empowering of Arab Muslim women?

It is essential to annex secondary questions to the above main question for purposes of clarity and focus of the research. Because the three novels will be the focus of this research, three secondary questions and sub-questions are required, each for a specific novel. The secondary questions for this study are: First, how do the social institutions play part in the marginalization and oppression of women? and how is religion used as a means of control and dominance at the hands of the male-dominated culture in Abdel Aziz's dystopia *The Queue*? Second, how are the Western views about Islam as an oppressive institution and the Arab culture as backward and static with regards to women manifest in McHugh's futuristic science fiction novel *Nekropolis*? and how does the author perceive the salvation of Arab Muslim women? And third, how does Islam play part as an instrument for female empowerment? and what are the views of an American convert to Islam about the assertion of religious identity and secularism in Wilson's cyberpunk fantasy *Alif the Unseen*?

This study is important because it offers insights from different authors on the issues of Arab Muslim women; therefore, it contributes to the dialogue between the East and West on Islam and women. With prospects that exceed traditional studies, cross-cultural studies are important because they seek "to advance and expand our knowledge beyond the confinements of our particular surrounding context, encompassing a universal perspective in understanding human behavior" (Goldstein and Naglieri 440). Such research aspires for authenticity among international voices on topics with varying viewpoints. It seeks to gain different perspectives in search for solutions to current problems, which is essentially a search that aims at exposing the truth and combating ethnocentrism and prejudice. By offering different points of view from different authors, this study is a step-forward in cross-cultural literary studies that deals with Arab Muslim issues from the different angles of an uncharted territory (the intersection between

speculative fiction, Islam and gender). Such an undertaking comes with aspirations to be a cornerstone and an understructure for future research on the topic.

Moreover, this study also contributes to Islamic feminism with critical literary research. Since its onset, Islamic feminism has welcomed the contributions of researchers and fiction writers regardless of their identities, orientations, and beliefs about gender issues. Badran argues that Islamic feminism is "an open discursive space which anyone could and did enter, whether to create, elaborate, debate or to disseminate its discourse" (Sikand and Badran). Perhaps one of the advantages that the Islamic feminist school has over other discourses of feminism, either in the Arab world or in the global context, is the space it creates for "dialogue between different personalities and identities" (Pepicelli 99). In addition, it welcomes the creation and dissemination of its discourse though literary production "because it is there that one can most clearly see the individual creating alternative realities" (Cooke "Women Claim Islam" ix). Therefore, this study is an extension of this discursive space through practical and analytical research that provides insights based on the identity of the researcher and the authors of the literary works under discussion. It contributes to feminist literary studies through using Islamic feminism as a critical lens which focuses on the religious domain that has been ignored by other critical lenses such as secular feminism or post-colonial feminism.

Research Methodology

This thesis employs close reading through a socio-historical approach. As such, it uses textual analysis as a main method for the analyses of the novels in question, because it encompasses the tools necessary for understanding the cultural and ideological aspects central to the production of texts[2] (Arya 173). As a data gathering method, textual analysis is "for those researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are" (McKee 1). It incorporates understanding the language and symbols in texts in order to understand the interaction between people and different cultures. Based on interpretive approaches, textual analysis aims to "understand what cultural and ideological assumptions were established at a specific time that allowed a text to be considered acceptable and become popular, even common sense" (Fursich qtd. in Arya 173-174). It enables

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[2] A 'text' "is something that we make meaning from" (McKee 4). It includes a variety of things such as "a book, television programme, film, magazine, T-shirt or kilt, piece of furniture or ornament" (4).

to understand the different discourses underlying different texts about people, their cultures, their practice of religions and the norms that guide societies including the customs, traditions and practices of their respective people. Textual analysis is, in short, "a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world" (McKee 1).

Like other cultural productions, a literary text cannot be understood solely in reference to itself, as Pierre Bourdieu argues in his essay. Rather, the production, consumption and circulation of art and literature is subject to social and political beliefs that are "inseparable from the space of literary or artistic positions" (Bourdieu 312). A literary text is an artifact that stimulates meaning about socio-cultural phenomena. Understanding these texts requires understanding the contexts that made the texts possible. Therefore, the researcher or "analyst must understand the broader social structures that influence the messages present in the text under investigation" (Hawkins 1753). For thorough understanding, literary studies require both contextual and textual readings of texts. It needs to be informed by background research into the context of the text under scrutiny, the context of its production, its content, and its consumption. Influenced by poststructuralism, textual analysis "understands multiple interpretations of the text may be recognized, understood, and valued when it comes to determining what texts tell us about cultural phenomena occurring within the sociopolitical, and historical time the text was created" (Hawkins 1754).

Debates on authorial intentionalism and anti-authorial intentionalism have occupied the academic interest for decades. The authorial intent is based on the premise that the "author's actual intentions should constrain the ways in which it is appropriate to interpret his or her works" (Huddleston 241). On the other hand, proponents of the 'intentional fallacy' claim that "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art" (Wimsatt and Beardsley 90). Those opposing views on the ability and inability to re-construct the author through writing have reciprocally insisted on excluding some aspects from the act of interpretation. Texts carry intended and unintended meanings that are nevertheless present in the works. Moreover, some aspects such as the author's cultural background, religious and political beliefs, gender and sex if not unconditionally predetermine the final product, they will at least offer some insights on the author's social beliefs and realities. Because this study's aim is to approach works by authors from different cultural

backgrounds, it is important to view the author as a 'function of discourse', as Foucault suggests, who stands as a "characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society" (Foucault 108). Therefore, neither of the social realities, religious orientations, and beliefs about gender and gender injustice of the authors will be ignored.

The novels in this study are not arbitrarily selected. The criteria for choosing the literary works have taken into consideration different biographical, contextual and textual qualities in order to meet the objectives of the study. Concerning the authors, the first criterion was to take into account the national and religious identities of the authors. The authors for this study -Abdel Aziz, McHugh and Wilson- are respectively Egyptian Muslim, American non-Muslim and American convert to Islam. The second criterion is the pro-feminist orientations of the female authors, whom either publicly identify as feminist or support feminist endeavors in their writings. All of the three novels are contemporary; that is, they are written and published in the twenty-first century. With respect to the novels' genres, a key criterion for the selection of the novels is the speculative fiction genre. Abdel Aziz *The Queue* is dystopian fiction, McHugh's *Nekropolis* is science fiction, and Wilson's *Alif the Unseen* is cyberpunk fantasy. Since speculative fiction is a broad term encompassing different genres, the aim was to select novels that have different elements in the speculative fiction genre for purposes of diversity. The last and most important criterion is the novels' settings and themes. All of the three novels are set in Arab Muslim states and discuss themes related to gender and Arab Muslim women. The titles of the works in this study are not mentioned in the title of the thesis because of the cross-cultural nature of this study. Since the study aims to approach the problem from different perspectives: Arab, American Muslim and non-Muslim representations of Arab Muslim women, the titles of the works become less important than the themes discussed in those works.

Because its focus is on the religious domain, Islamic feminism is chosen to inform the methodology of this thesis. Earlier feminist discourses in the Arab world have rendered religious principles to be at odds with the feminist ideals. However, with the rise of the new religiously-based feminist discourse, religion has become a frame of reference for social justice and female empowerment. Moreover, because it marks a paradigm-shift and a development from earlier forms of feminism, Islamic feminism provides comprehensive answers for all problems triggered by Muslims and non-Muslims on Arab Muslim women's issues. According to Margot Badran,

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Islamic feminism "transcends and destroys old binaries that have been constructed. These included polarities between religious and secular and between 'East' and 'West'" (qtd. in Mir-Hosseini "*Muslim Women's Quest for Equality*" 645). With an aim to combat views from Muslim traditionalists, Islamist conservatives and secular fundamentalists (Mir-Hosseini qtd. in Navarro 85), the Islamic feminist discourse provides a counter-narrative that aims to expose the male un-Islamic practices and the Western discourses on Islam. As a methodology, the Islamic feminist school of thought meets the objectives of this study to examine the role that religion plays in the lives of Arab Muslim women in representations by Arab and Western writers.

Structure of the Dissertation

This thesis consists of four chapters, the introduction and the conclusion. The introduction aims to introduce the central points that will be covered in this study. It includs a general background about the topic, review of the previous studies on the topic, statement of the problem, research questions and the methodology for conducting this research.

Chapter one is a review of the literature related to feminism, Arab secular feminism, Islamic feminism and speculative fiction. It aims to provide information about the historical, ontological and epistemological underpinnings of some social, political and intellectual movements, literary theories and concepts central to this study. The chapter is a theoretical and methodological background for the upcoming analytical chapters. Its main aim is to provide information about the rise of feminist voices and movements in the Arab world and to show the different discourses engendered with each feminist movement. As the Islamic feminist discourse is chosen to be the methodology for analysis in this study, it is the main focus of discussion in this chapter. The chapter tackles its historical origins, development and its different discourses and scholars. Additionally, it aims to highlight the Islamic feminist line of thought about the intersection between gender, Islam and the Arab culture.

Chapter two tackles the first novel in the selected works for this study. Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* is the main focus of the discussion in the chapter. However, for purposes of providing contextual information about the work's production, the chapter provides information about the author's background, her feminist views and the emergence of Islamic feminism in Egypt before and after the January revolution. After providing biographical and contextual information about the novel, Abdel Aziz's work is analyzed from an Islamic feminist lens. The aim is to investigate

Abdel Aziz's portrayals of the marginalization and injustice towards women by the patriarchal culture and the use of religion to achieve such ends. As well as the role totalitarianism and authoritarianism play in the overall oppression of people, particularly women. The chapter also aims to explore the author's Islamic feminist consciousness through her speculative fiction work.

The third chapter in this thesis is dedicated to discussing Maureen McHugh's *Nekropolis*. It includes biographical information about the author which aims to situate the author in the context of Western authorship. In addition, it compares and contrasts Western feminism and Islamic feminism in order to show the dialogue that emerges between the two discourses. The chapter also delves into the historical depictions of Islam and women in Western literary production. Ultimately, the chapter discusses *Nekropolis* from an Islamic feminist perspective with an aim to expose the Western discourses on Islam, the Arab culture and women in fiction writing. It also explores the use of science fiction in order to transmit implicit messages about Islam and the Arab culture. In the same context, the chapter explores the use of science and technology as means to oppress women in futuristic Morocco.

Chapter four discusses G. Willow Wilson's *Alif the Unseen* from an Islamic feminist lens. It includes an introduction of the author, her conversion to Islam, her views on gender and Islam through fiction writing, and eventually the study of her selected novel from an Islamic feminist perspective. The aim of this chapter is to show that not all Western literary production is prejudiced against Islam. It aims to show how Wilson's work departs from conventional Western notions about the Arab Muslim woman, Islam and the Arab culture. Moreover, it seeks to highlight how Islam can be viewed as a source of female empowerment in Wilson's fiction. The chapter also attempts to show how Wilson uses speculative fiction, particularly cyberpunk and fantasy, in order to celebrate both the modern-day uses of technology for resistance against governmental oppression, and the Islamic mythical and literary heritage.

Finally, the conclusion provides answers for the research questions of this thesis, and a brief summary of the arguments of the research. In addition, it includes research implications related to culture, the Islamic feminist theory and literature. It also includes recommendations for future research, and a summary of the knowledge contributed with this study.

Chapter One: Thinking about Feminism, Secular Feminism, Islamic Feminism and Speculative Fiction

1.1. Introduction

Like all women in the world, Arab Muslim women are thought to be oppressed. There are feminist voices in the Arab and Muslim world that critique sexist, patriarchal and misogynist readings and representations of Islam. Such voices claim that early Islam supported egalitarian ideals between men and women which have been subject to centuries-old distortions and misinterpretations (Wadud "Qur'an and Woman" ix-x). They believe that the Arab cultures are inherently patriarchal and androcentric (Ebadi qtd in Badran "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s" 22). The male-dominated cultures use the evermore powerful religious discourse to advance their sexist agendas. The struggle for Arab women's rights is manifested in the two trends of feminism in the Arab world: secular feminism and Islamic feminism (Badran "Feminism in Islam"). The latter, with a discourse firmly established on Islam's sacred texts, seeks to disarm the androcentric culture of its oppressive weapons with a critical view on how religion is twisted by the male-dominated culture. Besides, it aspires to empower women through egalitarian readings of the religious texts that stress on gender equality and social justice. In addition to critiquing the Western views on Islam and women. This chapter will be dedicated to reviewing the literature pertaining to the feminist discourse in Islam. It will include a review of the previous literary studies that have tackled Islam and gender. The chapter will encompass historical, cultural and philosophical discussions on the earlier forms of Western feminism, through the triple waves of feminism, feminist literary criticism, the rise of feminism in the Arab world, and to Islamic feminism. It will also include a discussion on the genre of speculative fiction.

1.2. Literary Studies on Islam, Gender and Islamic Feminism

This section includes a brief review of the literature pertaining to the current study by researchers and scholars in the field of literary studies. The purpose of this review is to recognize areas of prior scholarship, and to situate the study in the context of the existing literature. For organizational purposes, the theme *'Arab Muslim Women between Religion and Culture: An Islamic Feminist Study of Selected Contemporary Arab and American Speculative Fiction'* will be divided into parts with discussion of the literature that tackled the different parts of the topic.

The aim is to show differences and similarities in the existing literature in order to benefit from it and to contribute new knowledge. Therefore, the topic will be divided into four parts; the first of which will discuss works that approached Arab and Muslim women and Islam in literature. The second part will tackle works that are based on the representations of Muslim women in the Western literature. The third part will discuss the works that used Islamic feminism as a methodology for analysis. While the fourth part will discuss research on speculative fiction by and about Muslims and Muslim women.

1.2.1. Studies on Islam and Arab and Muslim Women

There are numerous contributions to the topic of Arab and Muslim women and Islam. These include Firouzeh Ameri' *Veiled experiences: re-writing women's identities and experiences in contemporary Muslim fiction in English* (PhD, 2012), Nesreen Abdullah Al-Harby's *Veiled Pearls: Women in Saudi Arabia in Contemporary Fiction* (PhD, 2017), Nancy el Gendy's *The Muslim Female Body in Twenty-first-century Discourses by Arab and Arab American Women Writers* (PhD, 2014), and Mazlin Arepin's *Representations of Muslim Women in Selected Contemporary Muslim Male Writings* (PhD, 2018). Firouzeh Ameri addresses representations of Muslim women in selected contemporary fiction written in English by Muslim women writers. She argues in this thesis that contrary to the Western mainstream narrative about Islam and Muslim women, these writers assert that religious identities of Muslim women are not indicative of victimization, but instead women are "willingly committed to their faith" (Ameri iii). She considers that texts such as Aboulela's *The Translator* and *Minaret*, Abdel-Fattah's *Does my Head Look Big in This?*, Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly* and Kahf's *The Girl in The Tangerine Scarf* can be read as writing back to the Western stereotypical representations of Muslim women and Islam by drawing attention to the role that certain narrative techniques play in highlighting "the complexities of Muslim women's religious identities and experiences" (iii). The selected works are coming-of-age and romantic novels that focus on Muslim women in the West whose religion plays a central part in their daily lives and experiences.

Al-Harby explores representations of Saudi women in pre- and post-9/11 literature by Saudi and Western writers. The works include Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*, Einion's *Inshallah*, Mantel's *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, and Ferraris's trilogy, *Finding Nouf*, *City of Veils*, and *Kingdom of Strangers*. She explores the influence of the different genres of the works in the

representations of Saudi women. The novels are labeled under the chick-lit, thriller, detective, and gothic genres. Her thesis uses Arab/Muslim feminism as a frame of reference in order "to assess the degree to which the novels reproduce or challenge prevailing discourses of gender and Orientalism" (Al-Harby 2). She highlights in her thesis the effects of genre on the portrayal of gender injustice. She concludes that the novels reproduce Orientalist views about Saudi Arabia and women. In addition, she demonstrates that Saudi writer Raja Alsanea's work is the only self-representation among her novel selections, and that Alsanea reproduces orientalist views because she limits her portrayal to the elite Saudi women.

In another thesis, El Gendy analyses the representations of the Muslim female body in selected twenty-first century Arab and Arab American women's fiction. She employs a culturally symptomatic approach in order to provide a reading of the various modes of representing the Muslim female body. Her selected works include contemporary fiction by Arab and Arab American writers. These include, but are not limited to, Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*, Jarrar's *A Map of Home*, El Saadawi's *Zeina*, and Al-Sane's *Banāt al-Riyāḍ*. The main argument of the thesis is that perceptions about the Muslim female body are constructed on cultural fabrications. She explores the modes of resistance that the selected works develop either of orientalist, Islamist or other forces that propagate certain body images. Her thesis shows the heterogeneity of the authors in that it highlights the "singular subjectivities of their production of knowledge" (El Gendy xii). The differences of the authors in question are brought to the fore when "delineated within diasporic as well as national contexts" (xii). As a result, El Gendy argues that the counter-images these writers create either trouble, maintain or refute traditional constructions about the Muslim female body.

Mazlin Arepin's thesis provides a study of the representations of Muslim women in selected contemporary Muslim men's fiction. The selected works for this study are Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns,* Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Kassab's *The Road from Damascus*, Hirata's *The Rainbow Troops,* and Noor's *Immortals* and *Duke*. The study examines the representations of Muslim women and perceived victimization by patriarchal, religious or Western hegemony, and the impact of the 9/11 events on the portrayal of Muslim women by male Muslim writers. As a theory for analysis, Arepin uses New Historicism which focuses on the author's background and the context of text production. This theory provides a "solid

historical and cultural explanations that have influenced the author's writings" (Arepin ii). The study concludes that some authors have revealed tendencies to validate stereotypes about Muslim women in their representations as propagated by conventional Western and patriarchal hegemony. In addition, these authors' views are equipped by their understandings of women's situation, therefore, attempts at subverting Western stereotyping and patriarchal domination are apparent in their works.

The aforementioned studies have dealt with the representations of Muslim women in contemporary fiction from different viewpoints. Ameri explores perceptions about the veil which, for her selected writers, is an assertion of religious identity. Her study is centered on the works that discuss the experiences of women in the West. However, in my study, I attempt to examine works about Arab Muslim women in their own societies and cultures. Al-Harby's study shares some similarities with this study in discussing literature by Saudi and Western authors. However, her focus to explore Orientalist representations of Saudi women pays little attention to the intricacies that religion and culture present in shaping the female experience. Besides, her selected works fall into the genres of chick-lit, thriller, detective, and gothic; while in my study I will explore speculative fiction works that include science fiction, fantasy and dystopia by Arab and American authors. Furthermore, El Gendy explores representation of the female body by Arab and Arab American authors; whereas in my study, I will discuss works by Arab, American non-Muslim and American convert to Islam to provide a broad perspective about the different representations of Arab Muslim women. Arepin's study focuses on Muslim male authors' representations of Muslim women after 9/11; whereas my study will deal with works by female authors from different cultural backgrounds.

1.2.2. The Representations of Muslim Women and Islam in Western Literature

There are numerous studies on the representations of Muslim women and Islam in Western literature. Some of the works that deal with the topic include Mohja Kahf's book *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (1999), Aqeel Abdulla's *Representations of Muslim Women in Contemporary British Theatre* (PhD, 2016), Arshad Masood Hashmi's *Islam, Prejudiced Western Fiction and Islamic Feminism* (2020), and Seyed Mohammad Marandi and Zeinab Ghasemi Tari's *Orientalist Feminism; Representation of Muslim Women in Two American Novels: Terrorist and Falling Man*. Mohja Kahf's work holds

that the 'odalisque' or the submissive, veiled, secluded and oppressed image of the Muslim woman that was circulated since the Enlightenment of the 18th century is a recent phenomenon compared to the forceful queens and intimidating sexuality of the Western medieval and Renaissance representations. Kahf traces the historically-located shift in Western representations from the 'termagant' to the 'odalisque'. She argues that "the question of the liberty, or lack thereof, of the Muslim woman" (6) actually began to appear only in the 17th century, and the image of the subjugated woman reaches zenith only in the 18th and 19th centuries. Loaded with detailed historical accounts on the representations of Muslim women, Kahf's work provides examples from European literature that stretches across medieval romance and chanson de geste, Renaissance drama, Enlightenment prose, and Romantic poetry. She argues that the representational changes from the 'termagant' to the 'odalisque' are attributed to the changes in the European and Islamic relations, and the Western gender-related developments.

Aqeel Abdulla examines in his study the representations of Muslim women in contemporary British Drama. He studies eight plays including Amber Lone's *Deadeye* (2006), Hussain's *Sweet Cider* (2008), Gupta's *What Fatima Did* (2009), Bano's *Shades* (2009), Streets' *Sisters* (2010), Manzoor's *Burq Off!* (2014), Bhuchar's *My Name Is...* (2014), and Khan-Din's *East is East* (2014). Aqeel uses an emerging theory that he calls Islamic feminisms as a framework for the analysis of the plays. He argues that this theory is "influenced by questions of cultural hybridity, second wave Western feminism, and religious ideology" (Aqeel 2). The plays manifest different issues including the hijab, women's positions in the Muslim family, and British society's integration/non-integration of Muslim women. He views each play as a cultural event, and through his analysis of the plays and the circumstances of their production and writing, he attempts to assess the "the possible contribution that [each] play has made to contemporary debates" (2) on Muslim women. His analyses extend from the thematic analysis of these texts, to performativity's role in conveying messages and initiating dialogue on the issue.

In his research paper, Arshad Masood Hashmi attempts to call attention to different facets of Western prejudiced fiction, and the rise of a counter-discourse called Islamic feminism that is manifested in different forms including fiction, and how this discourse is both "against the traditional Islamic interpretations and the Western approach regarding Muslims" (Hashmi 10). He argues that the Western fiction is generally filled with prejudiced themes, and negative

depictions of Islam and Muslim societies that are a consequence of the experiences between the West and Islam. The Western colonial mindset has always influenced fiction writing about Muslims who are thus regarded as "suggestive, crude, oblivious, monsters and slave dealers" (10). Those images intensified after the 9/11 events when the actions of some groups and the continuing colonial ideology have been wrongly used to depict Muslims and Islam. Consequently, Muslim women have had a central place in Western negative portrayals and their conditions have been a theme ripe for Western imaginations. A group of scholars and writers have challenged those negative narratives about Islam and Muslim women, as well as the Muslims misdeeds which inaugurated Western prejudice. The Islamic feminists are committed to challenging "these prejudiced notions rich in racial supremacy", as well as to attack traditional scholarship which "helped in portraying Islam and women in a negative manner" (10). Hashmi attempts to locate the Muslim fiction which is against traditional interpretations of Islam and Western prejudice against Muslims and Islam.

Seyed Mohammad Marandi and Zeinab Ghasemi Tari argue in their research paper that Western fiction after 9/11 has contributed in the proliferation of the old Orientalist discourse. Orientalist stereotyping includes images of Muslim terrorists and fundamentalists, and oppressed Muslim women. Novels produced after the events "reiterate and perpetuate the image of Muslim women as oppressed subhuman who live in the state of abject slavery imposed allegedly by Islamic rules" (Marandi and Tari 5). Besides the image of the oppressed, Marandi and Tari argue that Muslim women are also portrayed as "seductive, submissive and often an epitome of immorality and transgressive sexuality" (5). The paper focuses on two American bestselling novels, namely John Updike's *Terrorist* and Don Dolillo's *Falling Man*. The importance of these novels lies in the status of their authors; both of whom are considered to be contemporary canonical writers in American literature. The researchers examine how Updike and Dolillo reproduce Orientalist views about Islam and women, and how "fabrications replace the reality which has little or nothing to do with Islam" (19). Such 'fabrications' view the Holy Quran as the as the original source for women's 'sorry' conditions. The authors use the Quran's transliteration to insinuate an "aura of authenticity", while in fact, they are mere distortions because an ordinary Western reader will not be able to understand its real meaning (16-17).

The above studies are different from the current study in many aspects. While Kahf's study focuses on the historical developments in the representations of Muslim women in Western literature from the 'termagant' to the 'odalisque', my study calls attention to the contemporary representations in Western literature. Besides, the focus of my study will not solely be on Western literature, but I tend to extend the scope to varying viewpoints from selected Muslim and non-Muslim authors in the West, as well as from Arab literature. Similarly, Abdulla's study focuses on the representations of Muslim women in the West, albeit in British Drama. However, he uses a critical framework that he calls 'Islamic Feminisms' "which refers to any scholarship, activism, or work that deals with the issues that are key and important for Muslim women, regardless of whether or not the people who produce the feminist work are themselves Muslim or female" (Abdulla 24). This methodology is different from the one that will be used in this study, because the focus is not on the influence of religion on the situation of women, but rather Abdulla emphasizes the different approaches to the situation of Muslim women in the West. On the other hand, Hashmi's study tends to map out the negative portrayals of Muslim women in Western literature and the rise of a counter-discourse in literary production called Islamic feminism. However, his study traces the roots of the rise of this discourse as opposed to using this discourse as a methodology for analysis. Marandi and Tari's study focuses on two American novels with negative portrayals of Islam and women. Their analysis neglects the role that religion and culture play in women's lives, and focuses instead on the discourses of power between the East and West.

1.2.3. Islamic Feminism as a Methodology for Analysis

The Islamic feminist school of thought has been used as a lens for studying literary works in many research papers. Some of the studies that relied on Islamic feminism are Muhammad Abdullah's *Postfeminist and Islamic Feminist Discourse: An Analysis of Discursive Practices of Muslim Feminists* (PhD 2018), Areej Bashammakh's *Literature, Islam and Feminism in the Works of Fadia Faqir and Leila Aboulela: A Comparative Literary Study* (PhD 2018), Wajiran Wajiran's *Images of Muslim Women in Contemporary Indonesian Literature* (PhD 2020), and Amani Al-Serhan's *Arab Feminism and the Negotiation of Gender in Contemporary Jordanian Novels* (PhD 2016). Muhammad Abdullah uses a postfeminist and an Islamic feminist framing of Muslim women's fiction. Postfeminist thought is based on challenging victimization and

advocating autonomy and responsibility. His study focuses on works by women from Pakistan and the Arab world, and examines the discursive patterns that arise from the productions of Muslim women as protagonists in Chick-lit. He coins the term 'Islamic postfeminism', a concept that indicates "a merger of secular and religious sensibilities without betraying any of the respective traditions" (Abdullah iv). He comes to the conclusion that the literary discourse of Muslim women lacks a "single, homogeneous, explicitly traceable Islamic feminism or postfeminism" (iv). Instead, the selected works express a "fluid, free-spirited, juvenile, version of postfeminism" (iv). The authors do not wish to produce characters with assertive religious identities, but are withdrawing from affiliations and expectations of Muslimness.

In her thesis, Areej Bashammakh approaches Muslim literature written in English from a religious perspective. She uses Islamic feminism to analyze works by British Arab Muslim writers Fadia Faqir and Leila Aboulela. She argues that the religious domain has been avoided in postcolonial literary studies, and instead a "secular approach dominates partly because of the limitation of postcolonial theory in relation to Islam" (Bashammakh). Her main aim is to compare Islamic feminist consciousness in the fiction produced by Faqir and Aboulela between the 1990s and the 2010s. She concludes that the Islamic feminism of these writers vary enormously, as Faqir focuses on giving her female characters a voice in the face of patriarchal Arab cultural traditions, while Aboulela focuses on the role that the Islamic faith plays as a source of female spiritual emancipation. Bashammakh uses Islamic feminism as a key methodology in order to have a better understanding of how the selected authors "use Islam as a framework for their feminism" (Bashammakh), as well as the consequent challenges that these authors face while adopting such an approach in writing.

In another thesis, Wajiran Wajiran aims to examine how Muslim women are represented in contemporary Indonesian literature. He uses Amina Wadud's feminist theory to undertake a feminist reading of selected works. As an Islamic feminist, Wadud chooses "Islam as her foundation in understanding human rights and equality" (Wajiran 92). His research focuses on images of women in Javanese Muslim families, which have been object to changes since the *Reformasi* (the protest movement to overthrow President Suharto in 1998) in Indonesia. This thesis discusses the works by Indonesian writers, namely Mustofa W. Hasyim, Abidah El Khalieqy, Habiburrahman El Shirazy, and Alfina Dewi. Wajiran argues that although his thesis

deals with Islam, Muslim women and literature, the object of his research is not 'Islamic literature'. However, the selected writers are activists in Islamic organizations, and some of the writers are lecturers in Islamic universities. Their works tackle issues of contemporary Muslim society, Islamic values and the Javanese tradition. The reason Wajiran chooses Islamic feminism, particularly Amina Wadud's theory is because her "ideas about modern Muslim women are popular in Indonesia" (83). Therefore, applying Wadud's theory enables Wajiran to focus on the Quran and its interpretations.

Amani Al-Serhan uses Arab secular feminism and Islamic feminism to discuss some of her selected novels. She aims to use Arab feminism (which includes secular and religious standpoints) in order to "investigate how perceptions of womanhood and manhood are negotiated" (Al-Serhan 2) in her selected works. The selected works in her research include contemporary Jordanian novels written by both men and women between 2000 and 2012. She argues that the debate about advancing women's rights in the Arab world through modernity or tradition influences the authors' views about manhood and womanhood. Drawing on the author's strategy and views about combatting gender injustice, she identifies three categories of novels. The first category calls for a rebellious position in the face of patriarchal structures. The second category invites a return to tradition, particularly to the Islamic scriptures. While the third category detaches from the perception of tradition as an antithesis of modernity. In doing so, the advocates of such a position "attempt to bring together useful aspects of both paradigms in ways that help women combat gender inequality" (2). Al-Serhan takes a middle-ground position which neither exclusively advocates Islamic nor pro-Western ideologies.

Islamic feminism has been used as a methodology for analysis in the above studies. However, the use of this theory differs from the current study. Abdullah's study applies the theory to works of fiction that are considered Islamic feminist, and concludes that their orientations are in fact post-feminist (that is they seek a detachment from affiliations of religiosity and Muslimness). In my research, neither of the authors identifies as an Islamic feminist. The theory will be primarily used as a lens for the analysis and criticism of the selected novels. Similarly, Bashammakh's selected authors Fadia Faqir and Leila Aboulela publicly identify as Islamic feminists. However, her research shares some similarities with my research in her focus on the religious domain which has been overlooked by other critical lenses. On the

other hand, Wajiran's study employs Amina Wadud's feminist theory. While my research will not be limited by one Islamic feminist scholar, but will draw on different theories produced by Islamic feminists since its inception. Finally, Al-Serhan's study uses Arab feminism which incorporates secular and religious perspectives on women's rights, in an attempt to bring closer different views about modernity and tradition. Due to the focus on the religion and culture of Arab Muslim women, my research will especially use Islamic feminism because of its comprehensive nature, and because it marks a development from other forms of feminism in the Muslim world, which is indicative of its rich history.

1.2.4. Speculative Fiction and Islam

Scholarship on speculative fiction and Islam is noticeably modest. This is perhaps due to the lack of interest in such a genre by researchers. Some of the most prominent works on the field include Hosam A. Ibrahim Elzembely and Emad El-Din Aysha's (Editors) book *Arab and Muslim Science Fiction: Critical Essays* (2022), Yusuf Nuruddin's *Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology* (2006), Reuven Snir's *The Emergence of Science Fiction in Arabic Literature* (2000), and Rebecca Hankins' *Countering the Master Narrative: Muslims and Islam in Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Comics* (2010). Elzembely and Aysha's book includes essays by Arab and Muslim writers who explore science fiction in the Arab Muslim world. Unlike earlier academic works which approached the topic from "the singular perspective of a foreign expert" (Elzembely 1), this work approaches the topic from an Arab cultural perspective which identifies "the problems we all face in our various settings as authors, researchers, publishers and translators" (1). The book explores the history and nature of science fiction, and the challenges that face contemporary authors. Topics covered incorporate the clash between tradition and modernity, culture shock, the roles of female heroines, language games and the blind imitation of the techniques of storytelling.

In his article, Yusuf Nuruddin acknowledges the contributions of the Islamic culture on speculative fiction. He argues that the early speculative fiction works are in fact produced by Muslims with Islamic and Middle Eastern themes. He maintains that some stories in *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights* "might be considered proto-science fiction" (Nuruddin 138). He argues that there is little recognition of this historically-evident fact because of Eurocentric attitudes which imply cultural hegemony that is "pervasive and affects all aspects of culture

including mythology" (129). In addition, the lack of Western acknowledgment of Arabic literature, especially modern Arabic literature, is "because it has not been widely translated" (138). Nuruddin emphasizes that Islam has inspired science fiction motifs since its inception. In relation to Sunni Islam doctrines, he argues that there is evidence in the Quran about people who slept for centuries in caves, the jinn (creatures created from smokeless fire), and the metamorphosis of evil men into apes. Besides, there are hadiths about the Prophet's journey by the horse *Baruq* and into heaven, cracking of the moon miracle, and the one-eyed Anti-Christ (*Al Masih ad-Dajjal*) (138).

On the other hand, Reuven Snir's article discusses Arabic science fiction which has been around since the 1970s. He argues that Science Fiction is an American product that quickly became "a valuable export item" (Snir 263) to the rest of the world. He notes that it has reached many countries since its inception, and contributions from different parts of the world were collected in Aldiss and Lundwall's (Editors) *The Penguin World Omnibus of Science Fiction*. However, there was a lack of Arabic contributions, which is, according to the editors, because "they could find not one single work of SF in Arabic while they were putting the collection" (264). Snir's point of view can be encapsulated in the idea that the lack of Western or any academic research on Arabic science fiction is because there is an absence of the works produced by Arabs. He argues that the scholarly attention on studying contemporary Arabic science fiction works is a consequence of the almost exclusive focus on "those literary types and genres that have been recognized by the literary establishment as belonging to highbrow culture" (265).

In another research, Rebecca Hankins's paper recognizes the early Muslim contributions in the speculative fiction genre. She argues that the influence of the Islamic fantastic literature as manifested in the *Arabian Nights* on Western and African cultures and the contributions of the Islamic culture on the inauguration of speculative fiction are not properly acknowledged because "there continues to be a *Master Narrative* that has removed non-Western contributions from the historical record" (Hankins 2). She alludes to an article written by Rebecca Carol Johnson, Richard Maxwell, and Katie Trumpener entitled *The Arabian Nights, Arab-European Literary Influence, and the Lineages of the Novel* (2007) which traces the influence of the *Arabian Nights* "on the birth of the European novel, from Miguel Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*" (3). She argues that the resurgence

of Muslim science fiction and fantasy started in the late 1800s, and one of the early and most prominent writers is the Egyptian author al-Muwaylihi. Later, many male and female authors became interested in speculative fiction such as Nabil Farouq, Roquia Sakhawat Hussain, Nihad Sharif, G. Willow Wilson, and many others.

The above studies have tackled Muslim speculative fiction production. However, all of those studies tend to take a historical approach, as they seek to trace the beginnings of sci-fi and fantasy in the Muslim world. Elzembely and Aysha's book shares some similarities with my study in attempting to approach speculative fiction works from an Arab cultural perspective. As Arab Muslim researchers, we attempt to detach from "the singular perspective of a foreign expert" (Elzembely 1), and seek to understand the phenomena without taking for granted our experiences and understandings of the complexities of the Arab cultural setting. Nurudin, Snir and Hankins studies share the inclination to study the history of speculative fiction produced by Arabs and Muslims. However, my study will approach speculative fiction works by Western and Arab authors from a perspective that focuses on perceptions on gender, religion and culture in the Muslim world.

1.3. Tracking Western Feminism from The Early Religious Roots through the Enlightenment to the Triple Waves

The word 'feminism' was first coined by the French utopian socialist philosopher Francois Marie Charles Fourier. A derivative of the French word '*feminisme'*, it first appeared during the nineteenth century along with terms such as *socialisme* and *individualisme*. The original date for the appearance of the word is, however, unknown and is speculated to have appeared from 1808, which marks the publication of the first edition of the *Theorie de Quatre Mouvements et des destinees generals*, through the death of Fourier in 1837, to the publication of Fourier's *Oeuvres completes* which included the *Quatre Mouvements*' second edition after his death. Fourier arrived at the conclusion that women's emancipation is attached to eliminating their legal and economic subordination to men (Offen 45).

Although Fourier maintains in his 1808 edition of the *Quatre Mouvements* that it is imperative for social progress to 'progress' in the liberty of women, the word *feminisme* is not to be found. Despite the fact that many scholars do not openly regard him to be a feminist, Fourier was the first theorist to have an anti-patriarchal vision of social and sexual order. He even

parallels the treatment of women in the Western world to that of the slaves (Fourier 57). He emphasizes that "the extension of the privileges of women is the basic principle of all social progress" (132). Fourier's early life may have had a significant role in constituting his later views. One of the reasons for taking a favorable position on the issue of women is may be due to Fourier's early loss of his father, and being raised in a female household (xiii). It was not until Fourier's death that the word 'feminism' became linked to women's rights. This meant gaining its new meaning to represent the advocacy of equality between the sexes. As well as calling for the political, social and economic rights of the female sex.

Feminism has its early roots in religion. It became a familiar term in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when the Western feminist movement promoting the women's right to vote started. However, the roots of feminism stretch back to the medieval period. The earliest women to advocate the rights and speak about the conditions of women "did so within a religious framework, and in religious terms" (Walters 6). The fact the that first feminists relied on religion to support their agenda is often deliberately overlooked. Indeed, the religious dimension was essential for laying the groundwork for women's rights advocacy. Specialists in gender studies Marie-Andree Roy and Anne Letourneau go even further to reveal that "[h]istorians of women's movement have clearly shown that the link between feminism and secularization is recent" (qtd. in Maurot). In medieval Europe, and exactly in the 12th century, Hildegard of Bingen discovered her distinguished voice as a writer, philosopher and musician all the while she was a nun at St. Rupert's Nunnerye, a Catholic abbey. When she was sixty years old, she undertook a preaching journey all over the German Empire. This is contrary to the old practice that only priests were allowed to go on preaching journeys. The presence of a womanly maternal experience is what characterized Hildegard's discourse. She is renowned for her writing on the 'motherhood' of God, such as when she wrote: "God showed me his grace again, as … when a mother offers her weeping child milk" (qtd. in Walters 7).

Women's voices continued to echo throughout the medieval ages. Another such example is the Englishwoman Julian of Norwich. Being in self-isolation from society and family purified her vision, and provided her with the opportunity to view things from her feminine viewpoint. She was the first women to write a book in English. Her premature contribution to the feminist thought is clear in her instinctive womanly stance towards Jesus and the Gospels. Similar to

Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich is known for her comparison of God to a mother: "When [a child] is hurt or frightened it runs to its mother for help as fast as it can; and [God] wants us to do the same, like a humble child, saying, 'My kind Mother, my gracious Mother, my dearest Mother, take pity on me'" (qtd. in Spearing144).

More and more women were starting to debate their case by the late 16th century within a religious framework. The establishment of the Protestant churches, consequent to the reformation of the practices of the Roman Catholic Church, allowed women to receive an education. In 1589, Jane Anger used the religious discourse to defend women's position by combatting religiously-based misconceptions. She claims that Eve was superior to Adam because she was made from Adam's flesh which is purer than the 'filthy clay' that Adam was made of. She insists that "a woman was the first that believed, and a woman likewise the first that repented of sin" (Walters 9). Relying on religion to support pro-feminist claims came with its challenges. The difficulty lies in the fact that any woman willing to advocate and fortify her position would face negative scriptural depictions of women. Negative portrayals include the image of Eve's responsibility for the Fall of Adam (and the human race) from Eden, the treachery of Delilah to Samson, or the murders of Jezebel. In spite of that, a small number of women started to give new readings of Genesis, maintaining that it was not the sin of Eve alone, and that Adam is as much to blame (9).

As a result of the religious persecutions that took place on the basis of the rejection of the established Church during the 17th century Elizabethan England, many religious sects emerged including the Quakers, Familists and Baptists. Among these groups, women played substantial roles as preachers. Women were also active among the religious separatists who migrated to America or Holland fleeing persecution in late Elizabethan England (Walters 10). The dissenters, though did not openly delve in or question the subordination of women in terms of legal or economic or political affairs, had an egalitarian rhetoric that was evident in allowing women to vote in church meetings and to serve in disciplinary committees. The Quakers, for instance, even allowed women to serve as religious leaders. That was due to their conviction that despite one's sex or race, one possesses an 'inner light' which allows him or her to receive revelations from God (Huston 120).

The middle years of the 17th century witnessed a peak in published writings by women. Indeed, 620 published works were by women, and almost half of them were concerned with religion one way or another. In fact, keeping records of women's spiritual lives and experiences was of a great significance, as it was championed by the protestant doctrine which stressed on personal religious experience (Evans 301). Compared to male writings nevertheless, female published works were considerably scarce. Writers such as Amelia Lanyer, Lady Mary Wroth, Katherine Philips, Anne Killigrew and Margret Cavendish were either born to privileged aristocratic families or married into them. Accordingly, being an elite was prerequisite to get published for women at the time, as education was not available to all women in 17th century Europe (S. Wilson 1-2).

The eighteenth century brought with it the ideals of reason, equality and human rights. All of which were supposed to work in favor of the feminist undertaking. However, the Enlightenment discourse was far from being universal. The Enlightenment vision of a society structured upon the principle of equality was layered with various forms of domination in terms of gender, race, class, and empire. The period of the eighteenth century was a time when ideas were communicated through various forms, namely: 'high' philosophical works, novels, poetry, theology, eroticism, and the miscellaneous essay. Among the wide range of ideas, which shaped the Enlightenment period, women's contributions took different forms. The most notable contributions by women consist of letter writing and the management of 'salons'. The latter was flourishing in France and became a paradigmatic institution of the Enlightenment. The salons, with their 'mixed-gender sociability', were an important place for philosophical debate. Women, as viewed by the French naturalist Comte de Buffon, were a "civilizing force on which depended the 'gentleness of society'" (qtd. in Lettow 95).

As one of the prominent philosophers of the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, though convinced by the notion of 'equality among men', did not make women's equality at the center of his discourse. Rousseau believed that women have to rely on men and thus do not deserve equality. His ideas come from his belief that women are less rational than men. The main purpose of a woman, according to Rousseau, is to be a wife or a mother. Hence, women should not receive the same education as men; and consequently, men and women should have different duties. Some of Rousseau's thoughts are found to be contradictory among critics. When he

stresses on the idea that women should not have the same education as men, he indicates that they are responsible for educating their children. This also contradicts with the idea of women's incapability of reason (Lewis).

The Enlightenment writer and philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft, though influenced by the ideas of her contemporary Rousseau, disapproves of the subordination that accompanies the idea of a perfect wife for Emile in Rousseau's *Emile, or On Education.* She asserts that the reason behind the injustice that women endured through the ages was mainly because of the lack of education. Instead of education, women were expected to be beautiful in order to get married and bear children. She emphasizes that

> women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, OUTWARD obedience, […] will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, every thing else is needless, for at least twenty years of their lives (Wollstonecraft 84).

For Wollstonecraft, a woman is not less rational than a man. She addresses women in her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* by saying:

> My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their fascinating graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone … I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength, both mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only objects of pity and that kind of love … will soon become objects of contempt (Wollstonecraft 8).

Wollstonecraft denies any natural differences between the two genders as was advocated by Rousseau. However, as the prominent Enlightenment philosopher, Rousseau's ideas were celebrated and praised in consideration of the fact that such ideas were common and ordinary at the time and place of their occurring. The truth is that Wollstonecraft contradicted the claim of one of the most influential thinkers of the Enlightenment. That meant she was against the current

of the religious and scientific beliefs accepted in the era, which prevented her ideas from being proliferated and circulated.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, a group of intellectual women and men called *the bluestocking circle* attended literary assemblies. Those meetings were held and hosted by women in their London houses. The purpose of those meetings was for women to expand their knowledge as it was a chance to freely communicate with other women and men. The bluestocking assemblies resemble the French salons and in fact, they were influenced by them. The major hostesses of the bluestocking were the wealthy, well-connected women: Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Vesey, and Frances Boscawen. The bluestocking circle had a significant role on encouraging women to go into publication. The circle declined in the late 18th century along with the death of Elizabeth Vesey and Frances Boscawen. The bluestocking later became a term of ridicule, referring to women who were thought to be too educated to be marriageable (Knowles).

The Western movements of feminism include three waves categorized based on their time of occurrence, their activists' ideological beliefs and orientations, and the different strategies on approaching and advocating women's rights. The three waves are recognized as liberal first wave of feminism, radical second wave, and intersectional third wave of feminism. Some researchers argue that there is a fourth wave that emerged in 2012, and focuses on the empowerment of women, the use of the internet and social media to fight sexual oppression, and intersectionality. Other researchers assert that the fourth wave is an extension of third wave feminism.

The mid-nineteenth century was marked by women's struggle for the vote. The first wave of feminism was an international pioneering movement that spread in Europe, North America, India, Iran and Egypt. Although international in range, it was most active in Western Europe and the United States (Malinowska 2). The American suffrage movement started in 1848 when a convention for women's rights was held and organized by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton under the name of the Seneca Falls. Many American feminist activists lectured on issues such as equal rights to education, married women's right to property, employment and the vote (Aydin and Yildiz 165-166). Stanton drafted the Seneca Falls Declaration demanding the natural equity for women, as it sketched the political strategy of equal access and opportunity. The

convention along with the publication of the first American newspaper owned, edited and published by a woman resulted in a profound change in society. It can be argued that the first wave revolves around the idea of the 'New Woman', which is based on challenging the established limits by the male-dominated society (Malinowska 2). The 'bloomers', women wearing pants instead of skirts and dresses, were a consequence of dress reform -that which was emblematic of equality between the sexes. The dress reform along with other women's rights were the main focus of Amelia Bloomer's newspaper *Lily* in 1849. *The Woman's Journal* began publishing in 1870 by the American Women Suffrage Association and focused on the achievement of women's suffrage. Journals like *Lily* in the United States and *Le Voix des Femmes* in Europe provided "a more thorough picture of the lives of women" (3).

The first wave incorporated 'ideological inconsistencies' with regard to women of color. Coinciding with other reform movements such as abolitionism and temperance, feminism was in a love-hate reciprocal relationship that created divisions within and antagonism towards the movement's ideals. It "consisted largely of White, middle-class, well-educated women" (Krolokke and Sorensen 4). Black women were excluded and marginalized from the movement's agenda. Black activists Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells were excluded from the women suffrage movement. Though white women obtained striking achievements with the close of the first couple of decades of the twentieth century, black women and other women of color continued to confront impediments until the second half of the century.

The early twentieth century witnessed many public protests by women following earlier campaigning for women's right to vote by many activists. The fruits were beginning to appear since states such as Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho and Utah guaranteed women's right to vote. It was until August 18th, 1920 that the 19th Amendment was ratified under the presidency of Woodrow Wilson guaranteeing the right to vote for women in the presidential election in November of the same year (Johnson 3-6).

Radical second wave of the feminist movement emerged during the period of the 1960s until the early 1980s. It brought into view issues related to the inequality of laws, social and cultural inequalities and women's roles in society (Ranjan 120). It was inspired by the writings of female writers and philosophers Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer. It moved the whole discussion from what can be regarded as political (as in the

first wave's call for legal rights) to the fields of psychology, culture and anthropology. The women's movements were stretched outside of the traditional limits of political discourse, protesting against the very foundations of culture and civilization (Harrison and Boyd 298).

One of the main issues that the second wave had to confront was the socio-cultural valuing of the outer appearance of women instead of their personal achievements and abilities of thinking and reasoning. Such views were propagated by the media and the advertisement industry, resulting in pushing women into conventional gender norms (Johnson 6). Consequent to stereotypical views on femininity, women were reduced to mere objects of beauty as was manifested in the Miss America Pageant parades. Hence, "[w]omen were victims of a patriarchal, commercialized, oppressive beauty culture" (Krolokke and Sorensen 8). The objectification of women was a form of patriarchy intended to keep women in the home, or attach dull, low paying jobs to them. Such acts of stereotyping and injustice were encountered by protests by the radical feminist group called the Redstockings of the Women's Liberation Movement. This group organized a parade where they put the Miss America crown on a sheep, in addition to throwing artifacts that symbolized the 'oppressed' feminine such as bras, high heels, makeup and false eyelashes in the garbage can (Rampton).

Growing out of the New Left, radical second wave emerged along with other social and political movements in the 1960s and the 1970s. The women's movements were influenced by other leftist movements in postwar Western societies including the anti-Vietnam War movement, the civil rights and Black power movements. All of which exhibited extreme disapproval of 'capitalism' and 'imperialism', and focused their attention on the issues of the 'oppressed' groups. However, functioning within the framework of the New Left meant being constrained by the objectives of the revolution. This prevented women from real influence; thus, they found themselves exposed to sexism once more. Therefore, it was imperative for women to form women-only consciousness raising groups, and to raise mottos, as did the Redstockings such as "Sisterhood is Powerful" and "The Personal is Political" suggesting that the empowerment of women lies in solidarity. Influenced by neo-Marxism, second wave recognized the oppression of the capitalist society, claiming that women constitute a class of their own (Krolokke and Sorensen 8-9). Feminists considered women as a social class suggesting that 'women's struggle is class struggle'. Second-wave feminism included women of color and women from developing

nations, claiming the universality of women's experience, and illustrating that there is a relationship between race, class and gender oppression (Rampton). It is important to note that second wave of feminism is not only one, but many (Krolokke and Sorensen 15). Its most prevalent form (Radical feminism) sought to eradicate all forms of male supremacy and to challenge gender roles.

The third-wave of feminism started in the early 1990s. Many cultural events led to an increasing sense of a generational change that marked the shift from second to third wave of feminism. Musicians and bands such as Ani Difranco, Alex Olsen, the Indigo Girls, Bikini Kill and Brat Mobile were the voice of the contemporary generation of women. Many scholars view that the third wave was cultural and was manifested in broader subcultures of music, social justice activism and art. Embodied in these "cultural vehicles are familiar political issues such as sexual harassment, occupational discrimination, violence, sexual abuse, and body image, which continue to concern third wave feminists" (Reger 6). Referred to as 'riot grrls', the women of the third wave, as Baumgardner and Richards point out are "buoyed by the confidence of having more opportunities and less sexism" (qtd. in Krolokke and Sorensen 15). They exhibited strength and empowerment, avoiding victimization in addition to embracing feminine beauty for themselves as subjects, and not as defined by the sexist patriarchy (Rampton). The feminist agenda of empowerment along with the strategy of 'Do It Yourself' sought to cultivate the spirit of self-reliance and agency. This found a fertile ground among a growing number of 'riot grrl' groups in the United States and Europe (Krolokke and Sorensen 16). The new information technologies marked a point of departure for activism and provided a space, once male-dominated, for raising awareness and discussing women's issues. Technology resulted in the foundation of Cybergrrls and Netgrrls, the girls and women who gain access to the procedures necessary to produce websites in order to take control of the representations of women (Blair and Takayoshi 7).

Feminists of the third wave adhered to a strategy of embracing, even exaggerating the stereotypes used against them. This strategy sought to adapt insulting terms such as 'slut' and 'bitch' with a view to demolish sexist culture and strip it of its verbal weapons. Consequently, new self-celebrating terms and forms of communication were originated, starting with the very word 'girl' (Krolokke and Sorrensen 16). Besides, feminists ventured to deconstruct categorical

thinking, which labels people to 'us' or 'them'. Influenced by intersectional theory, they challenged the idea of universal womanhood, which was advocated by earlier feminists. Intersectionality recognizes the multiple social and political identities of a person that combine to produce different types of discrimination and injustice. According to this theory, women experience complex intersections of gender, sexuality, class, race, and age-related issues (16-17). Additionally, third wave is also inspired by the work of Judith Butler on gender performativity. Butler argues that males and females' behaviors are not innate characteristics that exist with a person since their birth. Instead, they are, what she terms, 'gender performances' designed for social acceptability. Gender performance determines the ways in which a person talks, walks, behaves and dresses. In Butler's words, gender is a performance and "is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (Butler 25). Therefore, it is believed that "individuals should be given the freedom to construct their own gender identities as they see fit" (Krolokke and Sorrensen 19). Gender performativity theory inspired later theorizing on LGBTQ's rights.

Third-wave feminism was contemporaneous with a major shift of world power marked by the fall of communism, resulting in a new global world order. Therefore, new challenges of religious and ethnic origins, as well as the risks and promises of new info and biotechnologies emerged. Activists of the third wave were concerned with different matters varying from violence against women, body surgery, self-mutilation and the overall 'pornification' of the media (17). With the new global order came new possibilities and challenges. Such challenges required new ways of approaching gender issues, especially those of international concerns. Therefore, third wave introduced 'transversal politics' "which is based on the possibility of dialogue between women across national, ethnic and religious boundaries" (20).

1.4. Women in the Western Thought and Literature, Feminist Literary Criticism and Gynocritics

The Western thought has long been layered with entrenched prejudice against women. Canonical male writers throughout history have long labelled women inequal to men and attached the attributes of frailty, imperfection, inferiority and illiteracy to them. The Greek philosopher Aristotle states that the superiority of the male is bestowed by nature, and that the male is the ruler while the female is the subject. As such, "the male is by nature superior and the

female inferior" (Aristotle qtd. in Smith 467). Numerous other Western writers and philosophers exerted themselves to degrade women. One such example is the eighteenth-century English writer Horace Walpole, who referred to Mary Wollstonecraft as "hyena in petticoats" for her unconventional thoughts with regard to women. Walpole, though considered mild in comparison to other writers' critiques and descriptions of Wollstonecraft, also nicknamed her a "philosophizing serpent" and an "archetypal castrating female" (qtd. in Landron 53). She was included as one of the "unsex'd females" of Richard Polwhele's poem. Polwhele and other writers and philosophers at the time were convinced that women must be a positive model of virtuous, sentimental and submissive femininity. He urges the reader to contemplate Wollstonecraft and other women's 'wrongdoings' against nature in his poem: "Survey with me, what ne'er our fathers saw, / A female band despising NATURE's law, / As 'proud defiance' flashes from their arms, / And vengeance smothers all their softer charms" (Polwhele qtd. in Bailinson 18).

Moreover, many nineteenth- and twentieth-century male writers were either opposed to the notion of women's writings, or negatively depicted them. Nathanial Hawthorne shares his misogynistic views on women's writings. He claims that women writers are a "damned mob of scribbling women" and that they "only write anything worth reading if the devil is in them" (qtd. in Bressler 146). This view is evidently shared by other canonical writers of the time. Ralph Waldo Emerson refers to Jane Austen's novels as "vulgar in tone, sterile in artistic invention… without genius, wit or knowledge of the world. Never was life so pinched and narrow (qtd. in Bressled 146). Similarly, Mark Twain expresses the same thing about Jane Austen, which only shows these writers ingrained hatred for Jane Austen's writings in particular, and the very idea of women's writing in general. The American writer Kurt Vonnegut Jr., most renowned for his writings in the science fiction genre, shares a negative portrayal of women. In in his 1970 play *Happy Birthday Wanda June*, Harold Ryan becomes disappointed because his wife, in his absence, gets educated and remarries to a doctor, and states that "educating a beautiful woman is like pouring honey into a fine Swiss watch. Everything stops" (qtd. in Klinkowitz 103).

Although authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft, George Eliot and Virginia Woolf have contributed immensely with their pioneering writings with regard to the feminist endeavor, feminist literary criticism developed mostly with the second wave of feminism. Simone de

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Beauvoir, Kate Millett and Betty Friedan are the most prominent figures of feminist literary criticism in the second wave. Their works investigate the construction of the female 'self' by male authors in literature. They consider "literary texts as models and agents of power" (Guerin et al. 223), in which males exert certain views, and as such, those views become the male vision of the perfect femininity.

The French existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second sex* (1949) has paved the way for the second wave of feminism, because it established the framework for criticizing gender and sexual difference. De Beauvoir has designed a philosophical framework that follows and is committed to the endeavor of Virginia Woolf and other feminists. In her book, she claims that "one is not born, one becomes a woman", suggesting that the distinctions between the sexes are not natural, they are instead socially constructed (Castle 95). Therefore, she asserts that women are labelled as the 'Other' *by* men, and any effort to define women as autonomous beings is overlooked. As such, "humanity is male and man defines woman not in relation to herself but as relative to him" (De Beauvoir 15). This implies that male writings have been preoccupied with presenting the superiority of the man; and therefore, a woman is defined by her proximity to the man in such a male-centric atmosphere.

Furthermore, De Beauvoir's ideas and concepts, along with other second wave French feminists' ideas, are the founding stone for feminist literary studies. In *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir presents her critique of representations. She proclaims that many representations - literary or otherwise- are biased towards a phallocentric perspective, mainly because most representations are the work of men (Bell 2). She raises the problem of how women are constructed differently from men. The answer to such an issue requires investigating representations, thus arriving at the conclusion that women are "constructed differently *by* men" (Guerin et al. 223). This essentially highlights the historical exclusion of the female from writing, a domain traditionally male-centered; therefore, the female is denied the privilege of presenting herself by herself. De Beauvoir inspired many later literary critics such as Kate Millett and Judith Butler.

Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) illustrates the negative representations and the inferiority of women in art in general and in literature in specific. She discusses literary works by esteemed authors in her analyses of the writings of D.H. Lawrence, Norman Mailer, Henry

Miller, and Jean Genet. Millett's book is considered the first book of feminist literary criticism. She considers the writings of Lawrence, for instance, as the final effort of literature to cover "the sexuality of patriarchal society in sentiment and chivalry" (qtd. in Clough 480). Millett points out that underneath sentimentality and romantic love lies his racism, his fondness of 'the superior male', and his sadistic visualization of women. Under Lawrence's romance and tenderness, Millett argues, lies "the heart of Lawrentian sexuality – 'coitus as killing'" (qtd. in Clough 480).

Feminist literary criticism seeks, through the lens of feminist theories, to expose the patriarchal ideologies which are integrated within representations in literary texts and other cultural productions. It relies on the methods of analysis and interpretation in order to scrutinize and deeply inspect the treatment of women either in the fictional realm, or the ways in which the patriarchal ideology has often excluded and overlooked female writers (Bell 1). Feminist criticism focuses on "examin[ing] the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (Tyson 83). Emerging to prominence in the 1960s, feminist criticism, though guided by various aims and methods, focuses on the influence of the patriarchal ideology on writing. According to Annete Kolodny:

> What unites and repeatedly invigorates feminist literary criticism … is neither dogma nor method but an acute and impassioned attentiveness to the ways in which primarily male structures of power are inscribed or (encoded) within our literary inheritance [and] the consequences of that encoding for women – as characters, as reader, and as writers (qtd. in Bressler 144).

Gynocriticism is a term which was coined by the American literary critic and feminist Elaine Showalter that aims to study the history and development of women's writings. The term was first used in her essay *Towards a Feminist Poetics* (1979) to represent a type of feminist literary criticism which is interested in women as writers. This is contrary to the earlier forms of feminist criticism which focused on women as readers- that is the critique of male writers (Plate 1). Gynocriticism, surfacing during the second wave, strives to acknowledge sexual difference and the particularity of the writing of women. Showalter identifies that the issue with the

feminist critique[3] lies in the male-oriented and male-centered hallmark of such criticism. Therefore, the experiences and the feelings of women are often neglected and overlooked. By disregarding women's experiences, the feminist critique is inclined to incorporate women's victimization as an unavoidable topic of discussion. Consequently, Showalter emphasizes that:

> In contrast to [an] angry or loving fixation on male literature, the programme of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the nearly visible world of female culture (217).

Accordingly, Showalter stresses the importance of establishing a female tradition. In order to construct the history of English women's writing, she identifies three stages: the Feminine, Feminist and Female stages (217). Each of these stages has certain distinct identification qualities. The Feminine phase, which starts from 1840 till 1880, is characterized by the effort of women to match the accomplishments of the male culture; and subsequently it followed its speculations about the female nature (217). This phase was marked by the male pseudonym, and one of its eminent examples is the English writer Mary Ann Evans- or as she is well-known as George Eliot.

The Feminist phase, which dates from 1880 to 1920, or the fulfillment of women's rights to vote and the end of first wave feminism. In this phase, women were enabled "to reject accommodating postures of femininity and to use literature to dramatize the ordeals of wronged womanhood" (217). Therefore, this phase was characterized by the writings of women that demonstrated disproval of phallocentrism, and revolted against it. As well as advocating the rights, values and freedom of women, female writers in the second phase, unlike the writers of the Feminine phase, sought to highlight "the harsh and often cruel treatment of female characters at the hand of their more powerful male creations" (Bressler 152).

During the Female phase, continuing since 1920, women refused the two forms of dependency which were manifested in the two earlier phases -those consisting of imitation and

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[3] Showalter identifies that there are two types of feminist criticism. The first of which is concerned with woman as reader- she calls this kind of analysis: the feminist critique.

protest. The focus of the Female phase, however, was instead on an autonomous art that originates from female experience. Therefore, women's earlier attempts to expose misogyny in male texts is substituted by "the rediscovery of women's texts and women" (Guerin et al. 225). This outstretched the feminist analysis of culture to literature's techniques and forms. Writers such as Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson, both of whom represented the 'formal Female Aesthetic', started to think at the level of male and female sentences and language; hence, they sought to "divide their work into 'masculine' journalism and 'feminine' fictions, redefining and sexualizing external and internal experience" (Showalter 218).

1.5. Secular Feminism in the Arab World and Its Political and Cultural Manifestations

Feminism has been regarded as a foreign importation and an alien phenomenon in the Arab culture. Such views are shared mostly among those in opposition of 'women's emancipation'. Proponents of such a stance justify their position by the claim that Arab feminism is derived from Western feminism; therefore, it is regarded as an importation of Western ideals during and after the French and British interventions in the MENA region. However, this claim is countered by Arab feminists and pro-feminists who see that feminism in the Arab world is a tradition on its own. According to Margot Badran:

> The West is not the patrimonial home of feminisms from which all feminisms derive and against which they must be measured. Indeed, Middle Eastern feminism generated a critique of western "imperial feminism/s" as they brought the insights and activist modes of their own secular/national feminisms to the table of (Western-dominated) international feminism during the twentieth century ("*Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s*" 12).

Badran demonstrates that Arab feminism was not a form or a consequence of Westernization, but an indigenous movement which was the offspring of the many changes that occurred in the region. However, other views claim that the cultural conflict between the perishing way of life of the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the 19th century, which was marked by tradition, religious assertion and feudalism could not compete with the temptation and the appeal of "the rising, modern, secular, capitalist European way of life" (Golley 529).

Arab feminism is originally linked to the first signs of the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Golley takes the example of Egypt, because it was "until the mid-20th century the centre of

modern Arabic cultural life" (530). Muhammad Ali, the ruler of Egypt from 1805 to 1848, promoted the modernization of the semi-autonomous state of Egypt in terms of education and other structures pertaining to culture and administration. One of the decisions that inaugurated the reform of the social structure of Egypt was the private ownership of property. As a consequence, new classes emerged in Egypt including the landholders who were involved in banking and commerce, and the 'petit bourgeoisie' which included bazar merchants, artisans, old shopkeepers and *Ulamas*. Some of those newly emerging classes had a resistant stance against the European culture and preferred the Ottoman rule and way of life. However, this was not the case with all the 'petit bourgeoisie, as a great number thought otherwise: that the Ottoman rule was responsible for all the problems of the Egyptian society. Regardless of their different points of view, both divisions of the 'petit bourgeoisie' were nationalistic nevertheless. They were antagonistic towards European colonialism, as opposed to the upper aristocratic class which had direct benefits from it. The overall change in the social structure of Egypt had a direct impact on women, because many women were pushed to the home as a result of losing their jobs. Women from the upper classes enjoyed private education at home because their husbands could afford it, while women from working classes represented the unpaid help for their husbands either in the shops or in labor (531).

The nationalists were divided into two camps: liberal and conservative nationalist camps. Each camp had its own beliefs with respect to the Arab world and women. The liberal camp nationalists, based on the thoughts of many writers like Qasim Amin, were convinced that the adoption of the European principles of "democracy, freedom, and equality of rights under the law" (Kandiyoti 437) were regarded as markers of strength and not otherwise. They maintained that such rights can be obtained within an Islamic framework. The second camp claimed that "the only way to resist foreign intrusion was to preserve traditions" (437); therefore, they believed that the very notion of 'women's liberation' was a foreign idea whose aim was to strike the very foundation of the Arab society: the family.

The predicament facing advocates of women's rights in the Arab world at the time of colonialism was that such calls for the equal rights of women were considered a betrayal of the cultural values of the Islamic tradition. This stance was adopted by the conservative camp which contributed in the obstruction of any changes in the position of women. Laura Nader criticizes

the discourse of the conservatives as lacking trajectory in that 'Occidentalism' is used as an instrument for social control over women. She emphasizes that: "Instead of blaming the West for exporting its ills, [they] are searching for the agencies that import them. This adds up to a kind of 'siege mentality' in which stripping Arab women of their rights has become well justified and condoned as a protective act" (qtd. in Kandiyoti 437).

In nineteenth century Egypt, there was a great legal conflict over inheritances which was created by the private property law. This was one of the main reasons that triggered the feminist revolts. The first women to show verbal mutiny in the wake of this new economic and social situation were naturally upper class, educated women (Golley 531). This is because, paradoxically, the privileged women were enduring greater restrictions while the less privileged women enjoyed an active economic role (Hoodfar 11).

Religious reformers of the nineteenth century were moderate concerning women's issues. Male and female reformers advocated the right to education for women which was one of the main issues raised by them. Ahmed Fares el-Shidyak, Rifaa Rafi el-Tahtawi and Sheikh Muhammad Abduh, to name a few, were among the male reformers who focused mainly on the right to education for women. Their beliefs were established on the basic teachings of Islam which "were considered to have become distorted and misunderstood" (Golley 531). However, it is argued that these reformers "only advocated women's rights as part and parcel of the general reform project" (531). The reformers attempted to show that early Islam was a perfect model which adopted the fairest treatment of women. Despite the reformers' general propensity towards social reform with Islam as a frame of reference, reconciliation with the past was an addition that granted the feminist project a more authentic origin.

Liberals, on the other hand, were more radical in that they transgressed the notion of the education of women to the right to work and other legal reforms. Such is the case with Qasim Amin, who relied less on religion to back his arguments, and more on the dogma of natural rights and the idea of progress. In addition, some liberals went even further to advocate unveiling (531). Consequently, liberal thoughts agitated orthodox Muslims.

Arab feminism was shaped by multiple discourses. The Islamic reform movement sought a revival of *ijtihad* in order to bridge the gap for people to become both 'modern and Muslim'. The Arab *Nahda* movement triggered a "broad movement of Arab intellectual and cultural

revival" (Badran "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s" 7). It was initiated by Christians and Muslims from Syria, as they escaped the Ottoman control to Egypt. Secular nationalism envisioned the unity of all citizens through a new type of collective identity grounded in the "people's historical roots in shared territory and a common … cultural experience" (Badran 7). Within this conceived secular nation, "religion was taken for granted and citizens' plural religious identities accorded recognition and space" (7).

Middle and upper-class women started to generate a 'feminist discourse' from this context. Badran states that: "Women anchored their feminist discourse firmly within the discourse of religious reform, most notably Islamic modernist discourse, and at the same time within the new nationalist discourse, pairing their own liberation and advance with that of the nation" (Badran 7-8). Therefore, Arab feminism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is referred to as 'Arab secular feminism', encompassing different religious identities and focusing on a united nation under the principles of human rights.

Early Arab feminist efforts of resisting patriarchy were initially manifested in literary production in its two forms: poetry and prose. Women writers established literary salons, clubs and journals which exhibited a cultivated awareness of the subordination of women as well as their exclusion from public life within their social and economic backgrounds. Golley explains that

> [women writers] not only discussed literary issues and competed with male literary figures at the time. They also expressed their unhappiness with the situation of most women and started fighting, though politely and unmilitantly at the beginning, for basic rights for women such as access to education and amendments to the marriage and divorce laws to secure women's livelihoods (532).

Furthermore, among the issues that those women raised were veiling and segregation. After examining Islamic texts, they found that such practices do not relate to Islam. Hence, their discussion was an addition "to the general debate on reform" (532).

In the early twentieth century, Arab feminism, being tied to the nationalist movements, was politically militant. The major role that women of all classes played in Egypt and other Arab countries was manifested in strikes, demonstrations and assassinations (532). In 1919 Cairo,

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women were politically active in that they organized demonstrations and showed their resistance by boycotting British goods. *The London Times* reported the events on the streets of Cairo by stating that:

> …(the women) descended in large bodies into the street, those of more respectable classes still in veil and shrouded in the loose black coat, whilst the courtesans from the lower quarters of the city who also caught the contagion (of political unrest) disported themselves unveiled and arranged themselves in less discreet garments. In every turbulent demonstration were well to the front shouting for "independence" and "down with the English" and waving national banners (qtd. in Hoodfar 12).

Although the Egyptian nationalists succeeded in winning a new constitution, women were left with little. On this basis, women activists started to form women's groups such as the Egyptian Feminist Union, which was established by Huda Sharawi in 1923. Although such groups advocated women's rights, they focused mainly on anti-colonial activity. In 1924, Huda Sharawi and two other women activists, arriving back from an international feminist meeting in Rome, took the decision to de-veil in an "act [which] rejected not just the actual veil but also an ideology which incorporated seclusion" (Hoodfar 12). Women displayed their utter respect for Islam and the Islamic teachings. They were nevertheless in antagonism with the traditions which, they argued, presented patriarchal fabrications designed to keep women backward. In 1942, the Women's Political Party was established. It was very much similar to other secular, nationalist Egyptian parties with the exception that it focused its attention on gaining constitutional rights for women, therefore, ani-colonialism became a secondary priority in their agenda.

With the second half of the twentieth century, the political power of women could not be overlooked by any other party or regime. Consequently, in 1956, the year Egypt gained independence, women won several rights including their full political rights, maternity leave, free and compulsory education for males and females alike, and the right to vote or stand for office (Hoodfar 12). However, although Egyptian women were the first to call for the abolition of oppressive laws and the amendment of the laws of marriage and divorce, they were ironically outperformed by other women from Arab countries such as Iraq, Tunisia and Syria. All of the latter states "have been more successful than Egypt in introducing measures to render polygamy and unilateral divorce more difficult" (Golley 533).

1.6. Paradigm Shift: A Feminist Discourse within an Islamic Framework

The late twentieth century Arab Muslim region was marked by the rise of political Islam and Islamism. As a result, the feminist discourse marked a shift from secular to Islamic feminism. The very concept of 'Islamic feminism' can be regarded as contradictory to many, while others see it as a hopeful sign: a movement that intends to restore harmony between religious beliefs and egalitarianism. Considered as a new phenomenon, Islamic feminism has its roots in the 1970s and the 1980s, parallel to the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the rise of Islamic revivalism. With the rise of political Islam in Iran and other regions in the MENA, many discussions on women's place in Islam and society were raised by women and scholars either in their local societies or in the West. One of the first topics to be discussed was the conservative change in women's dress. Such a discussion was fueled by alleged claims that Islam oppresses the female, and that the veil represents a symbol of Islam's oppression of women. The Islamic feminist scholars insisted on the notion that Islam, as opposed to what is propagated about it, does not oppress women. In fact, they asserted that the very Islamic teachings uphold the principles of human rights and egalitarianism. Consequently, Islamic feminists undertook the endeavor to reinterpret the holy texts by employing rationale and historical context. In addition to utilizing hermeneutics, those women found an entry point to the political sphere through Islamic activism. However, political and socio-cultural restrictions prevented women in the Middle East from participating in Islamic movements. Therefore, it was inevitable for Islamic feminism -at its inception- to work under the umbrella of organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood. Hence, women formed Islamic female-activist branches within the framework of those organizations (Eyadat 359-360).

According to Margot Badran, Islamic feminism is a feminist discourse and practice established within an Islamic paradigm. Deriving its understanding and legitimacy from the Quran, Islamic feminism advocates the rights and social justice for women and men in the totality of their existence ("*Feminism in Islam*" 242). Relying on old and new methodologies in its modern readings of religious texts, Islamic feminism focuses on the "interpretation of Islam and gender [that is] grounded in *ijtihad*, or independent intellectual investigation of the Qur'an and other religious texts" (Badran 3). In this light, Islamic feminists rely on religious texts to

advocate equality and women rights. The ultimate goal is to emancipate Muslim women from the cultural patriarchal practices that have long muddled religion and religious thought and practice.

The very idea of detaching Islam from the practice and thought of Islam is not exclusive to Islamic feminism. In fact, many progressivist thinkers throughout history have brought their insights regarding the wrong practices muddling the message of Islam. The history of progressive thought in Islam can be traced back to Ibn Rushud (Averroes; d. 1198) (Abdullah 25) and the *Mu'atazili*'s 'rationalist' interpretations of Islam. Ibn Rushud's thought can be considered as proto-Islamic progressivism. He argues that "women, in so far as they are of one kind with men, necessarily share in the end of man" (qtd. in Fakhry 110). In his thought, women can engage in warfare, they can also be rulers and philosophers. After Ibn Rushud, there was a decline in progressivism in Islam. However, with the second half of the nineteenth century, the influence of the West was immense and it paved the way for the emergence of many voices calling for rationalist interpretations of Islam. This was mostly because Muslims sought to position themselves in the 'advanced' world. Consequently, recognition of women's rights was a matter of great importance for many Muslim thinkers such as Muslim modernist Muhammad Abduh, and liberal thinkers Qasim Amin, Nasr Abu-Zayd and al-Tahir al-Haddad. Abduh, for instance, thought to outlaw polygamy for the injustice it causes. Scholars of the modernist thought in the second half of the twentieth century continued this endeavor. Such voices were moderate and reformist and some are still influential today. The most prominent of those voices are Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Muhammad al-Ghazali (Bahlul 37-38).

Although al-Qaradawi, al-Ghazali and Abduh had moderate views with regards to women's leadership, the objection to concealing faces and hands underneath veils and gloves and the rejection of polygamy for its injustice, their thought is still based on the thesis of gender complementarity. For instance, Abduh did not condemn 'wife-chastisement' and he argued that "it is sometimes legitimate [for husbands] to beat [physically discipline] women [their wives] is not so contrary to reason or common sense as to need argument" (qtd. in Bahlul 39). Al-Ghazali did not have a different opinion about the matter, because he thought that wife chastisement should be more symbolic than physical. Indeed, he agreed with the jurists that chastisement should be done through striking women with *siwak* (a teeth-cleaning twig). Liberals and progressivists believe that those scholars' views could not fall far from the tree of the traditional

ideas, but instead they expanded on them with moderate views to suit modern-day standards. What was required, therefore, is a radical shift towards reform- one which brings about a rationalist, more liberal, forward-looking view of Islam that acknowledges the rights of women. Such reform should challenge both traditional conservatism and Western conceptualizations, hence the emergence of Islamic feminism.

Historically, Islam and feminism have a history together back in the 1890s. Feminism started to become noticeable in Egypt in what would later be referred to as the 'feminist consciousness'. It was a consequence of the encounters with modernity, in addition to the British colonial occupation of Egypt. Subsequently, feminism found its way to North Africa and most of the Arab-speaking world later on (Afsaruddin 297). Muslim modernist men and women called for the reform of the religious discourse. As such, rising demands sought to reduce, even eliminate the repressive practices consciously or unconsciously conducted in the name of religion. It was a starting point which shone the light of change in the lives of women and their relationships with men.

Many movements were organized by women in the first half of the twentieth century. Egypt took the initiative between the 1920s and mid-1950s. Soon the women's public movements expanded to Lebanon, Syria and Iraq in the 1930s and 1940s, followed by Sudan in the 1950s. Those states initially attempted to repress the women's independent, public voices. However, they were not entirely eradicated. From the 1970s onward, the feminist expression was revived in countries like Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. There was a change in the feminist discourse which became more religiously oriented. Hence, 'Islamic feminism' started to become a familiar term in the last quarter of the 20th century (Afsaruddin 298). It is important to mention that the Islamic feminist discourse first appeared in Iran. At such time, several women emphasized in several periodicals and journals that the clerics' sexist interpretations of the religious texts were included in the state Islamic law of what would become the Islamic state of Iran (Abdallah 1).

After the rise of right-wing Islamist currents in the wake of the successful Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, women's status was affected in many areas of the social life. According to Graves,

Ayatollah Khomeini announced that Iranian women were no longer simply female citizens, but 'Muslim housewives', whose purpose in life was to give Iran many sons who would be true Muslims and citizens. The idea of Muslim women being Muslim housewives was used to justify the many laws regarding the seclusion and veiling of women (79-80).

Although Khomeini made an effort to export the revolution to all the Muslim world, his attempts became a failure after the Iraq-Iran war. Therefore, the dream of an Islamic identity eventually became an Iranian nationalist identity (Malekan 198).

On the other hand, the endeavor of Islamic revivalism to include and support Islamic feminism in order to influence change in women's lives legitimized their access to the public political and social sphere. This was mostly evident among Palestinian and Egyptian women besides other women in the Middle East and the Islamic world. Such time was marked by the emergence of Islamic feminist consciousness which, following Islamic modernist and progressivist thought, sought to detach Islamic thought and practice from accepted behaviors, beliefs and customs. Such religiously-based practices were considered repressive and have little to do with Islam (Afsaruddin 298).

The Iranian anthropologist and prominent activist Ziba Mir-Hosseini explains that there are two major turning points that helped shape the discourse of Islamic feminism: the success of the Islamic revolution in Iran and the politics of post 9/11 events. The first turning point is the Iranian revolution and the establishment of the Islamic republic. She maintains that before the revolution, it was rare to see a woman wearing a *hijab* in public spaces like offices and universities in most Muslim-majority countries. However, all of this changed with the return of Islam as a political and spiritual force, which reached its zenith with the Iranian Revolution. The success of the revolution challenged earlier predictions about the gradual religious withdrawal from the political space, which would leave the arena empty for political modernization that would eventually dispose of religious manifestations and symbols in the public space. However, to the surprise of the entire world, the Iranian revolution was successful and "one of [the Islamic Revolution's] enduring and puzzling images was that of women in black hijab leading political demonstrations" (Mir-Hosseini "*The Challenges of Islamic Feminism*" 110).

Meanwhile in the intellectual field, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, first published in 1978, stripped the dominant Western narrative and representation of Islam. Said argues that "the construction of identity in every age and every society involves establishing opposites and 'others'" (qtd. in Mir-Hosseini 110). As such, the West constructed an image of the Islamic culture as static in both time and space, and as lacking the ability to define itself. This planted a sense of Europe's cultural and intellectual superiority. It was eventually used as a justification of Europe's colonial rule. The West later became preoccupied with the meaning and symbolism of *hijab*. It was imperative for political Islam to exhibit that wearing *hijab* does not overlook women's choice. In some countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Sudan, Islamists in power passed laws to make *hijab* mandatory nevertheless. However, in other Muslim countries, a great number of women willingly made *hijab* their clothes of choice. Western feminists found those women's decision rather impossible to understand. For them, 'veiling' was always synonymous with Islam's subjugation of women. Thus, such a decision was interpreted as a rejection of the 'Western' and 'modern' way of life and values. While this was true for some, others saw in their decision the ability to define their identity their own way. "In that polarized debate", concludes Mir-Hosseini, "to be a feminist meant to oppose *hijab* and all it stood for, including 'Islam'" (111). Subsequently, women were placed at a forked path where they had to choose between their Muslim identity, and their advocacy for women's rights. Meanwhile, colonial discourses sketched 'Islam' as incompatible with the main elements of modernity, including 'women's emancipation'. Besides, in the early twentieth century, feminism was regarded by many anti-colonialist and nationalists as part of the colonial project. Such ideas resonated throughout the entire twentieth century.

As the twentieth century was nearing its end, the difficult position which women had been placed at was starting to gradually dissolve. Mir-Hosseini explains that the year 1979 was not solely associated to the Iranian Revolution. In fact, it was also the year when gender equality gained a new international legal mandate: the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Mir-Hosseini, "*Beyond 'Islam' vs 'Feminism'*" 69). CEDAW describes "discrimination against women" in its first article

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as any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field (Hevener 218).

Therefore, member states of the UN committed themselves to the political rights of women that must be surveyed in all levels of the government, in addition to their right to participate in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) amongst other rights which were clearly demonstrated in the CEDAW declaration. CEDAW recognizes the historical and systematic discrimination and oppression that exist in stereotypes, that are inherent and deep-rooted in cultures and that are also supported by political and religious convictions which would consequently hinder and impede any progress towards gender equality (Cook 188). Therefore, member states were necessitated to adhere to certain obligations such as to incorporate the principle of equality in their national constitutions, and to adopt appropriate legislative prohibiting all discrimination against women amongst other obligations that were clearly defined (Hevener 218). CEDAW was ratified in most states including all Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (El-Masri 933).

However, Islamist political movements, whether in power or in opposition, began to resort to '*Shari'a*' in order to demolish earlier attempts at reforming or secularizing laws and legal systems. Yet, by the early 1990s, the quarrel between those bitterly opposed 'isms', Islamism and feminism, found a common ground in the emergence of a new gender discourse which was later named 'Islamic Feminism'. Mir-Hosseini is considered to be one of the first to use the term. She affirms:

> I was one of the first to use this term for the new gender consciousness and discourse that emerged in Iran a decade after the 1979 revolution had brought Islamist into power. I called this discourse 'Islamic feminism' because it was feminist in its demands and yet took its legitimacy from Islam. Women who voiced this discourse in Iran were those who in the early 1980s were 'Islamist'; some had played a crucial role then in silencing secular women's voices, but by the late 1980s, many of them had become disillusioned with the Islamic Republic's official discourse on women. They found an ally in

feminism, and they were intent on resisting patriarchal interpretations of Islam's sacred texts (Mir-Hosseini "*The Challenges of Islamic Feminism*" 112).

1.7.Shaping the Discourse of Islamic Feminism

Islamic feminism is established on the argument that central to Islam's primary text (the *Quran*) is the equality of all human beings. Nevertheless, there are various forms of injustice within Muslim societies whose people claim to follow Islam as a system of justice and a way of life. The inequalities that can be seen between men and women in their societies are based on the social practices, subversions and diversions under the influence of patriarchal ideas (ideology) (Badran "*Feminism in Islam*" 247). Islamic feminists argue that in the Quran, there are various verses (*ayat*) that insist on the equality between the male and the female. Allah says: "Oh humankind. We have created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into tribes and nations that you may know each other. The most honored of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you" (*The Quran* 49:13). This verse is used to argue that men and women are equal in the sight of God and the only difference between them is the practice of '*taqwa*' or piety.

Islamic societies base their justice systems on *sharia* law, which is an immutable divine law. On the other hand, Islamic jurisprudence or *fiqh* constitutes the human understanding of the *sharia*. *Fiqh* is deduced from religious texts through independent investigation and interpretation (*ijtihad*). There are many verses in the *Quran* which emphasize that a law for humankind is laid down. Allah orders the Prophet Muhammad: ". . . judge between them by what Allah has revealed and do not follow their inclinations away from what has come to you of the truth. To each We prescribed a law and a method . . ." (*The Quran* 5:84). *Fiqh* encompasses the opinions and independent interpretations of qualified-enough scholars to interpret and derive laws from religious sources such as the *Quran* and the *hadiths* of the Prophet (Vogel 4). However, following its classical form in the ninth century, Islamic *fiqh* was itself under the influence of the patriarchal thinking of the day. As a result, many contemporary re-interpretations of the *sharia* emerged as a response (Badran 247).

The *Quran* is not the only reference source for the Islamic doctrine; there are also the *hadiths*. The *hadiths* comprise the saying and the descriptions of the actions of the Prophet Muhammad, and "… it is primarily over the Hadiths and their contents that Islam's sects and

schools of thought have diverged" (Brown 8). The *hadiths* are considered less reliable than the *Quran*, because scholars have been disputing about the validity of many sayings of the Prophet. Islamic feminists consider that the *hadiths* have also been predominantly used to support patriarchal ideas. They argue that many *hadiths* are either of debatable origin, or used out of the intended context. As such, they would result in negative outcomes for women. Consequently, many Islamic feminists turned to Islam's central text, the *Quran*, because it was well-preserved. Islamic feminist scholars seek to study the Islamic sacred texts and literature in order to combat the patriarchal ideology. Therefore, scholars like Amina Wadud, Riffat Hassan and the Saudi Arabian Fatima Nasef focus on the interpretation of the *Quran* from a feminist egalitarian perspective. Other scholars like Aziza al-Hibri and Shaheen Sardar Ali seek to examine formulations of the *sharia* backed laws. While other scholars like the Moroccan Fatima Mernissi and the Turkish Hidayet Tuksal explore and investigate the *hadith* (Badran 247).

The basic methodologies used by Islamic feminists are modeled after the classical methodologies of *ijtihad* and *tafsir*. In order to read the *Quran* from a gender-egalitarian perspective, female scholars equipped themselves with other disciplines including linguistics, history, literary criticism, sociology, anthropology and other scientific tools. This is to bring forth their experiences and questions as women to their readings. Those scholars rely on hermeneutics in their study of the *Quran*. They adopt three approaches in their feminist hermeneutics:

1. revising verses of the Qur'an to correct false stories in common circulation, such as the accounts of creation and events in the Garden of Eden that have shored claims of male superiority;
2. citing verses that unequivocally enunciate the equality of women and men;
3. deconstructing verses attentive to male and female difference that have been commonly interpreted in ways that justify male domination (Badran "*Feminism in Islam*" 248).

The Islamic feminist school of thought is a broad project encompassing the contributions of various scholars and researchers with an egalitarian view on Islam. Muhammad Abdullah points out in his 2019 PhD thesis -entitled *Postfeminist and Islamic Feminist Discourse: An Analysis of Discursive Practices of Muslim Feminists*- that amongst those scholars are

theologians, historians, sociologists and gender polymaths who form the skeleton of Islamic feminism as a multidisciplinary critical project (Abdullah 31). Amongst the most prominent scholars are Amina Wadud, Riffat Hassan, Asma Barlas, Fatima Mernissi, Hidayet Tuksal, Azizah al-Hibri, Shaheen Sardar Ali, Leila Ahmad, Margot Badran, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Omaima Abou Bakr, Meriam Cooke and Lila Abu-Lughod. The works of those scholars focus on the study of the *Quran*, the *hadiths*, Islamic jurisprudence, and other fields of interest including the history of feminism in the Islamic world and the production of an Islamic feminist discourse through literature. The main Islamic feminist scholarly productions and their contributors' methodologies will be the focus of this section.

1.7.1. Gender-Egalitarian Interpretations of the Quran

Islamic feminist scholars Amina Wadud, Riffat Hassan and Asma Barlas are interested in the *tafsir* of the *Quran* from a feminist perspective. Amina Wadud's scope of interest, following other progressive Islamic figures, is primarily on the *Quran* for being the ultimate authority and the 'original source'. Other Islamic sources such as *hadiths*, previous interpretations of the *Quran* and *fiqh* are paid little attention by Wadud because she believes that they have been steered to a "disconnection from the original text and its intent" ("*Qur'an and Woman*" xx). Additionally, Wadud believes that unlike other Islamic sources, the *Quran* is infallible, kept through the ages from distortions. On the other hand, *Sunnah* has undergone various alterations, errors and contradictions that can be seen in the sayings of the Prophet. For Wadud, the *Quran* is more important than *Sunnah*. She also makes the distinction between the *Quran* (text) which is 'the source' and the interpretations of the text (*tafsir*) that are conducted by people. Hence, "the Qur'an is the source; people are the resource" ("*Inside the Gender Jihad*" 208).

By applying postmodernist methods on her readings of the *Quran* in her 1992 work - *Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from Woman's Perspective*, she aims to present a *Quranic* reading from a woman's viewpoint which stresses gender equality/equity. She claims that her research on the *Quran*, unrestricted by the centuries-old "androcentric readings and Arabo-Islamic cultural predilections" has made her more assertive of the fact that "in Islam a female person was intended to primordially, cosmologically, eschatologically, spiritually, and morally a full human being, equal to all who accepted Allah as Lord, Muhammad as Prophet, and Islam as *din*" (qtd. in Abdullah 32). The androcentric readings of the *Quran* served to

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marginalize women in both the social and intellectual fields. However, Wadud attempts to break this bias because she believes that *tafsir* or exegeses should not be exclusive of females. For her, the "[a]cceptance of the pluralities of meanings", she insists, "is an implied prerequisite . . . of Qur'anic universal guidance" ("*Qur'an, Gender and Interpretive Possibilities*" 327).

Furthermore, Wadud suggests the tool of *tafsir al-Qur'an bil-Qur'an* or the interpretation of the *Quran* by the *Quran* itself. She argues against the traditional atomistic *Quranic* exegesis which partitions verses, and approaches the *Quran* without focusing on recurrent themes. She asks the question "[i]f the whole of the Qur'an permeates its parts, how does that work in precise textual terms against contextual applications?" ("*Qur'an, Gender and Interpretive Possibilities*" 327). Wadud's interpretation is established on a hermeneutical model for analyzing each verse while taking into consideration: its context; similar topics and discussions in the *Quran*; with regard to similar language structures used in the *Quran*; in light of the prevailing principles in the *Quran*; and within the context of the *Quranic* worldview ("*Qur'an and Woman*" 5). This hermeneutical model is used to analyze all verses which include references to women, either alone or with the mention of men. Wadud's methods are influenced by the work of Fazlur Rahman, who proposes that all the passages in the *Quran* are revealed in a particular time in history and within general and specific circumstances (4).

Moreover, Wadud argues that the language of the *Quran* (Arabic) is highly gendered. However, to truly understand the message of the *Quran*, a method should be created in order to detach from the literal meanings of the words which contributed in endorsing social injustice and gender inequality. The message of the *Quran* is universal, and the language should be understood in a neutral manner. In order to follow the universality of the *Quran*, Wadud offers two approaches in this framework. The first of which, she suggests that there should be a context which puts "particular historical or cultural practices during the time of the Qur'anic revelation as reflections of the underlying principles and the diverse reflections of those principles in other historical and cultural contexts" ("*Qur'an and Woman*" xiii). The second element is that there should be a process of "keeping words in context and referring to the larger textual development of the term" (xiii). Furthermore, Wadud suggests the hermeneutics of *tawhid*, and argues that patriarchy is a form of trespassing the unity of God or *shirk*. She points out that to perceive men as superior to women is against the status of Allah as superior to all and an interference with the

unity of God ("*Engaging Tawhid in Islam and Feminisms*" 437). She claims that including the experience of women in *Quranic* hermeneutics serves to achieve greater gender justice in Islam.

Similar to Wadud, Riffat Hassan also focuses on the study of the *Quran*. Hassan seeks to point out the conflict between Islam's normative teachings and the practices in Muslim societies regarding the rights of women. She highlights that of all the Islamic tradition -which encompasses the *Quran*, *Sunnah*, *hadiths*, *fiqh* and *sharia*- the *Quran* has 'the absolute authority' (Hassan "*Women's Rights in Islam*" 46). She argues that most of the *hadiths* are not authentic. This being so, most of them are not the words of the Prophet, but instead "a representation of the Arab-Islamic culture of seventh- and eighth-century Muslims" (46). They incorporate ideas about women that have been used across the Islamic history in order to subvert the *Quran*'s intention of liberating women from the inferior status assigned to them. In addition to that, she believes that the Islamic tradition and Islamic sources have been interpreted only by men. She claims that Muslim societies have tirelessly asserted that women are given more rights in Islam than any other religion, while preventing them from actualizing "their human potential" (46-47). Furthermore, she emphasizes that women partake in the rights that God has given to all humankind since their existence. These rights include: the right to life, respect, justice, freedom, privacy, sustenance, work, the right to acquire knowledge and the protection from slander, backbiting, and ridicule, amongst other rights (47, 48, 49, 50). She seeks to draw attention to the discrepancies between the *Quranic* ideals and the Muslim practices regarding women. She emphasizes that when viewed from a non-patriarchal lens, the *Quran* actually "goes beyond egalitarianism. It exhibits particular solicitude toward women, as it also does toward other classes of disadvantaged persons" (57).

Women are charged for the fall of man from *al-jannah* (paradise) in Muslim, Jewish and Christian traditions. The original sin has been used by the patriarchal ideology to demonize women. However, Hassan believes that in Islam, such beliefs are not based on the *Quranic* text. Instead, they are based on alien thoughts in the creation story of the *Genesis* (Hassan "*Woman and Man's 'Fall'*" 101). She compares the creation story in the *Quran* and in *Genesis*, and remarks that no explanation is given on the reason behind the serpent's temptation of Eve alone. Whereas in the *Quran*, the reason that *al-Shaytan* (*Iblis*) tempts Adam and Eve is mentioned in different passages. It is because God announces Adam's superiority (in terms of knowledge) over

the angels. *Iblis* disobeys God's command of the angels and refuses to prostrate to the *khalifah* of Allah. *Iblis* challenges to "prove to God that Adam and Adam's progeny are unworthy of the honour and favour bestowed on them by God" (108). Therefore, Hassan argues that unlike the Christian tradition, in Islam and in the *Quran* "the human pair's departure from *al-janna* is not regarded negatively as it has generally been in the Christian tradition, and that no sin or stigma is attached to Adam's *zawj* [Eve] in the context of this story" (113). As such, women are not responsible for the fall of man from paradise and do not deserve the misogynistic attitudes directed towards them.

On a different context, Asma Barlas argues that "we cannot reinterpret Islam without reading the Qur'an, and many Muslims do in fact recognize the urgency of such an exercise given its abuses at the hands of many Muslim clerics and states to oppress women" (Barlas "*Believing Women in Islam*" 210). Barlas asks two fundamental questions in her book *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (2002). The first of which is whether the oppression of women and sexual inequality are condoned by the scriptures of Islam. The second question is whether the liberation of women is possible and encouraged in Islam. She approaches the first question by critiquing the patriarchal interpretations of the *Quran*. She argues that viewing God as a male figure, which emphasizes male authority over women, is an interference with God's sovereignty and unity (*Tawhid*). Besides, God forbids injustice to himself and to everyone, and as such the injustice attributed to God in the *Quran* contradicts this fundamental rule. Barlas's methodology is established on the *Quranic* verse: "Those who break the Qur'an into part. Them, by the Lord, We shall question, everyone, of what they used to do" (*The Quran* 15: 91-93). She insists, in her interpretation of this verse, on the necessity of looking at the *Quran* as a whole in terms of textual unity. In order to achieve the purpose of deducting the best meanings from the *Quran*, Barlas uses four translations of the *Quran*. Two translations are by Arabs and the other two are by non-Arabs/non-Muslims. Such an approach clearly shows Barlas's tendency to address audiences regardless of their origins and religions. Throughout her analysis, she points out that particular translations of some words can lead to an alteration of the entire meaning. This serves to back her thesis that cultures and customs have an essential impact in the interpretation of the *Quranic* message. She demonstrates that the word '*darajah*' in the *Quran* pertaining to divorce, for example, decides whether the husband has a 'degree' or 'kindness' over women (195-196).

Barlas examines the primary and secondary sources which are referred to by Muslims. She analyses the methodologies which transformed those texts in terms of the influence of the cultures of their time of occurrence. She sees the *Quran* as 'the Truth', which is "inimitable, inviolate, inerrant, incontrovertible" (33). However, "[i]t is the interpretive process, both imprecise and incomplete, that is open to critique and historization, not revelation itself" (34). Further, she insists that *hadiths*, specifically those promoting misogyny, were included into the Official Corpus only after the death of the Prophet. She quotes Von Gurnebaum's saying: "The very pluralism of tradition worked against women's interests as ideas and customs of the earlier civilization penetrated more deeply into *Shari'ah* by being formulated as hadith" (qtd. in Barlas 45). Hence, she argues that the *Quran* recognizes that men and women are "two complete differences" but not two 'binary oppositions' in which women are identified as the Other, while men are the Subject (129-130). She refers to the Creation story by emphasizing that: "The theme that women and men commenced from a single self and constitute a pair is integral to Qur'anic epistemology" (134).

1.7.2. Investigating the Hadiths' Validity and Misuse

While Wadud, Hassan and Barlas focus on the *Quran*, Fatima Mernissi and Hidayet Tuksal focus primarily on the *hadiths*. As a scholar of *hadith*, Mernissi's work investigates the *hadiths* falsely ascribed to the Prophet of Islam. Such *hadiths* serve to promote and perpetuate patriarchal and misogynistic thought. In *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Muslim Society*, Mernissi asserts that: "[p]aradoxically, and contrary to what is commonly assumed, Islam does not advance the thesis of women's inherent inferiority. Quite the contrary, it affirms the potential equality between the sexes" ("*Beyond the Veil*" 4). She contributes to the Islamic feminist thought with many writings including her 1991 book *The Veil and the Male Elite*. In this book, she takes a very critical positioning towards many narrated *hadiths* in which she scrutinizes the validity of such sayings with reference to the Islamic ideals.

Following traditional methodologies in her study of *hadiths*, Mernissi's work focuses on the *isnad* -narrator (s)- of the *hadiths*. She seeks to investigate those *hadiths* that promote misogyny by examining the narrator's psychological and political status (Abdullah 43). In this context, she emphasizes the historical element of the *hadiths* rather than the analyzing the contents and ways of narration. Such an approach has been criticized by Raja Rhouni as being a

foundationalist approach to knowledge production (Rhouni xiii). Additionally, there is a fallible feature in this approach, as misogynist *hadiths* are not predominantly narrated by unreliable narrators. Therefore, following such an approach will not be the best way to achieve egalitarianism in Islam. Mernissi also refers to and studies *Asbabul Nuzul*, or the contexts in which the revelations of the *Quran* took place with their surrounding events and incidents (Abdullah 44).

Furthermore, Mernissi argues that the birth of the *hadith* science coincided with the death of the last of the four Caliphs and the appointment of Mu'waiya caliph. At such time, there were huge divisions between Sunni and Shiites, and as such, the *hadiths* were used to protect the interests of those groups. This provides the contexts "in which the Hadith, true and false were elaborated" (Mernissi qtd. in Vasiliki 34). Mernissi acknowledges Al-Bukhari's endeavor for authenticity in studying the *hadiths*, a process which enabled him to uncover 596, 725 false *hadiths*. She learns from Al-Bukhari's methodological work the "flight of time and failing memory" (34). *Hadiths* have gone through many fabrications and distortions that were either for material or ideological purposes, or for no reason at all (Vasiliki 34). Additionally, Mernissi even investigates the 'uncontestable' *Sahih* of Al-Bukhari, which includes misogynistic *hadiths*. In studying the *hadith*: "Those who entrust their affairs to a woman shall never know prosperity", Mernissi investigates the narrator of the *hadith*, Abu-Bakra. Mernissi feels bewildered by Abu-Bakra's "fabulous memory because he recalled [the *hadith*] a quarter of a century after the death of the Prophet" (qtd. in Vasiliki 34). She then investigates his social and economic life, and finds that Abu-Bakra was once accused for distorted testimony in a case of fornication (34).

On the other hand, Hidayet Tuksal also focuses on the study of misogynistic *hadiths* in her article *Misogynistic Reports in the Hadith Literature*. She classifies misogynistic *hadiths* into five categories. The first of which are the *hadiths* that report that Eve, and essentially all women, originate from Adam's rib. The second category includes the *hadiths* that report that women form the majority of Hell's inhabitants. Third is the *hadiths* that emphasize female deficiency in terms of religion and intellect, and that women can delude men. The fourth group encompasses *hadiths* that promote the idea of the inauspicious nature of women, while the fifth category includes *hadiths* about how dogs, donkeys and women invalidate the ritual prayers of men if they pass in front of them (Tuksal 135). As *hadiths* are considered a religious source, especially those

that appear in the reliable texts such as Al-Bukhari and Muslim, such misogynistic *hadiths* are commonly quoted and referred to by the patriarchal ideology. According to Asma Barlas, "it is ironic that even though there are only about six misogynistic Ahadith accepted as Sahih (reliable) out of a collection of 70,000, it is these six that men trot out when they want to argue against sexual equality" (qtd. in Abou El Fadl 14).

Tuksal argues that the transformation of the Islamic egalitarian mentality began to deteriorate at an early period. The circulation and proliferation of misogynistic *hadiths* started when "'A'isha [the Prophet's wife] was still alive" (Tuksal 135). With the political upheaval that followed, the one-sided and made-up accounts gained momentum with the formation of different political camps to become disseminated as prophetic words (135). Included within those accounts were reports that position women at a lower status. Tuksal argues that misogynistic *hadiths* are considered marginal when the *Quranic* emphasis on "human dignity and freedom" is considered (154). However, she states that it is unfortunate that "we see how cultural reflections of misogyny are easily attributed to Allah by way of exegesis of the verses, and to the Prophet" (154). Additionally, she points out to the difficulty of discussing accepted beliefs and addressing people with information that will shake the very grounds on which they stand. However, she believes that "despite all these difficulties, those who are in search of truth will get the reward of their search, sooner or later" (154).

1.7.3. Refuting Injustice Based on Shariah-Backed Laws

Prominent Islamic feminists Azizah al-Hibri and Shaheen Sardar Ali reject traditional Islamic jurisprudence for the injustice it inflicts on women. In her book *The Islamic Worldview, Islamic Jurisprudence: An American Muslim Perspective*, Al-Hibri argues that "if God did not mean for women to have their status improved . . . [He] would have stated out flatly in the Qur'an that women are inferior to men and must submit to them" (Al-Hibri qtd. in Hafez 446). Al-Hibri's work focuses on Islamic jurisprudence in the American diaspora in which Muslims take their guidance from 'misguided' *imams* and preachers. However, her study of *fiqh* has universal applications. She seeks to separate the ancient jurists' views from the cultural and patriarchal claims (Al-Hibri 15). She explains that the fundamental source of Islamic law is the *shariah*, which is deduced from the *Quran* and the *hadith*. Al-Hibri "argues that the centrepiece of Islamic worldview is justice" (Hafez 443). As such, her methodology is based on the divine

principle of *Al-Tawhid* or the 'unicity of God' which is the overarching precept that organizes the entire universe. Such principle allows for balance that is manifested in the Divine Scale or *al-Mizan* (91).

As an illustration of her methodology in dealing with Islamic jurisprudence, Al-Hibri references two *Quranic* parables. The first of which is Adam's descent to earth. In the creation story, God told the angles that He was putting a vice-regent on earth. Upon thinking that humans would spill blood and cause corruption on earth, the angels protested and God's reply was that He knows what they do not (The *Quran* 2:30). Al-Hibri mentions that "scholars have pondered over this reply, which appears to signal the promise of a humanity that will ultimately stand up for peace, justice, and harmony" (qtd in Hafez 444). The second parable is about Satan's revolt when God asked the angels to prostrate to Adam. Satan's refusal to obey God's direct order is justified by his words that he is better than Adam, because he was created from fire while Adam was created from clay (The *Quran* 38:76, 7:12, 15:33). Al-Hibri illustrates that Satan expresses a hierarchy of being which favors his kind over Adam's. Furthermore, she argues that no attempt at interpretation is acceptable when the matter is explicitly stated in the text. She asserts that the problem of Islamic jurisprudence is not in the areas that concern creed like the unicity of God, but in the different rulings in Islam's texts (444). As such, many scholars of *fiqh* have no consensus over different matters regarding law.

Al-Hibri argues that many matters related to Islamic jurisprudence were circumvented in different times in the Islamic history. The punishment for the act of stealing, which is performed by severing the thief's hand, had been circumvented at the period of famine during Caliph Omar's rule. Therefore, "where are the boundaries of what is permissible in the presence of an explicit text?" (Hafez 445). What changes is not the text, but how scholars understand and interpret the text. Another case is inheritance, in which many scholars argue that the *Quranic* text defines the lower allotment of women and not the maxima. As such, a woman may receive larger portions than stated in the *Quranic* verse (445). Al-Hibri identifies the problems with jurisprudence with regard to Muslim gender issues. She argues that the lack of an interpretation that allows for understanding the contexts of revelation, patriarchal regimes ruling under religious disguise, and the large inherited body of 'uncontested patriarchal jurisprudence' over

centuries are the main problems that stand in the way of Islam's envisioned gender justice (Al-Hibri 153).

On a different context, Saheen Sardar Ali argues in *Modern Challenges to Islamic Law* that although *sharia* law draws on immutable sources, it is "inherently dynamic, sensitive, and susceptible to changing needs" (qtd in Abbasi 1). Characterized by its evolutionary and multidimensional nature, Islamic law is both plural and transformative. Ali highlights the confusion that the single English translation of *sharia* and *fiqh* provides for both terms. The comprehensive English concept 'Islamic law', which refers to both *sharia* and *fiqh*, disregards the substantial differences that those concepts convey. This confusion leads to subsequential assumptions about Islamic law and Islam in general. Ali emphasizes that *sharia* is the overarching divine set of rules that cover the entire Muslim human life. Whereas *fiqh* is the human understanding and interpretation of divine guidance (1). Therefore, the concept 'Islamic law' covers and enshrouds the human dimension which includes the socio-cultural, economic and legal dimensions that the text has sustained "to arrive at legal formulations as we understand them today" (Ali qtd in Abbasi 2). Regarding family law, Ali argues that women are transformed from autonomous to dependent persons in the Muslim family law. The socially constructed male guardianship (*wilaya*) and supervisor (*qawwam*) were set to control and allocate material resources in the marriage institution. However, Ali asserts that such a situation leads to a "paradox of equality" in which women were initially equal in entering marriage, and later become unequal in the marriage institution (2).

1.7.4. Revisiting the Islamic History for Gender Equality

Leila Ahmed, in her seminal work *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), is interested in the historical roots of the modern debate. She seeks to counteract the Western colonialist views on Islam and women. The book includes insights from the pre-Islamic Middle Eastern era, the dawn of Islam and the continuing modern debate. Additionally, it includes some insights on the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome. The argument that Ahmed makes in the book can be summarized in the idea that when talking about women and Islam, it should be done in a historical context that takes into consideration the different time periods, different groups of women, different political environments, and different interpretations of Islam. Ahmed's argument is based on the conclusion that the status of women was good at the time of the Prophet

Muhammad, but started to gradually become worse with the influence of some dominant individuals (Ahmed "*Women and Gender in Islam*").

In another work entitled *Early Islam and the Position of Women: The Problem of Interpretation* (1991), Ahmed brings to the fore Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) which was dominated by male scholars. According to her, those scholars interpreted *shariah* favorably to men. She demonstrates that the problem lay in the absence of jurisprudence in the particular matter of polygamy. Therefore, polygamy was subject to individual choice. The *Quran*, thus, did not encourage polygamy. On the contrary, it made it harder for a man to marry more than one wife. As such, it urges the man to do justice, and if not, he cannot marry more than one wife (The *Quran* 4:3). In this sense, the *Quran* emphasizes monogamy than polygamy, as is shown in the *Quranic* warning of men that they will not and cannot be equitable among wives (The *Quran* 4:129). She criticizes the male interpreters for diverging from the egalitarian message of the *Quran*, in an act that either consciously or unconsciously goes awry from the Divine guidance. Ahmed, thus, proves the claim that most of the constructs, such as women's work and *qiwamah,* are culturally based and have little to do with religion (Ahmed "*Early Islam and the Position of Women*").

Ahmed's revisiting of the Islamic history is to counteract the Islamic scholarly male dominance and the Western prejudice against Islam. Although acknowledging its contributions to improve women's status, Ahmed displays her discontents with Western feminist's presuppositions about the Arab world and Islam. In her article *Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem*, she states that

> American women 'know' that Muslim women are overwhelmingly oppressed without being able to define the specific content of that oppression, in the same way that they 'know' that Muslim – Arabs, Iranians, or whatever – are ignorant, backward, irrational, and uncivilized. These 'facts' manufactured in Western culture, by the same men who have also littered the culture with 'facts' about Western women and how inferior and irrational they are (Ahmed "*Western Ethnocentrism*" 523).

1.7.5. Mapping the Islamic Feminist History and Prospects

Margot Badran's studies are based on the historical data collected from her research on feminism in the MENA region. Her forty years of studying the feminisms in the Middle East were crowned by her work *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (2009), which serves as a reference to the feminisms in the Middle East. She makes a distinction between Western feminisms and Muslim feminisms. Muslim feminisms are manifested in 'secular feminism' and 'Islamic feminism'. Secular feminism emerged in terms of political activism and was given the hallmark of an 'action-oriented' social movement. It did not emphasize religious affiliation and focused primarily on the equality of all citizens in particular nation-states. On the other hand, Islamic feminism emerged as an intellectual discourse which was entangled in the investigation and the interpretation of the religious sacred texts through *ijtihad*. Badran argues that the coming of Islamic feminism did not render secular feminism nonexistent. Rather, they both exist and coexist with their different discourses and approaches towards gender equality. Furthermore, secular feminism sought gender equality in the public spaces whereas maintaining gender complementarity in the private sphere. However, Islamic feminism advocated the notion of full equality in both the public and private spheres. As such, Islamic feminists argue that the egalitarian models of the religious discourse apply to the society and the family alike. Badran's main argument in this work underlines not only the divergences of the two feminisms, but also the confluences, the continuity and the influence that the two movements have over one another (Badran "*Feminism in Islam*").

Moreover, Badran argues that Islamic feminism is a comparatively recent movement that was a consequence of the rise of the Islamist movements in the Middle East. In addition to the rise of progressive political Islamic thought in Western Muslim communities. In her work, she discusses the views of the East and the West on Islamic feminism and the rejection that the movement faced since its inception. The new gender discourse was initially caught in a crossfire from the West and the East. While Westerners thought Islam and feminism to be oxymoronic, the East's evermore display of conservatism considered it "as another form of Western assault upon [Muslim] culture, and … a blasphemy to religion" (1). However, Islamic feminism is continuously gaining prominence and support from Eastern and Western activists and researchers.

Considered as the first to coin the term 'Islamic feminism' for the new gender discourse in Islam, Ziba Mir-Hosseini seeks to examine the new feminist discourse within local and global gender and Islam politics in her paper *The Challenges of Islamic Feminism*. She argues that the rise of this new gender discourse was influenced by two major turning points in the Middle Eastern sphere. The first of which is the success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and the rise of right-wing Islamist politics. The second is the events of the 9/11 and the subsequent politics of 'war on terror', which shifted Western views and politics towards freedom, democracy and women's rights in the Middle East (Mir-Hosseini "The Challenges of Islamic Feminism" 109-113). Furthermore, she also discusses the rise of the global Islamic feminist movement for justice and equality within the Muslim family called Musawah. As a founding member of this movement, Mir-Hosseini explains that the birth of Musawah was in February, 2009. It was initiated by SIS or Sisters in Islam Malaysian women's group. The contribution of this movement to Islamic feminism is that it bridges the gap between academic research and activism (109).

In another paper entitled *Islamic Feminism and the Equivocation of Political Engagement*, Omaima Abou-Bakr discusses Islamic feminism within the context of the rise and fall of the Islamists in Egypt and the role that 'state feminism' plays in limiting gender gains (Abou-Bakr 182). She argues that Islamic feminism in Egypt has been concerned with religious knowledge that incorporates the criticism of male-dominated interpretations. Its role has been limited to the creation of a gender discourse that advocates justice and equality within an Islamic paradigm and "lacked a strong activist dimension" (181). On the other hand, state feminism created an ethically distorted situation in which feminists "bargain with the state, at the expense of ignoring fundamental violations and corruptions and only for limited and gender-specific gains" (182). Alternatively, she suggests that Islamic feminism can provide 'an ethically informed politics', one that rejects state despotism and the hypocrisy of the religious establishment (201).

1.7.6. Shaping Islamic Feminism through Literature

In her book *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (2001), Meriam Cooke, and as the title points out, examines the writings of Arab women writers who seek to empower themselves through Islam. She focuses on the novels and autobiographies

which are written by the most influential Arab women novelists and writers such as the Algerian Assia Djebbar, the Moroccan Fatima Mernissi and the Egyptian Nawal El Saadawi. Those female writers, amongst others, are creating 'alternative realities'. Alternative in the sense that they contribute with their "reflections on personal experience and forays into fiction" (Cooke "*Women Claim Islam*" ix) which give insights about the reality and future of Arab Muslim women and their claim of Islam.

In her article *Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies* (2000), Cooke suggests that Islamic feminists, as fiction and non-fiction contributors, have what she refers to as 'double commitment', which consists of the commitment to a faith position and to women's rights. The term Islamic feminism juxtaposes two 'seemingly opposing' terms and proposes assuming a new self-positioning that embraces multiple belongings. According to Cooke, to refer to oneself as an Islamic feminist does not mean "to describe *a fixed identity but to create a new, contingent subject position*" ("*Multiple Critique*" 93). In this sense, Cooke suggests that to speak from an Islamic feminist position is to belong in a religious community, as well as to be a part of the activism for women's rights. This rendering of the necessity to 'speak from a faith position', however, is maybe exclusionary of anyone not belonging to Islam.

Furthermore, Cooke argues that Islamic feminism is positioned between the assigned identity of 'Muslim' and the attained identity of 'Islamist'. She further illustrates that a Muslim is born as such and engages in the Muslim culture, even though he/she may not agree with the norms and values offered by one's community. In this context, Muslims can be secular and they can, for instance, fast for Ramadan and not pray regularly. On the other hand, Cooke asserts that Islamists devote their lives to the establishment of an Islamic state. Such is the success and failure of the Muslim Brotherhood to establish an Islamic state in Egypt. Consequently, the term 'Islamic', she argues, "bridges the two poles of Muslim and Islamist identifications" (Cooke "*Multiple Critique*" 94). Therefore, the term 'Islamic' in 'Islamic feminism' expresses a specific self-positioning which examines Islamic epistemology in an attempt to expand on a faith position, not to reject it.

1.7.7. Islamic Feminist Voices in Opposition of Western Prejudice

Fatima Mernissi compares Western feminism to Arab/Muslim feminism and writes that "[i]n western culture, sexual inequality is based on the belief in women's biological inferiority"

("*Beyond the Veil*" xvi). Contrarily, she believes that the sexual institutions, such as polygamy for instance, are used to restrict the power of Muslim women. This is because the system perceives women as "powerful and dangerous being[s]" (xvi). This comparison is further developed in her 2001 *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Culture, Different Harems*, in which she illustrates the representations of Muslim women in art, history and literature. Her work brings into attention the Western views of Eastern *harem* life as being full of passivity. However, having grown up in a world which was opposite to Western imagination of Muslim women, Mernissi responds to Western criticism on the subject of the veil by saying that:

> the image of beauty in the West can hurt and humiliate a woman as much as the veil does
> . . . The power of the Western man resides in dictating what women should wear and
> how they should look . . . Being frozen into the passive position of an object whose very
> existence depends on the eye of the beholder turn the educated modern Western woman
> into a harem slave (Mernissi "*Size 6*" 51, 54, 56).

Furthermore, Lila Abu-Lughod argues in her paper *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others* that the construction of Afghan women post-9/11 as in need of salvation is problematic in different dimensions (788). Saving Muslim women from their 'oppressive' cultures reinforces Western sense of superiority and reiterates early twentieth century Christian missionary women stereotypes about Afghan women and their need for saving. In addition, it disregards cultural difference and respect for difference (789). She argues that the passivity of cultural relativism, which allows for understanding other cultures' differences and prevents interference (786), limits progress in the situation of Muslim women. Instead, she suggests a more productive approach that contributes in shaping a more just world. She proposes to "use a more egalitarian language of alliances, coalitions, and solidarity, instead of salvation" (789). She criticizes the Western double-standards which only heard the excesses of the Taliban and overlooked previous regimes. As such, the West is interested in Oil, international drug trade and the arms industry, and not in the veil and the 'oppression' that it symbolizes (789-790).

1.8. Islamic Feminism: An Intellectual Commitment or an Identity

In an article entitled: *Why keep asking me about my identity? Thoughts of a non- Muslim*, Renata Pepicelli asks an important question: "who has the right to speak on women and Islam

and on Islamic feminism?" (93). As a researcher who is interested in the study of Islamic feminism, Pepicelli asks the above question because of her non-Muslim Italian identity. In one of the conferences on women and Islam, she was met with refusal because the idea of a non-Muslim speaking about Muslim women's issues was incomprehensible to many Muslims.

Islamic feminism marks a paradigm shift from the early secular feminism. Its discourse, unlike the nation-based secular discourse that included the elements of Islamic modernist thought, secular nationalism and human rights, embraces Islam with the *Quran* at its center and as such, is a global inclusive phenomenon. It incorporates the methods of *Ijtihad* to re-read the *Quran* and the *hadiths* in order to promote the position of women as was endowed by their creator. Islamic feminism transcends beyond Muslim women to include non-Muslims as well. Indeed, the very notion of an Islamic discourse that promotes equality should have broad implications. According to Badran, Islamic feminist scholars promote the idea of equality to all human beings under God. She argues that "Wadud's *tawhidic* paradigm applies not simple to Muslims but to all human beings- to the equality [of] all citizens irrespective of gender and religion" (Badran "*From Islamic Feminism to a Muslim Holistic Feminism*" 82). As a result, Islamic feminism received attention and appreciation among Muslims and non-Muslims as well.

Since its inception, Islamic feminism aimed at the inclusion of all people, regardless of their national and religious identities. In a conversation entitled *The Course and Future of Islamic Feminism*, Margot Badran states that:

> Islamic feminism started out as an open discursive space which anyone could and did enter, whether to create, elaborate, debate or to disseminate its discourse. It had the hallmark of the inclusive. Islamic feminism was not tied to Muslim identity or a faith affiliation. Indeed, many non-Muslims welcomed this staunch egalitarian Islamic discourse, and some called themselves as Islamic feminists. The more discourses of equality the better, especially since we live together in societies and families (Sikand and Badran).

Accordingly, Muslims and non-Muslims in national and transnational spaces are co-blending. This, in addition to the increasing number of marriages between Muslims and non-Muslims that marks the amalgamation within the family space as well, suggests that the discourses of exclusion will not resonate and grow as opposed to the contrary. Consequently, the

inclusion of non-Muslims in the discussion and creation of the Islamic feminist discourse is an inevitability. The present social conditions require flexibility with other identities and religions. Therefore, Badran states that "the discourse of Islamic feminism breaks down dichotomies-secular and religious, East and West, Muslim and non-Muslim" (Badran "*Re/placing Islamic Feminism*" IX).

The propagated images of Muslim women were used as a fallacious argument by the West in the early 1990s and after 9/11 in order to discuss the compatibility of Islam and democracy. Therefore, what began as war against terrorism, later became a conflict over human rights and specifically the rights of women. Islamic feminism, meanwhile, was gaining momentum in Europe and elsewhere. People from different cultural backgrounds had their attention undivided on the appealing idea which openly defied the conventional image of Islam and feminism. Muslims and non-Muslims alike were concerned about Islam and women. This was because Islam was hard to ignore in Western societies as it became a part and parcel of the Western way of life. Pepicelli proclaims that "Islamic feminism could be a 'door of passage' into a culture, a thought, and identity that affects [her] life" (97). The various interrelations that bind the West and the Islamic societies, the evolution of a European Islam and the resurgence of religion in the public sphere provide reasons that invite non-Muslims to explore Islamic feminism in order to fully and better comprehend 'their' society. Pepicelli insists that "studying Islamic feminism does not mean studying 'Other', the 'Other Societies,' but it constitutes working on 'My Society.' It is a commitment to 'researching myself/ourselves'" (97). Indeed, Muslims constitute an evident force in the West, and the co-mingling of Muslims and non-Muslims has become inescapable. This can be clearly demonstrated in the increasing numbers of marriages between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Moreover, the Islamic feminist undertaking, which neither praises Islamic orthodoxies nor appreciates Western bigotry, finds a middle-gray area where Muslims and non-Muslims are welcome to discuss and debate. Therefore, opening new spaces and challenging authority is, according to Pepicelli, "the most revolutionary contribution of the Islamic feminism to women's empowerment and to the dialogue between different personalities and identities" (99). That is what characterizes Islamic feminism and evidently distinguishes it from other projects of feminism such as the nation-based secular feminism -which unlike Islamic feminism, operates on

a local level, nurturing local issues. On the other hand, Islamic feminism provides a global and non-exclusive discursive space. Islamic feminist scholars assert that the adjective 'Islamic' should not refer to assuming and/or defending a faith position. Such definition of the word is "exclusionary and inadequate" (Rhouni 33) because it insinuates an exclusion of secular scholars with Muslim backgrounds and naturally non-Muslims from this critical project. Instead, "Islamic feminism is open to the contribution of any critics, regardless of their religious background, who strive to contribute to the revitalization of Islamic thought through an approach that does not stigmatize Islam and recognizes its egalitarian scope" (Rhouni 33).

However, identity politics seem to slowly find their way in. There has been attempts to direct the course of Islamic feminism from its global scope to being exclusive of non-Muslims. Doing so alters and mutilates the very foundational principles it stood for. Such efforts are clearly manifested in *Musawah*, a social movement which aims for equality within the Muslim family. As opposed to the 'passive' intellectual endeavor of early Islamic feminists, *Musawah* takes the form of activism since its inception in Kuala Lumpur in 2009. Badran shows her dissatisfaction in such an endeavor to narrow down the scope of Islamic feminism to identity politics, especially that we live in complex societies where "Muslim and non-Muslim women are in it together" (Sikand and Badran).

Islamic feminism is a critical and an intellectual project that welcomes the contributions of all researchers and scholars regardless of their religious or national backgrounds. However, this global undertaking has being slightly steered away from its intended path by the newborn social movement *Musawah*, which narrows down the scope of Islamic feminism in the process of localizing its endeavor in an attempt to reform "the Muslim family" (Sikand and Badran). Considering this transition in the project, the following question is raised: is Islamic feminism a scholarly and an intellectual endeavor or an identity?

Considering the adjective 'Islamic' in the concept 'Islamic feminism', which may suggest an identity, Meriam Cooke asks the question: "why call Islamic feminism *Islamic* if it is not a matter of *defending* a faith position? You might as well call such a critique a feminist critique of Islam that could apply to any kind of religion?" (qtd. in Rhouni 271). In this sense, Cooke indicates that Islamic feminism must be generated from an identity position with the purpose of

defending a position in faith. However, such a definition excludes those whose identities are not Muslim such as non-Muslims and secular scholars from the critical project of Islamic feminism.

The fluidity of identities in Islamic feminism is epitomized by the most notable contributors in the Islamic feminist discourse nevertheless. Badran points out that Amina Wadud initially "objected to being labelled an Islamic feminist" (qtd. in Pepecilli 94) in the past. Instead, she preferred to call herself a Muslim scholar. However, even though she still does not identify herself as an Islamic feminist, she does not entirely reject the label and calls herself a pro-feminist. Asma Barlas, on the other hand, is very critical of the label 'feminist' because she thinks that feminism lacks a common language. Val Moghaddam situates herself in the middle between Islamic and secular feminisms and identifies herself as a Marxist-feminist. The Iranian scholar Ziba Mir-Hosseini openly identifies herself as an Islamic feminist. Some scholars are even Islamists, and such is the case with the Egyptian Heba Raouf Ezzat and the Moroccan Nadia Yacine (Pepecilli 94-95).

Amidst this plurality of diversified identities, Mir-Hosseini argues against assorting the emerging egalitarian voices "into neat categories and try to generate a definition that reflects the diversity of positions and approaches of Islamic feminists" (Mir-Hosseini *Muslim Women's Quest for Equality*" 640). Such an approach would not only be difficult but also futile. Therefore, researchers on the topic must come to peace with the fact that those scholars whom are referred to as 'Islamic feminists' have positions that are "local, diverse, multiple, and evolving" (640). An example of the evolving feminist discourses of those scholars would be Fatima Mernissi's shift from secular to Islamic feminism. Mernissi illustrates that there is no fixed position of feminist scholarship, and thus no fixed identity through which to recognize a position. Many of the 'Islamic feminists' object to being labelled either Islamic or feminist. However, their common goal is gender equality and justice for women, albeit "they do not always agree on what constitutes justice or equality or the best ways of attaining them" (640). Accordingly, Mir-Hosseini recommends against pointing the attention towards the label 'Islamic feminism', and to focus instead on the framework which envelopes the work that ensures equality and justice for women.

Rhouni asserts that the adjective 'islamic' (lower case intended to emphasize a new conceptualization of the word) "serves to describe an intellectual commitment . . . to reinvigorate

Islamic thought through rethinking gender in Islam" (Rhouni 271). Therefore, and as viewed from this perspective, it is not limited to people 'writing from a faith position' or being a Muslim for that matter. In this regard, gender critique in Islam is not a stranger to the Islamic thought. In fact, it demonstrates "a new engagement with it, . . . to foreground its affiliation to Islamic thought especially in its critical trend, ancient and modern" (272).

1.9. Islamic Feminism and Islamic Apologetics

Islamic or Muslim apologetics represents a field of knowledge that emphasizes upon dialogue, and it usually includes Muslims defending Islamic doctrines or practices against claims and assumptions about Islam. Its aim is to refute misconceptions through rational explication. In this sense, can one consider Islamic feminism to be a part of contemporary Islamic apologetics?

After 9/11, Muslim/Islam's image was stereotyped as malicious and evil. Therefore, the need for a counter discourse of *Rad al-Shubuhat* (refuting misconceptions) was necessary to defend religion and set it apart from the evil practices conducted by the few. This constitutes the essence of Islamic apologetics, which is about defending Islam. On the other hand, Islamic feminism is seen by Margot Badran as "quite distinct from Islamic apologetics" (Sikand and Badran). The aim of Islamic feminism is to provide clarifications about the wrong practices conducted in the name of religion in order to marginalize women. Such an effort is conducted through scholarly egalitarian readings of the religious texts. Therefore, Islamic feminism "is not about defending Islam but about defending women and gender equality and justice within Islam" (Sikand and Badran).

Furthermore, the two scholarly efforts of Islamic feminism and Islamic apologetics more often than not intersect than they diverge nevertheless. According to Meriam Cooke, Islamic feminism should take the form of defending a faith position (Rhouni 33). Conversely, some people employ the arguments of Islamic feminism in defense of Islam against attacks and criticism pertaining to women and gender (Sikand and Badran). This provides a reason why many researchers consider Islamic feminism to fall into the broader category of Islamic apologetics. Although Badran argues that the two endeavors are quite different, it is hard to overlook the fact that they are feeding each other.

Moreover, many Islamic feminists employ the apologetic rhetoric and exhibit it in their writings on women and Islam. In her book *Qur'an and Woman*, Amina Wadud seeks to show the *Quran*'s inherent message of equality between men and women was deformed by male-dominated readings of God's sacred text. Fatima Mernissi also shares an apologetic discourse which marks a departure from and an anti-thesis of her earlier secular views about the roles of women in the pre-Islamic era which, she argues, entitled women more rights than did the arrival of Islam. Marking a shift to Islamic feminism, Mernissi chooses Aisha, the Prophet's wife, as a symbol of early Islamic treatment of women. She asserts that Aisha "was wonderful. She was extremely lucky. She had a great husband, who loved this intelligence and this strength, and who gave her the necessary space for self-fulfillment. Later, [she] discovered the battle that she had led, the Battle of the Camel" (qtd. in Rhouni 202). Aisha "emphasizes, for the *new* Mernissi, the early Islamic encouragement of female self-assertion" (202). In her attempt to defend Islam, Mernissi writes in *L'amour dans les pays musulmans* that in Christianity, women's feelings and desires call for suspicion. While in Islam, those feelings and desires are celebrated in several sacred books on love (Mernissi "*L'amour dans les pays musulmans*" 99).

However, the apologetic approach employed by many Islamic feminists has been criticized because it is deemed to undermine and weaken the discourse of Islamic feminism. They argue that Islamic feminism is supposed to be an intellectual and a critical project that seeks to empower women in an Islamic context, not to defend the Islamic religion. The exasperation aroused as a consequence of using an apologetic approach lies partially in the fact that it detaches this project from the objectivity hallmark it attained once it included Muslims and non-Muslims in the debate. Hence, the project becomes subjective and exclusive once it employs apologia or defending a faith position.

The apologetic approach has also been criticized for defending the patriarchal structures underlying Islamic societies. The Islamic feminists' selectiveness in referencing the religious scriptures by highlighting women-friendly verses is a fragile approach which will collapse once it is faced with verses and *hadiths* that include discrimination between males and females. Additionally, employing traditional methodologies in the study of Islam and the reliance on early Islamic works will have negative repercussions on the entire Islamic feminist discourse. The very dependency on the prevailing power structures weakens the Islamic feminist discourse

because it is very difficult, as Valentine Moghadem argues, "to win theological arguments. There will always be competing interpretations of the religious texts, and the power of the social forces behind it determines the dominance of each interpretation" (Moghadem 1160). The apologetic tendencies of the first theorists of Islamic feminism, or as referred to by many scholars as 'foundationalism', should be counteracted by breaking away from the constraints which require captivity to the scholarly traditions that most Islamic feminists seek to disrupt. Instead, Rhouni suggests a 'post-foundationalist islamic gender critique [lower case intended)' (Rhouni).

Badran observes that many Islamic feminists are detaching their project from apologetics. Such detachment "has been accompanied by lessened antagonism towards the term 'Islamic feminism' and feminism per se" ("*Re/placing Islamic Feminism*" XIII). According to Badran, this shift constitutes a new stage in the Islamic feminist history. Many scholars such as Amina Wadud adopted a critical position in which their readings of the religious texts relied less on the power structures that influence the meaning of the text, and even the text itself. The *Quran*, for Wadud, is considered as a "text in process" (qtd. in Badran XIII) and not a fixed text. Adopting such a critical approach requires "refuting the text, to talk back, to even say 'no'" (qtd. in Badran XIII). Wadud recommends the urgency to view the *Quranic* guidance from the higher principles of Islam. She argues that the *Quran* condoned and attempted to restrict practices such as slavery, polygamy and wife chastisement at a certain historical time when they were the norm in the prevailing cultures of the time. However, with our modern and intellectual developments, "we accept the fact that we are potentially guided by the text, even if not limited to its particular utterances" (qtd. in Badran XIII). Wadud's new position is an example of Rhouni's 'post-foundationalist islamic gender critique' that seeks to understand the text with reference to the higher principles of the Islamic message.

1.10. Islam and Culture: An Islamic Feminist Perspective

"It may be said that the greatest task of the Islamic feminist is to separate culture and religion. This is perhaps a main reason for the hostility and anger with which this movement is met" (Fawcett).

In the Arab culture, women play different societal roles than those of men. Women are restricted primarily to the private sphere. However, in today's globalized world, women are supposed to balance between their gender roles as wives and mothers in the private sphere, and

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their social roles as workers and active agents in the public sphere. Should those women fail to balance Gender role expectations, "they may encounter some form of social exclusion" (Koburtay et al.). Because Islam plays a pivotal role as a "driver of ethical understandings and behaviors" in most Arab societies (Koburtay et al.), cultural practices and behaviors make Islam and its texts a source of their legitimacy. Intertwined into an intricate web of social practice, distinguishing between religious principles and cultural norms becomes a difficult task, especially to the foreign eye. Such a difficult position reinforces, rather than undermines, claims about Islam and misogyny. Traditionally, religion and culture have always been used alongside each other to delineate the faith, beliefs, ideas and customs of different societies and groups of people. As such, practices such as female circumcision and polygamy have their cursor undetermined between religion and culture.

There are two major types of culture and Islam discourses. As such, two meanings that illustrate the relationship between religion and culture arise. The first discourse is about stressing the connection between Islam and cultural expression. Such a position consists of celebrating cultural heritage in terms of music, food, architecture and other forms of expression. The second discourse, however, emphasizes a disconnection between religion and culture. This view is adopted by women who identify culture as "those passively inherited customs" (Jouili 208), and that separating religion from culture authorizes their criticism of particular patriarchal practices.

Women who advocate the distinction between Islam and culture base their claims on the premise that 'authentic Islam' is completely different from culture, which is identified as inherited traditions and customs. Culture, tradition and custom are used interchangeably in order to show the conflicting nature of some practices with Islam. Therefore, "the culture/ tradition/ custom trope came to decry a way of life that often falsely presumed to be grounded in an Islamic ethos" (Jouili 211). As such, "Muslim societies' cultures in fact contained many aspects that did not correspond to, or even outright contradicted, Islamic norms" (211). In this regard, religion does not change with time, as what changes are the understandings and local interpretations of the religious scriptures. Such understandings of religion, being bred from cultural environments, are modelled after certain customs and traditions acceptable in those societies. In such a reciprocal relationship, Culture shares many components with religion encompassing values, behaviors and morals, all of which contribute in making the task of

distinguishing between what is religious and what is cultural very difficult. In this context, religion has the power to shape a new culture, as was the case when the Prophet Muhammad entered the society of *Al-Madinah* for instance. The religious principles became a guiding force as when the people of *Al-Madinah* poured out wine as soon as they heard it was forbidden. The religious principles and laws transform very fast to become customs and traditions. For example, honor crimes are constructed on the religious prohibition of adultery.

Therefore, Islam and culture are very closely related, yet they diverge in the social practices conducted by the people in their specific local societies. Culture indicates a range of often reprehensible societal and religiously implied practices. Such practices are often criticized "either for their non-reflexive nature or/and for their non-egalitarian, particularly patriarchal character" (Jouili 211). In this view, the cultural practices that make religion their frame of reference are not only very distant from the teachings of Islam, but oftentimes even contradict with Islam.

It is important to note that in the early Islamic culture, women acquired the freedom to be active in the public domains including commerce and trade. There are prominent examples of women who engaged in the social life in the early Arab societies. Such is the example of Khadijah, the first wife and the first follower of the Prophet Muhammad, who was a successful business-woman. Before Islam, "[w]omen in some tribes had a certain degree of autonomy and enjoyed the right to engage in commercial activities and other arenas of social and political participation" (Sidani 499). With the coming of Islam, such egalitarian rights were reinforced by the words of the *Quran* and the Prophet's sayings, and the patriarchal ideology started to recede under the dominance of Islam as a force for social justice. However, after the Prophet, Islamic scholars and rulers started to deviate from Islam's egalitarian message by adopting tribal systems and patriarchal understandings of Islam. Over time, the patriarchal institution took hold of the entire Middle Eastern region (Koburtay et al.) and Islam's teaching with regard to women started to gradually recede.

Islam has paved the way for Muslim women to play a remarkable part in the affairs of the community, and "[s]ome contemporary feminists consider that those exceptional roles set an interesting precedent for women's emancipation" (Sidani 499). Many contemporary Islamic feminists argue that women must confront not only the patriarchal culture, but also the

misconceptions of Islamic ideals (Koburtay et al.). They believe that even though early female Islamic figures epitomize Islam's outlook of women, the economic and political participation of women started to shrink with time. This clearly demonstrates that the misconceptions of Islam and the cultural impact on the situation of Arab women was immense. This culminated in the denial of the right to education for women or to become part in the public life in the early 1900s. Such a situation is because "sometimes culture weighs more than religion" (Jouili 212).

The standpoint that detaches Islam from culture (male-culture) is embraced by the Islamic feminist school of thought. The Iranian Nobel Prize winner and Islamic feminist Shirin Ebadi asserts that:

> [the] divine book (the Qur'an) sees the mission of all prophets as that of inviting all human beings to uphold justice … The discriminatory plight of women in Islamic societies, whether in the sphere of civil law or in the realm of social, political and cultural justice, has its roots in the male-dominated culture prevailing in these societies, not in Islam (qtd in Badran "*Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s*" 22).

1.11. Speculative Fiction, Feminist Speculative Fiction and Islam

In order to understand what speculative fiction means, one must first understand mimetic and non-mimetic fiction. Fueled by verisimilitude, mimetic fiction or mimesis carries a variety of meanings that involve "the act of resembling, of presenting the self, and expression as well as mimicry, *imitatio*, representation, and nonsensuous similarity" (Gebauer and Wulf 1). Mimesis is the theoretical underpinning that dominated the creation of art since ancient Greece. Many Western and non-Western philosophers throughout history have been interested in theorizing and discussing mimesis and its relationship with art starting from Plato and Aristotle, to Jacques Derrida and Homi Bhabha. Understood as a form of literary realism, mimesis constitutes a form of literature and art that aims at imitating and representing the real world. Consequently, mimetic fiction is based on pure fact and not imagination as "it copies the world. Its language is literal, its perspective earthbound, and its goal is a clear connection between fictional and factual event" (Lane and Bellis 133).

On the other hand, non-mimetic fiction refers to the forms of fiction which are not characterized by the imitation of the real world as opposed to mimetic fiction. In its attempt to

shape new worlds out of imagination, non-mimetic fiction "speculates on new models of the old world. It seeks to mystify by exploring new perspectives and using figural rather than literal language" (Lane and Bellis 133). It often incorporates adopting non-realist, fictious and imaginary perspectives that are nonexistent in contemporary settings. Such an intentional departure from copying consensus reality, one that marked the Western literary norm which was based on the premise of the objectivity of reality, represents a clear mutiny and insurgency against what the Western model of art stood for.

The term 'speculative fiction' was first coined by the American science fiction author Robert A. Heinlein in his 1947 essay entitled *On the Writing of Speculative Fiction*. The term was used interchangeably, in the mid-60s to the mid-70s, to refer to science fiction. Writers used the term to articulate the type of work they were writing -that is to suggest the work is of speculative nature. Heinlein labels speculative fiction as a specific science fiction sub-category and designates certain distinctive qualities to it. "Defined as narratives concerned not so much with science or technology as with human actions in response to a new situation created by science or technology, speculative fiction highlights a human rather than technological problem" (Oziewicz 4).

The meaning of term has undergone various changes. While it was synonymous to science fiction since its occurrence in the 1940s, it acquired various historically located meanings. Margaret Atwood provides a definition which distinguishes between science fiction and speculative fiction. She argues that science fiction comprises of stories which are virtually impossible to happen. On the other hand, she claims that speculative fiction is about plots and "things that really could happen but just had [not] completely happened when the authors wrote the books" (Atwood 6). She uses 'speculative fiction' as a term to label her dystopian novels such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003). The definition provided by Atwood illustrates that speculative fiction is used to refer to narratives which explore possible futures and that can adequately describe utopias of the 19th and 20th centuries. Such literary productions emphasized "social and political -rather than technological- speculation" (Oziewicz 5). Atwood's definition is very restrictive as she equates it to the story's predictive value. Such claim was also shared in the 1960s, when the term was restricted to science fiction. As such,

writers like Isaac Asimov observed the realization of earlier science fiction stories in the American space program.

Margaret Atwood differentiates between science fiction and speculative fiction in that she considers science fiction to encompass "something that does [not] already exist" (Atwood qtd. in Wired). Consequently, she refers to her writings as speculative fiction because they take place on earth, and incorporate elements that already exist such as genetic engineering. However, she never alludes to the fact that both earlier assumptions about the meaning of the term and her labelling are future-oriented, which is a central and an important element of speculative fiction in today's most discussions.

Today, speculative fiction is more inclusive and less restrictive. It serves as an umbrella term embracing a wide range of fiction which is related to the use of non-mimetic narrative strategies. It encompasses science fiction, fantasy, horror, alternative history, utopia and dystopia, steam punk, futuristic fiction, cyberpunk, supernatural fiction, magical realism, gothic fiction, folktale, and any other forms of non-mimetic fiction which are marked by the departure from the likeliness of consensus reality (Jones 4-5). This understanding of the term has become a topic of interest since the 2000s "albeit mostly among readers, authors and scholars who are either younger or speak from a minority perspective" (Oziewicz 7). However, due to its broadness and inclusiveness, speculative fiction is criticized for breaking genre boundaries in a manner which is not productive, one that often leads to ambiguity and confusion.

Traditionally, speculative fiction has been considered as a male-oriented genre. This is mainly because the field was biased against women as authors and readers. According to Charles Platt, by 1963, there was a scarce number of women writing science fiction, and as such, women were a minority in the field (Davin 70). Subsequently, the minority status epitomizes the social, creative and intellectual marginalization of women. However, by 1999, the claim that the field is biased against women was no longer the truth, and the minority status was no longer considered as a sign of exclusion. Platt states that in the late twentieth century and "although women [were] still a minority in science fiction, they [were] not in any sense oppressed" (qtd. in Davin 70).

The genre of 'feminist speculative fiction' came into prominence in the 1970s by the American-Canadian author Judith Merril. It has since become an enduring influence on various writers, namely Ursula K. Le Guin, Dorris Lessing, and Margaret Atwood (Oziewicz 5). The

female authorship and readership of speculative fiction in the late 1950s was very modest. This was due to the conventional thinking about the female lack of interest in fiction that includes machines, inter-planetary wars and extraterrestrial life. Thus, such fiction was primarily intended for male audiences. However, writers such as Andre Norton, Ursula Le Guin and Marian Zimmer Bradley have made the emerging speculative fiction written by women very popular. Consequently, those female authors contributed in the inclusion of female audiences into the genre. Female audiences embraced the new genre because it was written by women, and because the focus on the masculine aspects of technology were replaced, to a certain degree, with "the affective, personal aspects of life" (Zirange 9). In the late twentieth century, more and more women authors were interested in the field of science fiction in specific and the super-genre of speculative fiction in general.

It is important to distinguish between female and feminist speculative fiction. While those types of fiction are primarily written by female authors, they may not always be feminist. To consider a work feminist, it must challenge male ideals by focusing on female issues; hence, a feminist work is woman-oriented. By breaking away from the masculinist conventions which dominated speculative fiction since its inception, women writers started to understand the potency of speculative fiction in triggering socio-political criticism. Female production in speculative fiction was not well-received by critics of the 60s and 70s, most of whom were male, because they thought women writers are supposed to be strictly limited to "the lowbrow forms of literature such as ghost stories, detective novels and romances" (Zirange 11). Therefore, any attempt of women in writing speculative fiction was met with severe criticism. Critics thought that the incorporation of feminist thought into female science fiction to be an abomination and a distortion of an once male-oriented genre and everything that it stood for. After the 1970s, female speculative fiction played an essential role as it mirrored female awareness of their 'difference' from men. As such, it focused on depicting the different socio-political status of women through different techniques and different language of writing.

Feminist speculative fiction plays an important role in conveying feminist thought and ideals because it focuses on portraying themes related to gender inequality, sexuality and reproduction in a manner that has never been explored in other forms of fiction. Consequently,

No other genres so actively invite representations of the ultimate goals of feminism: worlds free of sexism, worlds in which women's contributions (in science) are recognized and valued, worlds that explore the diversity of women's desire and sexuality, and worlds that move beyond gender. Whether in the form of superheroines, escapist or struggling utopias, cautionary dystopias, or alien gendered culture, feminism in [speculative fiction] offers textual exploration of theoretical and activist ideals for progressive social change (Helford 291).

Amidst such richness of the umbrella-genre of speculative fiction: the future and challenges of science in science fiction, entirely peculiar realms of magic in fantasy, different worlds in alternative history, and totalitarian regimes which reduce the citizens of a state to mere obedient subjects in dystopias- women find fertile grounds for the feminist theory to be experimented on and further developed. Feminist speculative fiction aims at criticizing the dominant male-culture. Through intensifying gender inequalities in dystopias, for instance, feminists attempt to emphasize the prejudice, and the one-sided, biased viewpoint of the dominant culture that works as the unquestionable, indisputable truth that denies all other viewpoints the right to surface and speak.

Originally, speculative fiction has always been political with regard to gender. Ironically enough, however, feminist speculative fiction shares many aspects with the masculinist agenda[4]. As such, it "build[s] on old themes when [feminists] obsess about femaleness and wonder how it could work better, if women could be freed of the need to cope with problems men create" (Kray 39). At its inception, speculative fiction was not considered as a political act; it was instead considered as a creative genre that is not annexed to any agenda. However, in the creative settings of speculative fiction, there has to be males and females, and consequently, "feelings, domesticities, love, reproduction, being rescued, and asking straight-man questions" (39) were attributed to the latter. In speculative fiction, the masculinist agenda reinforces gender stereotypes about women because female characters are frequently depicted in a conventional manner that involves the focus on womanly interests including the use of "cosmetic or prosthetic technology" (39) to make women look better in order to attract male characters. By breaking

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[4] The "masculinist agenda" explores the adventure of masculinity. The technological, rational, problem-solving, frontier-exploring, envelope pushing masculinity is constructed against the imagined alternative- femininity, seen as both conventional and mysterious (Kray 39).

away from male stereotypical chains, feminist speculative fiction often delves into exploring the possibility of a utopian world where men are either excluded or attached with peripheral roles. Therefore, women are free and not obligated to do conventional women-work. This very preoccupation about femaleness and 'how it could work better', however, ties feminist speculative fiction into the masculinist agenda once more.

In the recent few years, many research papers have tackled the topic of speculative fiction and Islam. Most papers argue about the influence of the Islamic culture on inspiring speculative fiction motifs. Yusuf Nurudin argues that early contributions of the Muslim culture consisting of *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights* contain many examples of proto-speculative fiction (Nududin 138). The collection of *Arabian Nights* includes examples of fantasy and science fiction such as *The Adventures of Bulukiya*. The story is about Bulukiya's travels across Eden and Hell, the seas and to different worlds in the cosmos. In his journey, he encounters different creatures such as angels, talking serpents and trees, mermaids, giants, and jinn in his search for the herb of immortality (Irwin 209-210). Such an example combines motifs from fantasy and science fiction in its peculiar worlds and creatures, and inter-galactic travels. Another story in the *Nights* that sets an early example of science fiction is *The Ebony Horse*. In the story, an inventor builds a flying mechanical horse. The horse can make the journey of a whole year in one day, and can fly into outer space. *The Ebony Horse*, with its magical mechanical devices and fast travels, is an epitome of early Middle Eastern science fiction. Ironically, the West often invokes the influence of Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* on setting an early example of space travel, which influenced many later authors such as H. G. Wells, but fails to recognize the contribution of stories like *The Ebony Horse* in science fiction.

Furthermore, *The City of Brass* is another example in the *Nights* that incorporates several elements of science fiction and fantasy. In the story, a group goes on an archeological expedition on the request of the Caliph of Damascus to find the ancient lost city and recover Solomon's brass vessel used to imprison jinn. In their journey, the group encounters different creatures including a mummified queen, seductive marionettes, automata, humanoid robots and a brass horseman robot (Khrais 132). Another example is *Abdullah the Fisherman and Abdullah the Merman* which tells the story of Abdullah the fisherman who acquires the ability to breathe underwater. He thus discovers an inverted reflection of his society underwater. Such a society is

characterized by its primitive communism where everything is shared equality among its members and concepts like money and clothing have no control over people's lives (132). The tale of Abdullah is not only an example of science fiction and fantasy but sets a precedent of early superhero fiction. The super ability to breathe underwater is used in many Western stories, comic books and later cinematic incarnations like *Aquaman*, *Namor the Submariner* and *King Shark*. There are other tales that include "Amazon societies dominated by women" (132) which perhaps influenced the creation of the Amazon superhumans and *Wonder Woman*. Other striking examples of early speculative fiction in the *Nights* include *Abu al-Husn and His Slave girl Tawaddud* and *Third Qalandar's Tale*. All of which are from Arabian and Persian mythology and creative imaginations that have become known today as early speculative fiction.

Islam has a great yet "not as widely acknowledged" (Hankins "*Countering the Master Narrative*" 2) influence on inspiring speculative fiction motifs. The Islamic culture is rich with religious stories about miracles and creatures that could fill people with awe. Such stories are told in Islam's sacred text the *Quran* and the *hadiths* of the Prophet. Islamic mythology serves as a point of reference to many contemporary authors with interest in the speculative fiction genre. According to Rebecca Hankins, "Muslims and Islam have historically had and continue to influence speculative fiction" (Hankins "*Countering the Master Narrative*" 5). In the Islamic literature, there are several examples that could inspire speculative fiction writing. The *Quran* tells about people who slept for centuries in a cave, as "they had remained in their cave for three hundred years, adding nine" (*The Quran* 18:25). It also tells about the heavenly creatures created from light known as the angels, and the invisible creatures created from smokeless fire known as the jinn. In addition, it tells about people who have been transformed into apes (*The Quran* 2:65). Further, the *hadiths* tell about the Prophet's miracles such as the cracking of the moon, and the Prophet's journey to *al-Aqsa* Mosque on a horse known as *Buraq* and ascent to the heavens in one night. The *hadiths* also tell about the one-eyed anti-Christ known as *al-Masih ad-Dajjal* (Nurudin 138). Such stories carry raw materials for speculative fiction, as they contain what we know today as extraterrestrial travel, speed exceeding that of light, supernatural powers, fantastical creatures and realms, and the possibility of life and intelligence beyond those known to man.

Like the onset of science fiction with the technological advancements in the West, Islamic speculative fiction was initiated with the great scientific developments and inventions with Islam becoming the world's scientific center. According to I. A. Ibrahim, with the prevalence of Islam, "great advances in medicines, mathematics, physics, astronomy, geography, architecture, art, literature, and history" (qtd. in Hankin 3) were achieved. As such, sophisticated instruments and inventions were developed by Muslims that would "make possible the European voyages of discovery, such as the astrolabe, the quadrant, and good navigational maps" (3). Hankins argues that the creation of such instruments had a direct impact on the inception and expansion of literary innovation in terms of fantasy, science fiction and speculative fiction as a whole (3). Islamic achievements had a great impact on speculative fiction literary production like *The Arabian Nights*. The innovative stories of the *Nights* mark a precedent in the science fiction and fantasy genres, most of which owe thanks to Islam as a religion and to the achievements made by the spread of Islam across different continents in the globe.

Islam continues to inspire Muslim and non-Muslim speculative fiction writing today. There are dedicated Arab speculative fiction authors like 'the father of Arab science fiction' Mustafa Mahmoud, the Syrian speculative fiction author Imran Talib and the Egyptian satirical dramatist Ali Salim (Nurudin 138). Other writers include Nabil Farouq, Roquia Sakhawat Hussain, Muhammed Zafar Iqbal and Nihad Sharif. Outside the Arab-speaking world, there are many Muslim speculative fiction authors who depart from Islamic mythology such as Pamela Taylor, Ahmed A. Khan, Jalaluddin Nuriddin, Hasan Khurshid Rumi and G. Willow Wilson (Hankins 9). Additionally, many Western speculative fiction authors have portrayed Islam in their fiction writing. The most prominent examples would be Frank Herbert's *Dune*, and other writings that portrayed Muslim fundamentalism such as Louise Markey's *Terrorists*, Katie Waitman's *The Divided* and Maureen McHugh's *Nekropolis*. Nurudin argues that Islam has an influence even on the film industry. According to him, Islamic symbolism cannot be missed in the most popular film series *Star Wars* (Nurudin 140).

1.12. Conclusion

This chapter was dedicated to reviewing the literature related to the feminist discourse in Islam. It included a historical, cultural and philosophical discussion on feminism in the West and the Arab world. The chapter will serve as a theoretical and methodological background for the

analysis of the selected literary works. The Islamic feminist critique of the practices conducted by the male-dominated culture in the name of religion and the Western narratives towards Islam and women will be used a lens through which to view the selected works in the following chapters. The next chapters will be dedicated to discussing three literary works of speculative fiction by three different female authors from different cultural backgrounds. The works include: Egyptian Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue*, American non-Muslim Maureen McHugh's *Nekropolis* and the American convert to Islam Gwendolyn Willow Wilson's *Alif the Unseen*. The chapters will bridge the gap between theory and practice in an endeavor to highlight the discussion on women and Islam in literary production, as well as to break the boundaries between East and West, Muslim and non-Muslim.

Chapter Two: The Male-Dominated Culture and Androcentric Readings of Religion in Abdel Aziz's Dystopia *The Queue*

2.1. Introduction

Post-revolution Egyptian literary production is full of political, socio-cultural and religious themes, and Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* is no exception. A contemporary speculative fiction dystopian novel, it presents modern-day realities rather than speculating on what could happen. Its author is known for her struggle against political and social injustice. Her feminist views are evident in her depiction of female characters and magnifying patriarchal practices. Using the Islamic feminist school of thought as a lens, this chapter probes the questions of how do the cultural and social institutions play part in the marginalization of and the inequalities towards women, and how is religion used as an authoritative force at the hands of the male dominated culture in Abdel Aziz's *The Queue*? The chapter aims to explore Islamic feminist consciousness in the novel by asking how is religion used as a means to practice authority over women by the patriarchal culture? Using textual and contextual evidence, this chapter employs the method of textual analysis while also relying on the context of literary production. This chapter will be divided into three parts. The first part will include biographical information about the author and her feminist views. The second part will tackle the context of the text by discussing Islamic feminism in Egypt before and after the January revolution. The third part will be dedicated to the analysis of *The Queue* using Islamic feminism as a methodology for analysis.

2.2. Basma Abdel Aziz: A Pen against Corruption and Social Injustice

"[Basma Abdel Aziz's] writings represent literature of the post-January revolution, which opened the door for tackling topics that had not been acceptable or available, like oppression by society or the regime" (Sonallah Ibrahim qtd. in Hendawi).

Basma Abdel Aziz is an award-winning Egyptian author, visual artist and psychiatrist known for her human rights activism. She was born in 1976 in Cairo, Egypt. She is nicknamed the 'rebel' for her relentless fight against corruption and social injustice, which marks her writings as a weekly columnist in *Al-Shorouk* journal, short stories and novels. In 2016, she was named one of the Leading Global Thinkers of Foreign Policy (Skawinski), and was listed one of

the top influencers of Arabic public opinion by the Gottlieb Duttweiler Institute. As a psychiatrist, she has treated several victims of torture, and advocated against autocracy at Hosni Mubarak's time, and after Abdel Fattah el-Sissi has overthrown the Islamists in power in 2011 (Hendawi). Renowned for her non-fiction writings such as *Temptation of Absolute Power*, *Beyond Torture*, *Memory of Repression* and *The Power of the Text*, she often tackles the uses and abuses of power and their repercussions on the people. Her works are written in Arabic and are politically, psychologically and sociologically oriented. Furthermore, she is known for writing fiction such as *May God Make it Easy*, *The Boy Who Disappeared*, *Here is a Body*, and her 2013 novel *Al-Tabur* (*The Queue*) which will be the discussion of this chapter.

In her debut novel, Abdel Aziz portrays government authoritarianism, religious corruption, surveillance, and how these elements affect the lives of citizens. This dystopia, or perhaps a 'post-Arab spring' reality, paints a full and an elaborate portrait of a community that implicitly resembles Egypt in a combination of satire and allegory. When asked about the reasons she kept the name of the city of her setting unrevealed, Abdel Aziz argued that "this situation — a totalitarian regime and a military institution, an authoritarian system that is controlling the details of people's lives — could be based in any place, and I wanted to express this in universal terms" (Underwood). Power plays an essential part in Abdel Aziz's dystopia; from the relationship between government and citizens, to the relationship between men and women. The latter are doubly marginalized, first by governmental bureaucracy and laws abiding all citizens, and secondly by cultural and social institutions which is highlighted throughout the entire novel. The novel offers an insightful viewpoint about how gender relations form systematic mistreatments of women on multi-dimensional levels. In this context, Marcia Lynx Qualey argues that Abdel Aziz offers a

> gender critique [that] is extraordinary … [and] finds space and time to be concerned about how patriarchy is warping her *male* characters. She creates detailed female characters reacting differently to situations, from different class backgrounds, shaped by patriarchy and fighting against it, and sometimes losing; but then she also finds space to acknowledge how *men* are shaped by patriarchy" (Jaquette et al.).

Abdel Aziz's struggle against injustice is amplified as she discovers her unique female voice in the genre of speculative fiction, which draws "comparisons to Western classics like

George Orwell's *1984* and *The Trial* by Franz Kafka. It represents a new wave of dystopian and surrealist fiction from Middle Eastern writers who are grappling with the chaotic aftermath and stinging disappointments of the Arab Spring" (Alter). *Al-Tabur* has been translated to English by Elisabeth Jaquette in 2016, and has attracted attention of Western audiences, and received positive reviews. The international press praised the novel for its social and political critiques and for its literary style and aesthetic. *London Review of Books* writes that: "Abdel Aziz's work draws on a rich lineage of Egyptian literary styles… She probes the gulf between official rhetoric and the stubborn inconvenience of real events, and delights in the convoluted absurdities that derive from them" (Shenker). *The New York Post* writes that "Although this is a novel, if you follow events in today's Egypt, it's not far from the truth. A brave effort" (qtd. in Abdel Aziz "*The Queue Melville Review*"). While *The New Inquiry* views Abdel Aziz's book to be "One of the most exciting post-Revolution novels written in Egypt" (Jaquette et al.). On the other hand, *Image Journal* perceives that the novel "show[s] how an individual might use the prevailing narratives of religion and power around her to reconstruct a world that also aligns with a personal conscience" (Qualey). Whereas *NRP* writes that it is "[a]n effective critique of authoritarianism…People…will always find a way to control other people in one way or another, should it suit them. Perhaps with the publication of The Queue, the lesson will begin to finally sink in" (Machado).

2.3. Abdel Aziz's Feminist Views

Abdel Aziz's women's rights activism stretches back to her college years. Egyptian journalist and critic Mohammed Shaeer, a contemporary and colleague of Abdel Aziz, describes the situation in which she was a medical student in the 1990s. At such time, medical school was the preserve of the Muslim Brotherhood. Basma Abdel Aziz was among the few non-veiled students, and consequently, the group tried to guide her to the 'righteous path'. However, Abdel Aziz responded in her own way. She prepared articles and topics dealing with the veil and women's rights and stuck them on the college's wall journal. The journal was removed from its place, and the irony was that those who engaged in such an act were security agents, not members of the Brotherhood. Evidently, the security did not like the presence of a left-wing voice calling for equality and human rights at the university. Such an 'organization', which included none other than Abdel Aziz, caused confusion for everyone. Alone, she prepared the

journal's materials and maintained back-up issues in order to stick them on the wall to replace the ones being pulled out. She refused the dominance of religious currents in the university (Shaeer).

Abdel Aziz describes the situation of women in the Arab Spring states before the outbreak of the revolutions. She argues that in light of the prevailing societal traditions and customs, women suffer from many violations of their human rights, and are thus subject to various types of injustice and violence, whether physical or moral (perhaps since their birth). In addition to the economic and social conditions that contribute to the detraction of their rights and roles and effectiveness in society, some legislation, policies and government decisions also contribute to the re-enforcement of women's low status instead of seeking to eliminate discrimination. She takes the example of Egypt as a representative for the rest of the Arab world, and points out that the Egyptian government, when signing CEDAW, made reservations to four articles of the Convention. Such a position has been taken by a number of Arab states, hence disrupting the spirit of the Convention from the ground up and preventing the establishment of laws that support true equality between women and men. She continues to say that despite the fact that the Egyptian constitution stipulates that citizens are equal before the law, Egyptian legislation, like many of its Arab counterparts, contains many blatantly discriminatory articles against women (Abdel Aziz "*Human Rights Activist*").

Furthermore, Abdel Aziz sees that despite the strong role that women played in the January 25th revolution and its aftermath including their participation with men in overthrowing corrupt Arab regimes (Abdel Aziz "*Egyptian Women... Rebels*"), the rise of extremist Islamist currents led to the reduction of women's political roles by excluding them from parliamentary elections. However, she argues that the policy of marginalizing women from political work has become a norm for various parties, regardless of their orientations. Marginalization is not limited to the parties of the religious trend, although it is clearer in them. She points out that, unfortunately, the parties that raise the slogans of democracy, liberalism and leftism do not take into account the representation of women in their organizational structures, and are instead satisfied with hollow statements that are not applicable in reality. She further remarks that it may be understandable that some extremist Islamist currents exclude women, but it is not at all

understandable that civil currents that claim democracy exclude them (Abdel Aziz "*Human Rights Activist*").

Abdel Aziz argues that after the fall of Mubarak's regime, women started to be gradually excluded from social and political life. She accounts numerous practices that served to obliterate women's achievements and eclipse women's rights. The national council for women was considered by Islamist parties as a weapon used at the hands of the falling corrupt regime to ruin the Egyptian family; therefore, all legislations achieved by the council had to be abolished. Women were excluded from the positions of governor, mayor or secretary general because they were not "qualified for such positions" according to the governor of El-Giza. Feminist NGOs were sarcastically referred to by the media as *al-munazmat al-harymy* or "the religiously forbidden organizations". Women were either not fairly represented or misrepresented in the parliament, as only 2% of all the members were women. Even those women in the parliament had a confused point of view regarding women's rights and issues. As such, one female member proclaimed that women are responsible for all the sexual harassments they receive, that women are not allowed to ask for divorce, and that female circumcision and genital mutilation is mandatory (Abdel Aziz "*Egyptian Women... Rebels*"). Some of the Islamist figures called for preventing women reporters to appear on TV without the Islamic dress.

However, Abdel Aziz sees that despite the negatives that surfaced on the scene and affected women, there has been a real change in the awareness of Egyptian women. She recounts that on the International Women's Day on March 8, 2012, a large number of women belonging to human rights and women's rights and representatives of various political parties and even veiled women participated in the march on Cairo. They all chanted against the puritanical religious currents and against men's attempts to seize all state positions and demanded the participation of women by 50% in the constituent assembly to draft the constitution. She sees that this image of women from different cultures and currents coming together was a new spectacle, and is a gain per se. People also witnessed attempts that occurred after the revolution to organize women's work and give it an official hallmark. Such is the forming of a women's parliament parallel to the elected parliament in order to discuss women's issues. In addition to establishing the Egyptian Women Union headed by writer and activist Nawal El Saadawi. Abdel Aziz views that all this is in itself a gain and a development in the process of women's activism

in Egypt. That is despite the fact that women's marginalization increased after the Arab Spring (Abdel Aziz "*Human Rights Activist*").

Political Islam continued the policy of the exclusion of women, as there have been claims that all national and international conventions concerned with women's rights are incompatible with *shariah*. In addition, new projects concerned with the family either called for restoring, canceling or reviewing some laws. The woman's right to ask for divorce has been reviewed by an Islamist project and sought to abolish it, and to permit a woman to be forcedly delivered to her husband's house against her will. Another project advocated lowering the age of marriage to 13, taking into consideration the maturity of the female children's 'bodies' in warm districts. Besides, another project has been under study that intended to repeal the law that incriminates female circumcision (Abdel Aziz "*Egyptian women… rebels*"). Abdel Aziz's views towards political Islam are clear as she argues that the Egyptian woman broke the false religious stick that some were waving, and she realizes like all people realized the amount of lies and deception committed by those who trade in religion and those who profit from it. She decides to call for women's full rights, and no matter how long it takes, she will not retreat from her goals (Abdel Aziz "*Egyptian Women Broke Many Barriers*").

On the other hand, Abdel Aziz argues that many non-Islamist and liberal currents exhibited a discourse that supported the patriarchal culture. This is evident when many human rights activists became affiliated in political parties. Thus, consequent shifts were manifest in their discourse in defending their rights which became flexible and less radical, allowing them to make deals and compromises accordingly. Some of the women and men who took this new approach said that the Egyptian society is not yet mature enough to accept real gender equality, and that it was not the appropriate time to bring women's rights to the discussion, for fear it would result in social problems. "So withdrawal of the liberals from the battle of women rights appeared to be a step made just in order to keep the popularity in a deep and strong patriarchal society" (Abdel Aziz "*Egyptian women… rebels*").

Additionally, Abdel Aziz considers that to confront the danger that threatens women's political, social and human rights, it is necessary to pass a civil law that treats men and women equally. As such, they must be all treated as citizens within the state, equal in rights and duties before the law. Such a law should entail reconsidering the inheritance law because it is high time

to achieve parity between both genders in the issue of inheritance, especially since women have become employed and play the same economic roles as men with regard to the issue of family spending. She affirms that earlier beliefs about inheritance were present in an era under certain circumstances in which the man used to spend on the woman and provide for the family. She states that Tunisia has overcome this matter through jurisprudential reviews. Unfortunately, she believes, the situation in Egypt is going backwards. Such a situation is maintained by representatives who have begun to advocate outdated laws such as female circumcision and the right of the husband to rape his wife. This confirms that people in Egypt are currently unable to carry out intellectual and jurisprudential revisions that keep pace with the requirements of the time. She suggests that since there is a lack of ability to establish the justice and equality that the revolution called for, then it is safer to adopt a civil law that reduces the chaos of reactionary laws that its authors intentionally forget that we are in the twenty-first century. Abdel Aziz believes that there is a conflict between Arab women and hard-line Islamists over their rights and status in society. According to her, Islamists constitute a real threat to everything that women achieved. However, even though Islamists climb to power, she has confidence that Egyptian women in particular and Arab women in general are able to take their full and undiminished rights. Women who support their families, and sometimes even their men, will not allow attempts to suppress them (Abdel Aziz "*Human Rights Activist*").

After a short lecture by Abdel Aziz in Berlin, questions from the audience remained unresolved about what they called the 'ghoul' of the Muslim Brotherhood that could swallow up the rights of Egyptian women at any moment. But the writer emphasizes that Egyptian women have already gained many social and political rights over the years. Abdel Aziz considers in this regard that Egyptian women from different social classes will not give up their basic rights in society. With regard to education, she considers that there should be sufficient awareness of the necessity of educating girls and not discriminating between them and boys (Hefny). In a different context, and pertaining to the future of women in Egypt, she believes that the Egyptian woman is now engaged in a struggle which aims at attaining freedom and complete, undiminished dignity. The Egyptian woman is actually overcoming, day after day, the trinity of religion, customs and traditions, and the political reality that have long tied her up and subjected her to injustice. Furthermore, she maintains that the woman has not obtained her full rights so far and has not

achieved victory in her battle, but she is certain that women are on the right path (Abdel Aziz *"Egyptian Women Broke Many Barriers"*).

Abdel Aziz does not praise previous Arab regimes because there were several legal articles that use gender as a basis for discrimination. Those discriminatory texts include the personal status law, labor and social security laws, and the penal code. Discrimination is clear in the Egyptian Penal Code with regard to the crime of adultery for instance. The law specifies the penalty of imprisonment for the adulterous husband not to exceed six months. On the other hand, the penalty of imprisonment was set at no more than two years for the adulterous wife. Therefore, the crime of 'adultery' has two penalties in the law, which she finds to be a perplexing legislative discrimination. In addition, if the husband discovers his wife's infidelity and kills her, he will be punished by imprisonment for a period not exceeding three years. Such an act is considered to be a misdemeanor and not a felony. By comparison, if the wife kills her husband in the act of adultery, she will be punished according to the law of felonies, which is either life imprisonment (25 years) or aggravated imprisonment (15 years or less). This was justified by the legislator as taking into account the feelings of the man and his rage in defending his dignity and honor, while he considers that women do not have the same human feelings or that they do not have honor or dignity (Abdel Aziz *"Human Rights Activist"*).

Abdel Aziz explains that gender equality was achieved in a spontaneous manner at the times of Mohamed Ali and Nasser, at which times Egypt was guided by a national project for development. Conversely, she views that the lack of such a project will undoubtedly result in the persecution of women and the vulnerable groups. She points out that in the era which was ruled by a system with a religious project (referring to the period when the Muslim Brotherhood came into power), it was "not be a good time for compromises". She asserts that "[w]omen are in need for a radical act, it is the revolution either to fight to gain our freedom or to go back and lose all previous achievements" (Abdel Aziz *"Egyptian women… rebels"*). She sees many positive aspects in the attack on women, as they broke fears and shame in talking about their rights. She recounts some of the remarkable events that took place such as women talking about female circumcision and the pain it causes on social networking platforms. Veiled women with *niqab* calling for their 50% share in the founding committee of the constitution. A woman posting her nude photos in an act of protest against sexual objectification. Topics such as sexual harassment

were discussed and displayed openly. In addition to women forming a significant voting mass (Abdel Aziz "*Egyptian women… rebels*").

2.4. Islamic Feminism in Egypt

To argue that there is only one feminist movement and discourse in Egypt is reductionist. In fact, there are various feminist rhetorics, and sometimes even in opposition of each other. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, the early struggle for women's rights in Egypt is integrated in male modernist reformers' discourse in the 19th century. Muhammed Abduh, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Qasim Amin represent the central figures for whom women's rights were a central element for reform and progress. However, the rise of feminist activism is associated with the liberal nationalist feminist movement led by Huda Sha'arawi and the Egyptian Feminist Union in the early 20th century. The Muslim Brotherhood sought to counteract the rise of the liberal feminist thinking by creating a division in the Brotherhood for the Muslim Sisters group in 1932, whose objective was *da'wah* or calling people to embrace Islam (Abdel-Latif 2, 3). Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, upholds traditional views on gender roles with a rhetoric that regards women as mothers and wives, specifically "in terms of the reference to the 'noble task' and 'noble mission' and in its presentation of the domestic realm as a sanctuary where [a woman] exercises her lordship and power" (Tadros 91). Zaynab Al-Ghazali was a member of the Egyptian Feminist Union before she left to form the Muslim Women's Association in 1936. Her views do not apparently match those of the Union, because she believed the Union's and Sha'arawi's approaches to be a 'mistake' and considered that to talk about the liberation of women in an Islamic society is an error. The Muslim Women's Association's role was

> to acquaint the Muslim woman with her religion so she would be convinced by means of study that the women's liberation movement is a deviant innovation that occurred because of the backwardness of Muslims. … We consider Muslims to be backward; they must remove this backwardness from their shoulders and rise up as their religion commands (qtd. in Ahmed 198).

This provided an oppositional stance to which she previously believed, as the once rapidly expanding association primarily concentrated on welfare work and encouraged women to

study Islam. Its political goal was to have the *Shari'a* (Islamic law) implemented. Her views about the role of women corresponds with the views of the reformist wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, which emphasizes that a woman's primary role is to take care of the family, besides her full participation in public life. To her, "Islam does not forbid women to actively participate in public life. … as long as that does not interfere with her first duty as a mother … So her first, holy, and most important mission is to be a mother and wife" (qtd. in Ahmed 199). Hassan al-Banna urged al-Ghazali to incorporate her association with the Muslim Brotherhood claiming that Muslims must be unified and put their differences apart. He recommended that she leads the centralized women's section in his association, his offer was, nevertheless, rejected, only to change her opinion in 1948 after the Brotherhood was attacked, pledging allegiance to al-Banna. However, he suggested that she keeps her association separate (Baron 237). Women joining the Brotherhood became called the 'Muslim sisters'. It is worth noting here of the problematic nature that confronts us when classifying the activity of the Muslim sisters. In view of the terminological concept, the activity of Muslim sisters cannot be classified as 'feminist' because the concept of 'feminism' contradicts the Brotherhood's thought adopted by the sisters. The Muslim sisters are female recruits within the group that serve the interests of the group. They receive instructions from the higher authority, and their vision of women's rights contradicts the vision of the rest of the feminist factions.

Egyptian feminist activism and any other political activism were monitored by the state during the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser (1952-1970). This was a consequence of the state's banning of independent organizations. Furthermore, women's issues were monopolized and integrated in the state's social welfare issues. Nasser's period was marked by a commitment to social egalitarianism, hence the position of women in Egypt in this period changed, albeit under the supervision of the government. Egyptians were equal regardless of gender under the 1956 constitution and its revised version (Al-Ali 7). Women were given the right to vote and to run for public office. The state also mobilized working-class women to supply its public sector. The state's commitment to women's rights was termed by Mervat Hatem as 'state feminism' (1992). Although there was a considerable progress in the issue of women, state feminism "…did not challenge the personal and familial views of women's dependency on men that were institutionalized by the personal status laws and the political system" (Hatem 233). This was a

result of the state's preserving of the conservative Personal Status Laws of the 1920s and 1930s. Thus, women became part of the state's reform project imposed by political controls, and their movements became through state institutions to implement the national reform project that was carried out by the 1952 revolution. From this date, the official feminist current or 'state feminism' began to be active and develop within the framework that was drawn for it within the political regimes that followed in Egypt until the end of Mubarak's rule in February 2011. During the era of Hosni Mubarak, the National Council for Women was established and headed by Suzanne Mubarak to be the governmental front for feminist activism (Barazi 8).

Islamic feminism has been introduced in Egypt by Margot Badran and Omaima Abu Bakr (El-Marsafy 28). Traditionally, there has been different types of feminist activism before the emergence of feminist voices entrenched in Islam's sacred texts, all of which has been considered by Badran to be modernist, secular and nationalist in their orientations ("*Feminism in Islam*"). There is a problem that faces us when discussing Islamic feminism as a social movement, because it is mainly an intellectual project that "exists and expresses itself through the production of texts, conferences and symposia, as well as networks and organizations that educate and advocate for women's rights both at national and transnational levels" (Moro). Islamic feminism is a global phenomenon that started in Iran and was triggered by the 1979 Islamic revolution, it later spread to the rest of the world. It emerged in Egypt as a kind of "[m]arriage between feminism and Islamism" in 1989 which aimed at discussing and applying feminist issues, while attempting to reread Islamic texts from a feminist perspective (El-Marsafy 34). The *da'awa* movement or the women's piety movement in Cairo was part of the Islamic revival project and advocated a return to 'true Islam' (Moro). It established weekly lessons, readings and teachings of the doctrine of Islam. This movement included for the first-time women as teachers in mosques, and "had become so popular that there were hardly any neighborhoods in this city of eleven million inhabitants that did not offer some form of religious lessons for women" (Mahmood 5). These women, regardless of their different social backgrounds, shared the concern for the 'westernization' and 'secularization' of the Egyptian society (Moro) due to the Egyptian-American alliance in 1973 because of the strategic location of Egypt and its control over the Suez Canal. According to Sabrina Moro, the women's piety movement is part of the Islamic feminist movement in Egypt (Moro) because "the piety activists

seek to imbue each of the various spheres of contemporary life with a regulative sensibility that takes its cue from the Islamic theological corpus rather than from the modern secular ethics" (Mahmood 47). These activists claims are against the state's secular policies which seek a disconnection of the public sphere from the religious sphere. Saba Mahmoud's fieldwork study entitled *Politics of Piety* (2005), conducted from 1995 to 1997, found that the women's piety movement or the women of the Mosque Movement did not attempt to directly engage the state, but nevertheless wished that Islam and practices like veiling should be normative traditions, not just performative. They criticized the notion of an abstract system of beliefs accorded to Islam the way that religiosity was practiced in Egypt at the time, one that bears little influence on the way people live (44). Mahmoud indicates that:

> For most of the *daeiyat* [women preachers], however, reinstatement of the shari'a remains marginal to the realization of the movement's goals, and few lessons address the issue.... this does not mean that the mosque movement endorses a privatized notion of religion that assumes a separation between worldly and religious affairs. Indeed, the form of piety women [...] advocate brings religious obligations and rituals (*ibadat*) to bear upon worldly issues in new ways, thereby according the old Islamic adage "all of life is worship" (46-47).

In this sense, the goal of the mosque movement is to bring to the fore a common set of shared norms so that one can judge his/her own conduct (48). Women's participation in the mosque movement is abided to certain limits nevertheless, and one such limitation was that women instructors were strictly to instruct women, not men. "This is consistent with prohibitions forbidding women to deliver the Friday sermon or to guide men in the performance of collective prayer. Hence the terms *khatib* (one who delivers a sermon) and *imam* (one who leads the prayers) are reserved for men" (65). Women who preach were called *da'iyat* or *wa'izat*. Mahmood highlights that these restrictions' reasoning is entangled in two beliefs. The first of which is the general belief that women should not serve in important positions of leadership which allow them to guide and command men, because the Qur'an assigned men guardianship over women. The second reason is the pervasive idea that a woman's voice can provoke sexual feelings in men, therefore it can render an act of worship null and void. She argues that these conditions of participation are not challenged by women *da'iyat*. However, they continue to

conjure up skepticism, and sometimes condemnation, towards the religious establishment (65-66).

The Egyptian Islamic feminist school owes much of its intellectual and institutional emergence to Mona Abul-Fadl, a professor of political science at Cairo University, who returned to Cairo after a period of residence in the United States with two issues. The first is the need to discuss Western feminist knowledge with its issues and methods from an Islamic point of view and present an in-depth critical view of it (perhaps this original critical stance is what irritates Western centralism). The second issue is the urgent need for original thinking about the problems of Muslim women from an Islamic point of view in which women play a fundamental and effective role based on the principles represented in the Qur'an and the correct *Sunnah*, one that does not accept anything without criticism and discussion. Mona Abu Al-Fadl founded an Egyptian school for this purpose, which was first known as the Zahira Abdeen Chair for Feminist Studies, then developed into the Association for Women and Civilization Studies, which then expanded its framework to surpass the school of Mona Abu Al-Fadl and include many Egyptian feminists who reconcile their feminist tendencies with their Islamic culture, such as Dr. Omaima Abu Bakr and others (El-Sherif).

The two main figures who introduced Islamic feminism in Egypt, Margot Badran and Omaima Abou Bakr, share diverging views concerning who can use and apply Islamic feminism. While Badran believes that all people regardless of their religion, ethnicity and gender affiliations are equal before God, therefore Islamic feminism can be applied to all humans (*insan*), Abou Bakr contradicts this notion by saying that "Islamic feminism should only be applied to Muslims. It should be confined to Muslims only, since there is Christian Feminism for Christians" (qtd. in El- Marsafy 36).

2.5. Islamic Feminism in Post-Mubarak Egypt

Egypt has undergone various changes and power shifts over the last few years, and the Islamic feminist discourse continues to develop and gain more prominence with the political changes that engulf the country. Upon the end of Mubarak's rule in 2011, the Egyptians elected the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate Mohamed Mursi as president in June 2012. Suppressed for years, the conservative groups were able to speak openly on televisions, newspapers and

mosques. According to Abu Bakr, conservative Muslim groups, such as Salafists, advocated a gender discourse that interprets Islam literally, one in which women belonged in the home. She believes that "The political and cultural initiatives that the conservative Islamists stand for are more a reaction to the fact that their own views have been repressed for years. They take everything so literally and are determined to imitate the first generation of Muslims from way back in the 7th century" (Abou Bakr qtd. in Hviid). Therefore, the version of Islam exhibited by the conservative groups is considered to be far from the 'true Islam' that the Islamic feminists call for. It is important to note that the term 'Islamic feminism' did not come into view socially in Egypt until after the year 2011. It was not a prevailing term in society. Rather, it started echoing and expanded after the year 2011, when the January 25th revolution and the broad social movement that took place in its wake allowed the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood to gain popularity. A serious problem emerged after the parliamentary elections, in which the fundamentalist current from the Brotherhood and the Salafis took over the parliamentary majority, which necessitated sounding the alarm on many laws and constitutional rights that were guaranteed by legislation to women during the era of former President Hosni Mubarak. Therefore, women's organizations emerged in order to protect women's rights in Egypt.

Islamic feminism in Egypt can be defined as an intellectual project for Muslim women researchers and specialists in Islamic studies, with the aim of criticizing patriarchy in the Islamic heritage, and building another, more egalitarian alternative. Abu Bakr explains that Islamic feminism in Egypt works on an individual level within an institution called 'Women and Memory' which is not an Islamic institution, but a feminist that deals with all feminists. Some of these feminists are working on Islamic history, including Abu Bakr. She further clarifies that Islamic feminists were at first only known among researchers. In recent years, after the January 25th revolution, they began organizing seminars, conferences and workshops, and with time the term began to surface (Abou Bakr "*What is Islamic Feminism*"). Hana'a El-Marsafy, in her anthropological study of Islamic feminism in Egypt after the revolution, concludes that "the Egyptian society is a religious society and any message justified by Islam will have a strong influence on the Public" (El-Marsafy 47). However, she found that after the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic feminists are not defending the pure Islamic discourse, or 'true Islam', but they use a combination of Islamic and secular feminist discourses in order to be

appropriate for the Egyptian culture. Therefore, it is imperative for any future discourse that seeks to influence the public to appeal to religious ethos. On the other hand, the conservative discourse will have little influence on future generations, and this immunity, she argues, is a result of "the failure of the conservative Muslim Brotherhood rule to introduce a discourse that fulfil[s] the expectations of a revolutionary new generation" (49). Consequently, the Egyptian society is a fertile ground for any innovative issues provided that they align with the religious norms and values of the Egyptian society. According to her, "Islamic feminism as a discourse that is innovative as well as appealing to religion seems to have a considerable opportunity to flourish in the future here to come" (49). Innovative discourses arise within Islamic feminism itself with the rise of the new generation of Islamic feminists after the revolution and more prominently after the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The new generation of Islamic feminism in Egypt seeks to raise the awareness of women by organizing and contributing in many international conferences and webinars. Omaima Abou-Bakr, as one of the important figures of the new generation, engaged working after the Arab spring through Women and Memory Forum. Moreover, the secretary general of the *Musawah* movement/organization (the biggest organization led by Islamic feminists) was moved in 2012 to Egypt. Consequently, the new generation of Islamic feminists engaged in deeper discussions, and shed the veil of shame on many topics that were considered taboo in the past. One of the discussions which were brought up is the topic of marital rape, which according to the Penal code in Egypt is not considered to be a crime, because "the government believes that as long as the married couple holds a legal document that proves their marriage, then it [is] essentially a consensual relationship, not rape" (Dalaman 87). This new generation seeks through the organizations of *Musawah* and WMF to discuss the issue of family law reform in Egypt, a country which relies on religion to regulate family law in a secular law structure. Egypt made some reservations on the CEDAW clauses that include the aspects of equality in family life such as Article 16, and this act, according to the Islamic feminists, breaks the unity and integrity of the family. Marwa Sharafeldin, a Muslim family law reformer and one of the new generation of Islamic feminists states:

> I think that Islamic feminism is actually going to be the entry point for this whole renewal
> of Islamic discourse… So it will be up to the Muslim women themselves who are not

willing to let go of their religion, but at the same time, they are not willing to accept being treated as second class citizens because of a certain version of religion (qtd. in Dalaman 87).

After the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, there have been many persecutions targeting the Brotherhood's members by the government of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Fears that the project of Islamic feminism will be mistakenly labeled as part of the Brotherhood arose, and many Islamic feminists started justifying that their project does not have to do with the Brotherhood's. On the contrary, it criticized its practices and view of gender issues. Abou-Bakr asserts that "[i]n Egypt, this brand of feminist work, though based on religious arguments and study, has never been a part of political Islamism or the MB's project" (195). Islamic feminism is an intellectual project which did not engage in ideological and political activism and its members and researchers have never been a part of the Sisters (women active within the Brotherhood). Abou-Bakr argues that she expressed the ambiguity while the MB were still in rule. In 2013, she writes that Islamic feminism "finds itself in a slightly shifting situation with the Islamic Freedom and Justice party in power. Using 'Islamic-based' arguments and emancipative concepts … can be easily perceived as in alignment with … the conservative Islamist gender ideology that has featured MB thought" (qtd. in Abou-Bakr 195). Clearing this fogginess which immerses this epistemological project should not only draw away fingers of suspicion, but will allow Islamic feminists to work and proceed with their agenda without the limitations and persecutions practiced against the Brotherhood. For Islamic feminists, finding a space to communicate their ideas is essential for the prevalence of Islamic-based gender equality within Egyptian women.

When Mohammed Morsi was ousted in 2013 and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi became president, things did not seem to be better for women. El-Sisi was cast as a hero and savior for the Egyptian people, and different images of masculinity were drawn in the highly biased media about him, incorporating sexual insinuations. These images represented the president's star to impregnate Egypt, and many women offering themselves to him, either for marriage or as concubines (196). Subsequently, women were out of the frying pan and into the fire, that is- they gone passed a conservative rule to a military rule that does not bode well for the issue of women. Newspapers were presenting military men securing voting centers to be guarding and protecting the queues of women voting for the constitutional referendum. Additionally, el-Sisi remarks about the

traditional roles of women before his presidency were not thoroughly analyzed by feminists. Abou-Bakr argues that the feminist consciousness "should not sacrifice an ethically consistent outlook on political engagement for superficial or temporary outcomes" (197). Therefore, in order to avoid falling prey to double standards, a feminist critique ought to stretch both to religious and military patriarchy. The outrageous status of Egypt dictated by el-Sisi's dictatorship is tempted to violate human rights, let alone women's rights.

2.6. *The Queue* by Basma Abdel Aziz: Plot and Themes

"Whereas dystopian narratives generally 'reveal an aptitude to narrate in the conditional tense – the genre's "what-ifness" – contemporary Egyptian dystopias tend to express 'what already is" (Moore 196).

Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* is told from an omniscient point of view. The story follows a linear plot structure, which depicts the lives of different characters endlessly waiting at *al-tabur* or the queue for the Gate to open. The Gate represents ultimate authority, as it appeared to monitor and organize the people's lives in every detail. The novel is divided into six parts with each part containing several chapters. However, linearity breaks in terms of storytelling, as chapters of the novel are dedicated to the characters and keep jumping between them in order to follow their lives at the queue in different events and time periods. Each part in the novel starts with a chapter dedicated to the character of Dr. Tarek Fahmy, the doctor undesirably responsible for the case of Yehya Gad el-Rab Saeed -the protagonist of the story. Tarek is placed at a dilemma while handling the file of Yehya, which positions him at the impossible situation of defying authority and helping Yehya out, or going against his moral code and letting him die as a consequence of catching a bullet in his pelvis. Yehya sustained the bullet while he was at the square when the 'Disgraceful events', a skirmish between ordinary people and the country's security forces, took place. He is taken to the hospital where Dr. Tarek oversees his case. When Dr. Tarek initiates to remove the bullet from Yehya, he is warned by one of his colleagues that the government made it illegal to take such an action in the aftermath of the Disgraceful Events without a certain permit obtained from the Gate. Moreover, while Tarek sits at his desk with his hands figuratively tied, details about the events that led to Yehya's misfortunate incident are spoon fed to him with many details missing. Totalitarianism is one of the major themes in *The*

Queue. It presents a state where even the ruler is unknown to the public. This totalitarian government relies on religious figures such as the High Sheikh and the man in the *galabeya* to deceive citizens by using texts from the Greater Book, and even exaggerating their hypocrisy. The interests of this regime are protected by a military force that follows the orders of the gate blindingly. Higher authority is known for the people only as The Gate. The writer, in a blunt and almost deliberate way, establishes the heart of her bleak world, the Gate, and focuses her attention on it. She does not get busy with giving adequate explanations to the world before The Gate, or even how this world really looks outside the framework of the queue.

> At first no one knew what this immense and awe-inspiring structure was that simply offered its name — the Main Gate of the Northern Building — as the pretext for its existence. Yet it was not long before people realized the importance that it now played in their lives. As the ruler faded from the public eye, it was the Gate that increasingly began to regulate procedures, imposing rules and regulations necessary to set various affairs in motion. Then one day the Gate issued an official statement detailing its jurisdiction, which extended over just about everything anyone could think of. This was the last document to bear the ruler's seal and signature. As time passed, the Gate began to introduce a few new policies, and soon it was the singular source of all regulations and decrees. Before long, it controlled absolutely everything, and made all procedures, paperwork, authorizations, and permits — even those for eating and drinking—subject to its control. It imposed costly fees on everything; even window-shopping was now subject to a charge, to be paid for by people out doing errands as well as those simply strolling down the sidewalk. To pay for the cost of printing all the documents it needed, the Gate deducted a portion of everyone's salary. This way it could ensure a system of the utmost efficiency, capable of implementing its philosophy in full (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 31-32).

Abdel Aziz feeds her readers with scattered information about the Gate's origins. This intentional undertaking sets the tone and the mood for the entire story, because it provides little details which contributes to the overall sense of ambiguity surrounding the enormous structure into the heart of her unnamed state. It is as though she wants to tell her readers that the building's origins story is not as important as when it took authority and controlled the lives of the people.

All the readers are left to know is that it was established in the wake of the 'First Storm', a popular uprising led by ordinary people who almost forced the ruler to surrender. However, with the internal fractures within the uprising, conflicts began to appear to the point that they forgot about the ruler who regained influence, and his military started to regroup and rebuild, thus the Gate appeared (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 8-9). Abdel Aziz references the failures of veritably all the Arab Spring states associated with popular uprisings against unjust ruling systems, with the possible exception of Tunisia, that instead of the dream-like democratic utopias they hoped to become, they ended up with nightmarish, oppressive dictatorships and sectarian-based internal conflicts and destruction. This tremendous regression is reflected on the economic, social and political scene, and had direct repercussions on the people's lives. Egypt, under el-Sisi's government, is exposed to its worst human right's crisis, and contemporary reality became what Abdel Aziz refers to as "a badly written dystopia" (qtd. in Moore 192). Crimes including torture, killings and political detainment are used against activists and the ready-made charge of terrorism became the trait of anyone who speaks against injustice. Bureaucracy and the inability to practice the freedom of speech are the hallmark of el-Sisi's government. Abdel Aziz uses the Gate as an exaggerated emblem of total control and the bureaucratic procedures which incarcerate the people in the world she creates in an endless circle trapped between hope and despair.

The novel revolves around the line of people that stretches kilometers away from the closed Gate, in *al-tabur* 'the queue', hence the novel's title. Yehya arrives at the queue to get a permit to remove the bullet from his pelvis only to know that many people in a queue that goes beyond sight are waiting to receive permits from the Gate to do simple, routine everyday tasks. The queue represents a small society which encapsulates economic, political, social and religious post-Arab Spring and modern-day realities. People from different backgrounds and with different interests join the queue, with a special emphasis on the characters of the struggling mother and future entrepreneur Um Mabruk, the once rebellious turned pious and obeying schoolteacher Ines, the resourceful friend of Yehya Amani, the injured Yehya, Yehya's best friend Nagy, the autonomous and defying woman with the short hair, the conservative man in *galabeya* and the loyal Shalaby. Days and weeks pass by while these characters wait at the queue to receive their papers from the Gate, but it never opens to anyone. This absurd endless waiting is sometimes stirred by some dispersed hope of people at the front of the queue allegedly seeing moving

shadows of people within the Gate. The people in the queue are clutching to what little hope they can find, manifested in the rumors about the presumed day of its opening. News about the Gate's opening keep hovering around every day, yet the Gate never opens. Although there is no punishment for those who leave the queue, no one dares to leave. Therefore, the novel lays out a state of absurd waiting, similar to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. This unnecessary and frustrating experience draws attention to Kafka[5]'s modern-day mythical works about bureaucracy and the meaninglessness of all the procedures set by a ruling system to keep people in a rolling wheel. Abdel Aziz says that the idea that inspired her to write the novel is when she came back from a vacation in France, and headed to the Ministry of Health to finish some papers. When She was passing through Qasr El-Eyni Street in Cairo on her way to the ministry, she saw a line of citizens in front of a government building whose door was closed and there was no window. The scene caught her attention because of its strangeness, but she continued on her way. On her return a few hours later, she saw the same queue is still there, and no one moved from it, but the number of people standing increased. The situation provoked her, as it was a strange scene in which the standing people seemed to be tied to the queue, so she decided to take notes about the scene and write it as a story (Sakr).

The authoritarian system attempts to remove the shooting during the Disgraceful events from the memory of the people. By hiding and manipulating facts, this regime uses every tool possible to achieve its purpose. Such an example is when newspapers are substituted by one newspaper called *The Truth*. To Yehya's misfortune, the bullet that lies in his body is evidence that the military force of the Gate fired bullets at rioters, the fact this regime wants to keep hidden from the public. Yehya is then placed in a labyrinth of paperwork in order to do the surgery. However, this intersects with the Gate's interests and he never receives the papers necessary to pursue his endeavor. Furthermore, the Gate not only wants the people to forget about the events, it wants to convince them that the shooting did not take place entirely, and by doing so, Yehya cannot remove the bullet, because it would mean the opposite of what they are propagating. The Gate confiscates all X-rays performed after the Disgraceful events from the hospitals and continues to confiscate the X-ray machines as well. Amani, Yehya's fiancé, after finding out that a copy of the X-ray performed on Yehya is still held at the Zephyr Hospital, a

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[5] Franz Kafka's works, particularly *The Trial* and *Poseidon* tackle the absurd nature of the procedures of bureaucracy.

direct subsidiary of the Gate, makes an effort to steal it, because it is the only proof that Yehya has a bullet, therefore, it should enable him to do the surgery to remove it. However, her mission is unsuccessful and she is caught and mentally and psychologically tortured. The chapter of Amani's torture entitled 'Nothing' shows the prowess of Abdel Aziz as a writer and an expert of psychological torture, because the reader suffers along with Amani, and is left suffocating by the experiences she goes through. Amani undergoes a psychological rather than a physical torture, as she is locked naked in a dark space where she can feel nothing; no walls, no light and no sound except her internal voice. She reaches the point where she wishes to be tortured physically and to feel pain. Amani proves to be a case of the aspirations of the Gate towards its subjects, because upon her release, she leans towards thinking that no real bullets were shot at the Disgraceful events, and attempts to convince Yehya by saying that "the bullet that had pierced his side and lodged itself in his pelvis was a fake bullet, and it wasn't important to remove it, and that he no longer needed to trouble himself with who had shot him," Aziz writes. "But Yehya was not convinced, and he did not stop bleeding" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 213). The Gate is an epitome of a totalitarian regime, and as is the case in all totalitarian regimes, it "seeks to completely control the thoughts and actions of its citizens" (Pipes 243) including those thoughts and actions considered trivial and insignificant. Shaping and reshaping consciousness are forever present in what resembles an Orwellian doubletalk version of the Gate's control as "it urged citizens not to be misled by what they had seen, no matter how confident they were in the accuracy of their vision" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 93). This government wants the people not only to say that '2+2=5', but to believe it. After her experience, Amani is radically changed leading not only to altering her thoughts, but also to breaking her rebellious character. Contrary to the Orwellian Ministry of Love, she does not come out to say 'I love you, Big Brother', but becomes frightened, questioning her own convictions, and yearns for psychological comfort. She decides to believe what they told her, that nothing had happened, no injuries, no bullets, nothing.

Surveillance is also another major theme in the dystopian world of *The Queue*. Totalitarian governments, with the intention of protecting their interests, use surveillance to monitor and therefore control the actions of their subordinates. Surveillance, which is an act of violating the privacy of people, "is driven by the desire to bring systems together, to combine practices and technologies and integrate them into a larger whole" (Haggerty and Ericson 610). With the rise of new technologies, it became easier to infiltrate the people's daily routine, as

these technologies "permit a relaxing of centralized, bureaucratic management supervision and monitoring" (Lyon 128). In Abdel Aziz's novel, surveillance is a task performed by the Violet Telecom, a telephone company that provides services to the citizens of Abdel Aziz's world, which is discovered to share the private conversations of people with the Gate. Consequently, the people of the queue start noticing disappearances and relate them directly to their phone conversations. The people who are receiving these rumors grow cautious about what they say. Others like Ines become extremely frightened because they think they will be next in the line of disappearances. While the woman with the short hair organizes a boycott of the telecom's services.

Religion is weaponized through religious persons in order to justify for the government and to break the boycott. These corrupt *ulama's* are a powerful tool at the hand of the ruler. They represent a type of clerics who harness their knowledge to serve the ruler, either out of hope for his benefit or out of fear of harm. They twist the religious texts according to the interests of their rulers. This is manifested in the High Sheikh, and his miniature local version the man in the *galabeya*. The novel draws a realistic picture about present-day Egypt, because the ruling system in the country relies on religious persons to convince citizens about the often-unjustifiable laws and decrees. The Egyptian society is a religious one, therefore accepts anything as long as it is disguised in religion. This is why the novel can be considered as a religious and military dystopia. Abdel Aziz "wanted to show that religion is being used here to control people, but meanwhile, the military system is still present" (Underwood "Waiting"). While Yahya's wound is still pouring blood, the High Sheikh issues a *fatwa* that "if citizens were pious, God-fearing believers (and not weak of faith), they would not bring destruction upon themselves" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 181). However, if a bullet were to hit a 'true believer', he should accept it as though it was from God. The *fatwa* urges the 'true believer' not to "question the unquestionable—such an act could lead him down a perilous path towards doubt…. He must acknowledge how lucky he was to be struck by a bullet, and exalted to a place in heaven ordinarily reserved only for the most dutiful" (181). Absurd as it may seem, the atmosphere in Egypt does not fall far from the novel's pessimistic and disturbing depiction of religion gone awry. The High Sheikh issues a fatwa in response to the Violet Telecom boycott declaring that "[b]elievers shall not boycott their brothers, nor cause them to suffer financial or emotional distress, and shall not call upon others to take such actions, as this is one of the gravest sins,

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unless done in support of religion" (133). This *fatwa* is supported by the man in the *galabeya*, who organizes lessons and urges people to break the boycott and even collect donations for the company. He benefits both as a supporter of the ruling system and as an owner of a large stock in the company.

2.7. Patriarchy, Sexism and Resistance in *The Queue*: An Islamic Feminist Reading

The Queue can be considered as an anti-patriarchal dystopia on a multi-dimensional level. Its writer engages with the male-dominated field of speculative fiction. In addition to depicting sexism within the novel, Abdel Aziz demonstrates through *The Queue* that fighting patriarchy and male dominance can be achieved in the two fronts: from within the text and from without. This is evident in her attempt to write in the once male-dominated genre, namely speculative fiction. Besides her depiction of the injustice and inequality that her female characters face. This twofold confrontation with patriarchy seeks to highlight and perhaps eliminate the forms of discrimination prevalent in the intellectual and creative fields, as well as the social and political spectrum. Evidently, women writers are conquering this new genre, albeit with many stumbling blocks. According to Aysha Emad El-Din:

> The status and portrayal of women in Arabic [speculative] fiction is at a precipice in the post-Arab Spring era. Using Egypt as a test case, it emerges that the number of women contributing to the genre is on the rise, and that the presentation of women is generally positive, if not very in-depth and challenging. The politics and economics of literary production is the greater issue, holding back all authors regardless of gender (Emad El-Din 28).

On the other hand, the novel captures exceptional women characters. Most of whom are portrayed in a positive manner that shows resistance to the patriarchal structures. Other women and men accept their roles as clogs in the giant machinery of patriarchy. Submissiveness works to keep these characters silent throughout their entire lives. All of the social institutions including religion, culture and politics are used to achieve the purely male purpose of dominance and control. While some characters are obedient, others show a resistant stand against injustice and attempt, with what little they have, to change their reality. Men are also affected by patriarchy. Yehya, for instance, finds himself with a bullet in his body, trapped in the paperwork to remove it. In this sense, "the bullet itself is an interesting gendered figure: [Yehya] has this thing in his

belly waiting to be born and it'll kill him if it isn't removed" (Jaquette et al. "*Let Loose Your Tongue*"). The characters of Um Mabrouk, Ines, Amani and the woman with the short hair represent women from different class backgrounds. They are exposed to patriarchy, yet their response to it differs immensely from one character to the next. In the following paragraphs, the experiences of these characters are discussed with reference to the Islamic feminist school of thought.

2.8. Women in the Private Sphere: Gender Inequality and Domestic Violence

Throughout the entire novel, there has not been a single mention of Um Mabrouk's real name. All what readers know her for is Um Mabrouk, that is the mother of Mabrouk, her son. Characters in the novel identify her by her son's name, bearing in mind that she also has two older daughters. This concealment of her name, conscious or not, is a strong epitome for the "failure" of the woman who "take[s] her identity from [a] man" (Heilbrun qtd. in Gardiner 347). It is as if her female identity is dependent on her male son. This is emblematic of the patriarchal attempt to remove all traces of the female, even on the level of the nomenclature. Um Mabrouk is put at unending crises and traumatizing experiences.

> Her eight-year-old son was sick with a bad kidney and was always in and out of the hospital for more treatments. She'd taken him in several times in just the past month, and watched as his slender body was pumped with what seemed like gallons of medicine. Her two older daughters couldn't help with the bills because they were both weak with rheumatic heart disease. By the time the doctor had read her the results of the X-rays and medical tests that had diagnosed their condition, they had already fallen far behind in school (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 19-20).

As a conservative and religious woman, Um Mabrouk relates all her problem to fate. She works very hard in order to fulfill her family's demands. With some help from Amani, she is able to work at the company that Amani works for. Her job requires her to do several tasks including cleaning, working in the kitchen and helping out in the office. She engages in a busy schedule, for she works almost every day, morning to afternoon, with just a few minutes to rest for lunch. She even adds other jobs to her schedule in her days off as the expenses for her children and apartment "rose like floodwaters" (18). She becomes suffocating under the rising living costs and living conditions, considering her children's health problems. Her face "was

lined with sorrow" (18). Her husband is an irresponsible person who "never [leaves] the coffee shop, who'[s] quit his job and wander[s] around idly in search of hash and pills" (20). To make matters worse, not only he neglects his responsibilities towards his family, he intervenes to ask his wife for money. Sometimes he pleads with her for money, but when she refuses and berates him, he even beats her.

Traditional views about finances in the Muslim family dictate that the man has an almost exclusive responsibility towards his family. This is supported by many texts insisting that guardianship over the family is the man's responsibility. Guardianship requires the man to fulfil the needs of his children, wife and older parents (if any). In *surah al-Baqarah*, Allah says: "But the father of the child shall bear the cost of the mother's food and clothing on a reasonable basis" (*The Quran* 2:233). The duty to protect the wife physically and provide financial support is justified by the verse that says: "Men are the caretakers of women, as men have been provisioned by Allah over women and tasked with supporting them financially" (*The Quran* 4:34). On the other hand, traditional views dictate that the wife has no financial obligations towards her husband, children or keeping the household. These views maintain that even if the wife is working in an esteemed position or is rich while the husband is a humble day laborer, still the latter is required to provide for the family on his own. The word *qawwamūna* in surah *al-Nisaa* (4:34) is translated, according to different translations in English, as caretakers, guardians, supporters, protectors and maintainers. All of these words suggest a certain obligation. They delineate that the man is in charge. However, feminist writers argue that the period of Qur'anic revelation was marked by a society that was entirely different from our contemporary one. Women in these times were responsible for raising and educating their children. They had a certain autonomy over their own property and income. During this time, the task of raising children and educating them, as Amina Wadud argues, was much more difficult due to the lack of access to technology and diseases and the absence of necessary healthcare knowledge. Consequently, not only were gender roles in these times inevitable but necessary as well. Wadud writes that: "The Qur'an establishes his [the husband's] responsibility as *qiwamah*: seeing to it that the woman is not burdened with additional responsibilities which jeopardize that primary demanding responsibility only she can fulfill" (Wadud "*Qur'an and Women*" 73). The social structures since the Prophet's time have undergone many changes. Gender roles' changes are less visible nevertheless. *Qiwamah* becomes a problematic concern in our modern societies where

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evidently one income cannot provide a comfortable lifestyle. Some husbands cannot even provide materially. For this reason, Wadud argues that these problems will never be solved "if we look narrowly at verse 4:34. Therefore, the Qur'an must eternally be reviewed with regard to human exchange and mutual responsibility between males and females" (73). The rest of the verse is most commonly quoted against Islam. It is used as an argument about the Islamic command of wife beating. It is considered as a clear expression in support of domestic violence. Allah says: "As for women of whom you fear rebellion, convince them, and leave them apart in beds, and beat them" (*The Quran* 4:34). Traditional and contemporary readings of the verse suggest that the beating of the rebellious wife should not be a painful punishment, but one that is more symbolic than actual punishment. While the word *daraba* which literally translates to 'beat' or 'strike' is considered to hold its literal meaning, albeit lightly or mildly, other meanings surface among scholars and researchers with an egalitarian view on Islam. An argument that delivers a meaning that is historic, therefore, suggests that *idribuhunna* (beat them) in the Prophet's period means to separate (stay away from) or divorce (Mernissi "*Veil and the Male Elite*" 157). According to Wadud, *daraba* does not always carry the meaning of violence or force in the Qur'an. It can mean 'to give an example' such as in the phrase '*daraba Allah mathalan*' (Allah gives or sets an example) (Wadud "*Qur'an and Women*" 76). It can also be used to mean that someone sets out on a journey. Reading the verse in its contextual setting, in the light of excessive violence (such as pre-Islamic female infanticide) against women before and after Islam, Wadud argues that "this verse should be taken as prohibiting unchecked violence against females. Thus, this is not permission, but a severe restriction of existing practices" (76). These writers argue that the verse is used out of its context and intended meaning "in order to show how words of the Qur'an have been mistranslated in order to make men masters and women the slaves" (Hassan qtd. in Ammar 524).

Um Mabrouk's husband neither helps with the household finances nor treats his wife with care. His negligence towards his responsibilities transcends the minimum limits to become a complete liability that his wife has to bear along with their children. To rub salt in the wounds, he often beats his wife when she refuses to provide him with what he wants. The husband's cruelty stems from his judgment that he owns his wife, a feeling bestowed upon him by an unjust patriarchal culture and probably a faulty reading of God's sacred texts. This is not only a mistreatment of Um Mabrouk, but a "a serious oppression against the woman" (Wadud 73).

Having to bear with these conditions with her husband, Um Mabrouk is placed between the frying pan and the fire: her husband treatment and her children's illnesses on one hand, and the hard living conditions on the other. Despite her husband's mistreatment, there are no signs of resistance or even a minor rebellion to show her dissatisfaction about her life, except for "when she scold[s] him" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 20) right before he berates and beats her. She keeps living her life the way she knows: working hard, taking care of her ill children, and keeping calm about her husband.

2.9. Social and Religious Attitudes towards Women and Female Entrepreneurship

The inferior status of Um Mabrouk is not entitled to her solely by her husband, but also by her society. Abdel Aziz draws a picture about the illness that permeates the Arab society in relation to women. The scene that Abdel Aziz describes features a vivid portrayal that tends to capture the details and responses of the people in society on the specific incident that happens to Um Mabrouk. On her way back home after a long day at work, Um Mabrouk takes the old metro enjoying a moment of relaxation. A "dirty-looking man" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 18) sits across from her when a woman leaves her seat empty. She gives a promise to herself that she would never get up from her seat despite how bad he smells. After all, relaxation is a luxury she rarely has in these moments of her life.

> She watche[s] him cautiously and edge[s] her legs away, but that [doesn't] stop the man, who seemed half-crazed, from curiously reaching out to grab at her breasts. Um Mabrouk jump[s] up, screaming and cursing at him, and hit[s] him with her bag, which opened up, and the broken old rotary phone she'[s] taken from the office to repair fell onto the floor. The man panic[s] at the clatter, leap[s] toward the metro door in fright, and jump[s] out before the train stop[s] at the next station (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 18-19).

This incident is followed by commentary and criticism from the people in the metro car. Ironically enough, almost all of the criticism is directed to Um Mabrouk and not to the man who harassed her. As the unfortunate unexpected sexual assault takes place, women's voices and shouts are torn between fear and confusion. Um Mabrouk hears oddly unexpected responses from the passengers. She hears mutters of shame from the people around her. There is a man who "whisper[s] that a woman's place [is] in the house, his gaze fixed on the ground" (19). Another passenger even "quote[s] a passage from the Greater Book, and although she couldn't

make out what he said, she sense[s] from his tone that it [is] directed at her" (19). All of these examples represent the reality and mentality of the Arab society. Instead of helping out the victim and standing with her, they kick her when she is down. Alternatively, they stand with the perpetrator, justifying his deed by saying that in order for a woman to avoid harassment, she must conform to traditional gender roles and stay at home. The use of religion by quoting the 'Greater Book' shows that the discourse used by men on women is essentially one dimensional in "its insistence on the inferior status of women" (Jones qtd. in Gruss 49). Um Mabrouk is then blamed for her own victimization. Furthermore, after the incident, Um Mabrouk blames herself because it was her decision not to change her seat. Self-blame and others blame is a widespread phenomenon that happens in case of sexual assault and rape. This assumption suggests that "[b]ystanders and society at large victim-blames in order to protect themselves from the perpetrators.… This phenomenon is called the Just World Theory; the idea is that only bad things happen to people if they did something wrong to deserve it" (Schoellkopf 6). In the case of Um Mabrouk, her mistake is to go out of her house. All of her problems, it seems, are due to bad luck. She once visited the High Sheikh before the Gate made it strictly impossible to get in touch with him. He told her that she is cursed with bad luck because she "neglected her prayers" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 20). The author attempts to show that the misuse of religion works on different levels. Indeed, the High Sheikh convinces her that her problems are due to not praying, and not to society, government and her husband. Consequently, she makes a promise to herself to uphold all of her religious duties. However, her situation does not change to the better, but only to the worse.

When Um Mabrouk's daughter dies, she sees an opportunity of saving her other one by using her daughter's death as a leverage. She asks from the people she knows to help her in collecting the funds required for her daughter's operation. Despite her attempt, she does not collect the necessary money. She goes to the hospital director's house and kisses his hands to waive just half of the operation's fee, but he instructs her to go to the infamously bureaucratic ministry that has jurisdiction over the hospital called the Gate of Maladies. There, she is asked by an official she cannot receive treatment for her daughter unless she completes certain paperwork. Having little money to survive, she pleads him and prays for him. He tells her that her daughter's death certificate is inappropriate, and continues to say that her daughter's time was up. He asks her if she believes in God and recommends that she stop "go[ing] around blaming other people

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for her own woes" (67). The official urges her to get an appropriate death certificate from the Gate of the Northern Building. Placed at a labyrinth of procedures and paperwork, "she had to withdraw the complaint she had submitted about her elder daughter's death, and the documents she'd attached to prove that her living daughter's condition had deteriorated" (67). Bureaucracy, as manifested here, is a kind sexism practiced by the state. She bribes the official who has done nothing but directing her to do more paperwork at the Gate that never opens to anyone.

The bad economic situation of Um Mabrouk with the death of her elder daughter and the illness of the younger one requires her to think of an immediate solution. Waiting in the queue costs her a lot as she stopped working at people's homes. Consequently, she takes space in the queue and starts her business. She makes friends among drivers passing through the queue and asks them to bring her packages of sugar, coffee, tea and milk. She buys a gas burner and cheap cups made of plastic. She provides drinks for the people waiting in the queue upon her return from her only job at Amani's office in the morning. Customers are the people near her, but her business starts to expand especially since the only coffee shop near the queue closes. This almost instant success gives her an insight to add other services such as letting people use her phone at a discount. "Before long, she [is] able to buy Mabrouk [her son] a new backpack for school, and then she gave him a bit of money to give to his sister" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 89). Um Mabrouk sets an example of Muslim women's entrepreneurship however small her business is. Islamic history is full of *sahabiyat* and women entrepreneurs. Commerce and trade have always been a part of the Islamic economic life. The qur'anic message of women and earning is clear in the verse that: "Men shall have a benefit from what they earn, and women shall have a benefit from what they earn" (*The Quran* 4:32). The Prophet's wife Khadija bint Khuwaylid was one of the biggest traders of that time. Women were not excluded from trade in Islam, there were many successful business-women like Um al Saidina and Al-Shifa binti Muawiz who was elected 'commandant' of Medinah market. Contrarily to what is assumed, Islam actually encourages women's entrepreneurship and "the big evidence is that Prophet Mohammad did not ask his wife Khadijah to sit at home and leave her business when they got married" (Althalathini et al. 10).

Skirmishes between the Gate's forces and protestors harm Um Mabrouk's thriving business. Afraid she would be attacked; she is forced to pack up her things and stop her business until the 'Riffraff' is over. The riot causes a divide that has been lurking in the shadows for a

long time. People in the queue start resenting the protestors because they heard rumors about the Gate's presumed opening. On the other hand, protestors threaten people in the queue and Um Mabrouk is accused of helping to keep the status quo and even making profit out of the situation. After the Riffraff is dissipated, Um Mabrouk feels that a lot time is wasted in the events which restores "her belief that misfortune follow[s] her wherever she [goes]" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 92). She believes that an incident not caused by her, such as the Riffraff, is a proof of her misfortune. This echoes the High Sheikh's words that she is cursed with bad luck because she neglects her prayers, which demonstrates a sort of mentality that keeps women from changing their situation. Things become normal in the queue and the man in *galabeya* invites Um Mabrouk to the religious lessons he gives at the front of the queue.

Um Mabrouk proves to be a fierce competition in the male dominated field of commerce. Her clients are the people that used to go to the near coffeeshop where Hammoud works. Losing many customers to her, Hammoud claims that she has overstepped her bounds, and that she does not know about the business. Um Mabrouk's commerce skills grow and she starts gaining more and more customers and expanding her business. She realizes that the radio that the woman with the short hair holds attracts listeners, so she strikes a deal with her to stay near her in exchange for free tea.

Um Mabrouk joins the Violet Telecom boycott campaign that the woman with the short hair organizes. Being a conservative woman, Um Mabrouk is convinced to boycott certain candy products in which the word 'God' can be seen in a certain light. The boycott is organized by the Fatwa and Rationalizations Committee, which overlooks the Violet Telecom's violation of people's privacy and condemns the boycott against it, while encouraging it for a certain candy factory. However, her enthusiasm for the boycott fades as soon as she attends one of the man in *galabeya*'s lessons. Supporting the *fatwa* issued by the High Sheikh and protecting his interests as a share-holder in the Violet Telecom company, the man in *galabeya* once again resorts to religion. Indeed, he does not "say a word without supporting it with passages from the scripture" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 134). Um Mabrouk weeps during the lesson and swears she would abandon the boycott. Befriending the woman with the short hair keeps her in constant struggle nevertheless. In her attempt to protect her friend, she is harassed relentlessly by the man in *galabeya* especially that the woman with the short hair has "attracted an audience whose size

rivaled --sometimes even exceeded-- that of his own weekly lessons" (169). He advises Um Mabrouk to stay away from her, but when she refuses "he berate[s] and shame[s] her" (169). However, his words have little influence on her because she feels more independent once she raises the money for her daughter's treatment. The man in *galabeya*'s weapons become useless against Um Mabrouk who decides to disobey him and get rid of her free phone. And once "he realize[s] how outright rebellious she [is] being, and that she [is] no longer under his control, he [forbids] her from attending his weekly lesson" (169). Um Mabrouk's power lies in the fact that she stops relying on a man in her life and starts relying on herself. Her husband and the man in *galabeya* represent patriarchy and male dominance that keep her from achieving her goals. She breaks the chains of patriarchy with its two different forms: the first being the "rule by the father/husband, which, in some of its religious iterations, draws on images of God as Father/ male", while the second is "the politics of sexual differentiation that privileges men in their biological capacity as males" (Barlas "*Patriarchalism and the Qur'an*" 28).

1.10. Politics, Political Participation and Female Agency

Besides culture and the misuse of religion, politics is another instrument for the subordination of women. The old woman from the South is standing at the queue to file a complaint because she is denied buying government-made *baladi* bread. She is asked by all bakeries to get a *Certificate of True Citizenship* from the Gate in order to be able to get her daily portion of bread. She is a faithful customer of *baladi* bread, but upon one conversation in relation to politics, she loses the right to buying bread. The shopkeeper asks the old woman who did she pick in what seems like an election. She tells the man that she "checked the box next to the candidate with the pyramid symbol" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 11). The man becomes really mad and "flashes his teeth, and tells [her], 'I know your kind, the whip is what people like you deserve'" (11). He apparently wanted her to pick another candidate. Although the novel does not reveal whether she picked the unwanted candidate because she is old and illiterate or she it was her conscious decision to do so, the consequences are stuck with her. The man tells her "We don't have any bread! And don't come back" (11-12). When she goes to other bakeries, she notices that they have heard what happened and she is denied from buying any bread unless she gets the *Certificate of True Citizenship* from the Gate. Evidently, the ability for individualized choice and action in political participation is non-existent. Political participation for women is

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one of the first rights to be advocated by the feminist movement. Women understand the power of political participation and representation; an idea which frightens the patriarchal ideology. Women's presence in the public sphere (through casting their votes which stand for their individualized choices) is a right encouraged by Islam. According to Hassan Al-Turabi: "Women played a considerable role in public life during the life of the Prophet, and they contributed to the election of the third Caliph. Only afterwards were women denied their rightful place in public life, but this was history departing from the ideal" (Al-Turabi 244). The woman from the South is punished by not having her daily bread because she chose the wrong candidate. This inhumane act does not stem from neither a religious doctrine nor a cultural practice, but from a politically-driven selfish act that aims to deprive women from making political choices. The shopkeeper thinks that denying bread for the woman from the South is not a sufficient act, he thinks she deserves a 'whip'. It is as though it is permissible to hit a woman for just having a voice in a political matter. The woman near her in the queue called Ines thinks that "[p]olitics had eaten away at people's heads until they in turn had begun to devour one another" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 12).

Unlike the old woman from the South, Ines prevents the politically-based act of sexism by lying. She has chosen the same candidate as the old woman but chooses to keep quiet about her pick. The question 'who did you pick?' is repeatedly asked after the elections, and its answer could lead to direct economic repercussions on the person should he/she pick the wrong candidate. Ines becomes frightened and hides her pick by maneuvering the question. She uses an old trick to avoid answering until the other person answers first. "Her response each time was to turn the question around on whoever was asking and follow their reply—whatever it was—with a wink, a shy smile, and the reliable phrase: 'That's who I voted for, too'" (12). Although she gets away with it and avoids blame, she is constantly afraid and cautious about what she says. This form of patriarchy seeks to exercise a dominating influence over women all the while keeping them silent and obedient. Molding women's thoughts and overseeing their political views and choices has never proven to benefit women. On the contrary, it works to subordinate them and elevate the patriarchal agenda. Ines has lived her entire life vigilant and afraid. She is circumspect in all her conversations and extremely careful in all that she says. However, the fact that she is standing at the queue in order to receive a Certificate of True Citizenship is due to a mistake she made when she was still a teacher. She receives an essay from a girl from her Arabic

class. To Ines's liking, the essay is well-written and tackles the conditions in their district. The essay also speaks broadly about the situation in the country and the developments in the region. Ines thinks not only that the essay is perfectly written, but the "girl's words echoed what [she] herself might say if no one were listening" (13). She suspects that one of her family members wrote or helped her in writing it. The girl swears that no one helped her, and that the essay represents her own thoughts. Having no choice but to believe her, she gives the girl "a nearly perfect grade, [has] the class applaud her, and ask[s] the girl to read her essay in front of the other students, as an example of outstanding work" (13). A simple common teacher's act as it may seem, the consequences of such an act result in severe backlashes on Ines and the girl. The girl is absent from school, and an inspector arrives demanding to see Ines's Personnel File. She is then suspended from resuming her duties as a teacher unless she gets the Certificate of True Citizenship. Before leaving, the inspector leaves a cassette tape at the principal's office, which she "later learn[s] that it [is] a recording of the girl reading her assignment" (13). Evidently, surveillance exists within classes and schools as well.

Religion is used as a tool for politics. It is often pointed at helpless women in order to subordinate them. After the elderly woman from the South collapses suddenly in the queue and people thought she is dead, the man in *galabeya* proclaims that it is a sign from God. He claims that God is angry with her because she has wronged herself and other people. Her sin is that she did not repent or hide her mistake. He raises his palms and calls out: "Only those who have gone astray picked pyramid candidates" (27) referring to her choice in the election. He claims that instead of bowing before God and ask him for forgiveness, she comes to the queue to file a complaint as though she is the person who has been wronged. In his view, her political orientations that do not conform to his is a grave sin. A sin she is responsible for which, ironically enough, requires repenting and not calling for her right (to have her daily bread) through legal procedures. Unfortunately, the very fabric of the Egyptian and Arab society is interwoven on religious basis. So, everything that is given the religious hallmark or is told by a man with a beard is unquestionable. The power of the man in *galabeya* lies in the fact that he possesses both authoritative qualities: a man and religious. One of the key roles of Islamic feminism is to raise the awareness of women and urge them to study religious texts. This is to help distinguish that which is religious from anything else, and not fall an easy prey for men who use religion to achieve their purposes.

Arriving lately in the queue, a woman with short hair and black skirt confronts the once unopposed man in *galabeya*. These two characters are identified through the entire novel by their descriptions and not by their real names. Abdel Aziz maintains that their names are insignificant because they are more symbols than real persons. They represent certain trends and groups in society (Mansour and Abdel Aziz). The man in *galabeya* represents a tool that can be used by politics and an epitome of religious authority. While the woman with the short hair represents resistance against authority. The choice of the character of a woman to represent resistance is a clear demonstration of Abdel Aziz's intentions to rise up against sexism in all its facets: political and patriarchal. These two characters confront when a man hurriedly leaves the queue and forgets to take his bag and newspaper behind. Another man follows him to return his things but he is late. There is nothing in the bag that reveals the man's identity. The man in *galabeya* urges the man who found it to take it, and that there is nothing wrong in doing so as long as he attempts to return it to the owner with good faith. It is a "manna from heaven" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 47). The woman with the short hair contends that they keep the bag for a couple of days until its owner, who must be looking for his things, returns to collect them. If he does not show, then they should hand it to the nearby official in the booth. Her presence is enough to irritate the man in *galabeya* who sanctimoniously turns away from her. She even hears him "mutter a prayer for busybodies to be led toward the right path, and the same for fools and the ignorant, who know not the difference between righteousness and sin" (48). Discontented that she intervened, more people avert their gaze and agree with the man in *galabeya*. A man wonders if it is "right to listen to the opinion of a woman standing so immodestly among a group of men" (48). This clearly reveals that cultural practices disguised as religious are tremendously entrenched in Arab societies. In fact, Islam does not marginalize women from giving their opinions. On the contrary, there are prominent examples of outstanding figures in Islamic history taking the opinion of women. During the caliphate of Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second Rashidun caliph, Uman gave an opinion about the way finances are settled in case of divorced couples. A woman in the mosque argued with Umar because she had a different opinion. Umar heard her out and the woman publicly disagreed with his opinion. The ferocious leader then retracted and said "the woman is right and Umar is wrong" (Ahmed "*Women and Gender in Islam*" 141). Here is an example of women participating in public life in early Islamic history. Women's opinions were valued and had an impact on many executive decisions in different affairs.

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Although the woman with the short hair's statement is directed to the entire gathering, her words find resonance only in Ines. She is troubled by the men attacking the woman. Resisting the urge to stay out of trouble, and as insults are "hurled upon the woman" (48), she thinks it is enough and shouts: "She's right" (48). Her words, albeit feeble and soft, result in the whole crowd to turn to her. Brief and faint, these words join the woman with the short hair who still insists on protecting the bag. The crowd feels that "an opposing side [is] forming" (48). Apparently, Ines's move is not well thought out, because after she utters the words, her face becomes red and she feels embarrassed. However, one positive aspect of her interjection is that the discussion has stopped. The argument used against the woman with short hair about her immodest standing is not used against Ines. It is partly because Ines wore a hijab and because they fear they could stir other women into joining them. The discussion about the bag is ended when a journalist named Ehab recommends that he take the bag to the newspaper headquarters and publish a notice so that the owner might recognize his belongings.

1.11. On Government, Military and Social Oppression, Rape and Seclusion

Shalaby takes the place of Yehya upon the latter's short withdrawal from his place. Yehya thinks that there is no use of speaking with him, because he stands there "with such bravado, obstructing the place like a concrete pillar" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 63). Yehya has no choice but to turn away with his "head hanging low" (63). Shalaby and his cousin Mahfouz represent the type of patriarchy that manifests toxic masculinity. Standing near Ines and Um Mabrouk, he picks up the threads of conversation about the reason he is standing in the queue. Shalaby's father has taught him and Mahfouz "everything they needed to know about life" (72). His presence in the queue and far from his village is because he seeks redemption for his dead cousin, Mahfouz, whose name is not in the list of Righteous Guards. Besides recognition by the Gate, Shalaby demands a Special Pension Permit and a proper compensation for their families whom are being evicted from their land. Shalaby used to be a guard in the Servant Force with an easy task of protecting the family of a commander. While Mahfouz used to be in the Quell Force and it was his "sworn duty to protect and defend the country from Godless infidels, unscrupulous rebels, and other filth who were bent on destruction and had an insatiable appetite for dirty money" (73). A dependable member of the force, he never disobeys an order from his superiors.

Mahfouz kills a rioter with his truncheon, but the man's friends seek revenge. They surround him and he jumps into the water and drowns.

To the dissatisfaction of Ines and astonishment of Um Mabrouk, Shalaby continues boasting about his cousin. Shalaby declares that Mahfouz should be named a war hero and a martyr. However, he reveals that his cousin has made a mistake or two. Such a mistake is when he was assigned with guarding a hospital. Shalaby narrates the mistake that his cousin made stating that:

> Mahfouz said he'd struck a deal with a patient suffering from a bad liver to spend the night with her. But then she screamed out in fear, and when the doctors and nurses on duty arrived to find him at the edge of her bed, about to take his clothes off, they grabbed him and dragged him outside. He fought back, saying she wanted him, saying she was the one who called to him from a window in the empty ward, and when they couldn't calm him down they tied him up and informed his unit (74-75).

The mistake that Shalaby speaks about is not that Mahfouz attempted to rape a woman, but that he abandoned his post as a guard. He insists that because he was young, "his lust for this woman had overpowered him" (75). Despite the fact that the woman is a victim of rape, she was afraid of what people (society) would say about her. She "wanted to protect her reputation" (75) and decides not to file an official complaint. The woman's fear to talk about the rape attempt stems from the injustice that permeates the patriarchal ideology. The woman represents, therefore, a "repository of male-defined honor in the community . . . This concept is restrictive for women, who fear losing the vested honor through any nonconformist behavior" (Zia qtd. in Lamrani 3). If the woman decides to take the rape trail, she will be forever charged with losing her own honor, and the honor of her family, particularly that of her father and brothers. This entails that she has lost her virginity, which will reverberate on her future marriage aspirations. Shalaby and Mahfouz are examples of toxic masculinity, one that promotes violence that includes sexual assault and domestic violence against women. They only exhibit the traits of strength and masculinity and attempt to hide any weaknesses. This leads to the reassurance of traditional gender roles and often leads to the subordination of the other sex.

While Um Mabrouk sympathizes with Shalaby on Mahfouz's death, Ines's patience reaches an unbearable limit, and she erupts like a volcano rejecting to call Mahfouz a martyr.

Once again, she speaks without thinking "casting aside all virtues of silence, caution and restraint" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 76). She starts blaming Mahfouz for killing people, and sees that he deserves punishment along with his superiors. Despite Um Mabrouk's attempts to silence her, she continues her speech. Surprised at herself, she finds herself speaking her ideas in front of people. She takes off the clothes of shame and expresses her opinions about the matter without any hesitation or fear. Reviewing what she said, she recalls Um Mabrouk's attempts to silence her, and thinks she is correct. She thinks that if anyone from the government was listening, she would be fired for life from her job and not just be reevaluated. Her alarm shows that the government reinforces the patriarchal structures already prevailing. Shocked by what he has heard, Shalaby turns on her and thinks of slapping her. In this simple conversation, he cannot take it and thinks to use violence against her. He thinks that Ines is ignorant and has no honor. Indeed, his thoughts start taking a new direction entirely, as they are steered towards other things other than the topic itself. Upon a simple disagreement in a conversation, he thinks that she is "probably corrupt, morally and otherwise—no scruples, no religion, not even wearing a respectable headscarf; he could see a strand of hair hanging down beneath that pitiful scrap of fabric on her head" (78). Seemingly, her headscarf does not match the one sketched in his head, therefore, does not allow her to discuss topics like his cousin Mahfouz.

The relationship of Ines and the man in *galabeya* is characterized by male dominance. He grows fond of her especially that he sees "the absence of a ring" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 50) from her "tender" hands. Consequently, he becomes interested in her and pays visits to the area where she is standing. Although no relationship binds the two yet, the man in *galabeya* starts exercising power against Ines by dictating what she should do and how she must act. Upon a visit, he sees that she is talking to another man near her in the queue. He is annoyed by "the disgraceful mingling between men and women" (117) and commands Ines "to conduct herself with modesty" (117). This highlights the double standards of the man in *galabeya* who has talked to Ines and checked her hands and skin before. Seclusion, veiling and surveillance are the devices used by the man in *galabeya* because, in his mind, women are considered to be a source of *fitna* or chaos and disorder. *Fitna* can also refer to "a beautiful woman – the connotation of a *femme fatale* who makes men lose their self-control" (Mernissi "*Beyond the Veil*"). This justifies the seclusion and veiling of women because men fear that they would fall "prey to *fitna* whenever they are confronted with a non-veiled woman" (Amin qtd. in Mernissi "*Beyond the*

Veil"). This not only objectifies women but also undervalues them. According to this definition of *fitna*, women easily succumb to masculine attraction, which raises a problem of who should wear the veil.

Ines starts to disappear gradually under her imposed veil. Even though she wears a veil, it does not seem to match the one that suits the man in *galabeya*. He preys on her fragile situation after she discovers that she is being surveilled by the Gate. Evidently, her conversation with Shalaby is recorded: "every syllable and every word had been recorded" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 121). The people in the queue start noticing disappearances. Afraid the she would go missing, she succumbs to the man in *galabeya* because she needs a man to shelter her in order to feel safe. This shows that in addition to patriarchy, government oppression worsens the situation for women in favor of male dominance and female submission. The man in *galabeya* is seen around the area where Ines stands many times "talking to her at length, sometimes even shouting. Sometimes she crie[s] harder when he [is] around, and other times her tears [abate], but no one heard exactly what he said" (127). The double pressure that she faces makes her very anxious to think that if she gets into trouble, her entire family will be affected. It would tarnish the family's name and "result in divorce of her sister, who would be forced to leave her husband's house and take her children with her" (131). Her sister's husband would divorce his wife because of something not/committed by her sister. Islamic feminism calls against male unilateral divorce which is prevalent in most Arab societies. Unilateral divorce means that one spouse (mostly the man) decides to end a marriage without the other's consent, an act "not granted to [men] by God but by Muslim male jurists" (Mir-Hosseini "*Muslim Women's Quest for Equality*" 642).

Ines appears in the lessons of the man in *galabeya* "wearing a loose white veil that [falls] down her stomach, concealing her breasts" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 135). She is changed and instead of supporting the boycott campaign and standing with the woman with the short hair, she attempts to dissuade her. Her look becomes even more conservative, constantly "making sure that her neck and hair [are] completely covered" (167). In order to satisfy the man in *galabeya*, she attends his lessons and wears "a drab *isdal* over her everyday clothes, and it [falls] from the middle of her forehead down to her toes, so that every hill and valley of her body [is] concealed" (185). Then, he starts his lesson by praising the "modestly dressed believers who [follow] the

path of righteousness" (185). To him, righteousness lies in covering the entire body. This simplistic reduction of women into a virgin or a whore encourages the inferior status given to women. Using the religious discourse as a tool to exercise power is what men like the man in *galabeya* do. He distributes booklets to women present in his lesson "with titles like *The Nature of Women … Suffering the Temptation of Women*" (185-186). The titles of the booklets show his views about women: as different from men, and as a temptation. To celebrate her return to the right path, Ines is given the whole collection of booklets because they "would help her learn more about faith, the world, and religious practicalities" (186). Ines feels relieved that she belongs to the new crowd and the man in *galabeya* starts to rely on her. Growing fond of her, he asks her hand for marriage. After taking the consent of her family, she grows "comfortable with the idea of someone beside her, able to share her burdens, who she could lean on in times of need" (189). After marrying the man in *galabeya*, Ines leaves the queue for good, relinquishing her attempts to regain her job.

Similar to Abdel Aziz, Amani's character is strong and rebellious. She is "headstrong, a trait [not] often seen in women" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 177). Amani and Yehya are engaged to each other, and could have been married were it not for the unfortunate bullet that hits Yehya. They could have had "an ornate wedding dais at the beginning of the queue, in front of the Gate" (100). The two of them could have been "wrapped in a long embrace, lovingly entangled in each other, instead of this uncomfortable silence that had settled between them since his injury" (100). Amani possesses an independent and strong personality, stronger than Yehya's, who relies on her in often hard tasks. Yehya draws a picture in his head about his fiancée who autonomously takes the dangerous task of stealing his X-ray from the unbreakable Zephyr Hospital in order to perform the surgery. He thinks about "Amani storming the hospital basement, striking down whoever opposed her and returning with the X-ray" (100). The relationship of Yehya and Amani is one of gender equality, not just complementarity, which is what Islamic feminists advocate. She pays the bills and has a steady job that they could both rely on. Yehya on the other hand does not treat her as inferior, but seeks her counsel and takes her advice. Therefore, Abdel Aziz shares with Islamic feminism the tendency to advocate full equality in the public and private spheres. However, religiosity is not exhibited in Amani's life. She wears jeans and does not wear a headscarf and does not mind kissing her fiancée. Therefore, female empowerment as manifested in Amani does not have roots in religion. Instead, her empowerment is rooted in the

secular beliefs of gender equality. Amani goes to the Zephyr Hospital to get the X-ray but she is caught by the guards.

Amani is questioned, refusing to cooperate and withstanding threats, she finds herself in what seems like a completely dark room. There are not voices in there, no sense of walls, bars or columns. All she can feel is the solid ground underneath. She screams, swears and curses The Gate, the Violet Telecom and the High Sheikh. Soon, she takes it back and begs for forgiveness "rebelling then pleading, filled with courage then wracked with tears" (152). Despite her contradicting attitudes, no response comes from her captors. Having nothing to touch with her hands, she starts touching her body to realize that her clothes are gone. She touches "her thighs and her breasts and in between her legs, checking they hadn't [raped her]" (153). Rape is used as a weapon of torture in Arab prisons against women opposing or even not agreeing with the regime's methods. The psychological impact on women humiliated by rape is not easy to wish away. In her dark nothingness, Amani wishes "they could beat her" and "to be tortured" (153) physically just to feel some pain, because pain mean that she is alive. She is reduced to nothing and perhaps, she thinks, "she really [is] nothing" (153). After what seems like forever, she finds herself in a tunnel, free from her prison, and goes home. She is changed by the experience in the prison and instead of the independent and rebellious personality, she becomes a passive malfunctioning individual. The oppression that Amani goes through is neither religious not cultural. It is rather oppression by government and politics. She is oppressed because she attempts to steal the X-ray that proves Yehya has the bullet in his pelvis. A fact the government seeks to keeps hidden by altering facts and reshaping people's consciousness. Taking her clothes off in prison is more of a symbolic torture. Clothes represent the façade that people put to hide what they wish not to reveal. The government reveals the fragility of a person and takes off any worn disguises. Additionally, if clothes are taken off a man, the impact would be less severe than that on a woman. To women, involuntary nakedness is often attributed to sexual harassment and rape. A case proven by Amani's touching of her body in her dark captivity.

On a different context, it is important to mention that Amani and the woman with the short hair are the two female characters who stood against dominance: governmental and patriarchal. Both of these characters do not put any type of veil or headscarf. Female agency and dress code perpetuate old stereotypes about Muslim women and the veil. By comparison, Ines

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and Um Mabrouk, both of whom wear hijab, are less independent and more sumbissive. While many modern Muslim feminists stress on the importance of the women's freedom of choice in veiling or de-veiling, other Muslim feminists believe that "the veil is the visible symbol of the subjugation of women" (Amara qtd. in George). The Qur'an stresses on modesty[6] and does not specify how modesty is achieved. This explains the different types of veiling prevalent in Muslim majority countries. To name a few: chador in Iran, burqa in Afghanistan and niqab in Saudi Arabia, each with a certain style and mode of clothing. This lack of consensus is due to cultural factors and not to religious ones. And while modesty is required from both men and women, "veiling and seclusion [are] manifestations particular to [certain cultural] context[s]" (Wadud "*Qur'an and Women*" 10). Like many Islamic feminists, Abdel Aziz insinuates that female choice in dress code is essential for female empowerment. However, women who choose the veil as their clothing of choice are not explored. Veiled women in the novel like Um Mabrouk and Ines are submissive. This negative image about the veil is a perpetuation of Western stereotypes and a detachment from cultural norms.

The woman with the short hair represents the type of woman men fear, mainly because she is independent and possesses the traits of a leader. She is shunned by men when she gave her opinion about the lost bag, thought to be immodestly dressed, opposed for daring to speak among men, and considered to be a troublemaker. She organizes a boycott against the Violet Telecom company as the latter is proven to have violated the privacy of its customers. "[U]ndaunted by the obstacles ahead" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 122), she rallies many people from the queue, and successfully convinces the majority of the queue to join her campaign. As she makes many supporters, she creates many animosities. Most men who are against her stance, including the man in *galabeya*, consider that women are not allowed to lead. This all-pervasive attitude against women in Arab cultures is often supported by the Prophet's *hadith* that appears in Sahih al-Bukhari that "those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity". Fatima Mernissi argues that the "hadith is the sledgehammer argument used by those who want to

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[6] "And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their private parts; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their khimār over their breasts and not display their beauty except to their husband, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments." (*The Quran* 24:31)

exclude women from politics" (Mernissi "*Veil and Male Elite*" 04). The hadith is central in all arguments about women and politics "that it is practically impossible to discuss the question of women's political rights without referring to it, debating it, and taking a position on it" (04). Contrary to the patriarchal ideology, Islam does not exclude women from political decision-making, either as representatives or as voters.

Infuriated by the boycott that the woman with the short hair leads, the man in *galabeya* "want[s] to banish her from the whole district" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 127). He becomes very delighted that a *fatwa* is issued by the High Sheikh criminalizing "boycotts that negatively affected businesses owned by God-fearing believers" (132). The only woman courageous enough to stand against the man in *galabeya* is the woman with the short hair who accuses him "of discrediting the boycott campaign to defend Violet Telecom, while secretly using another phone network himself" (132). Apparently, the man in *galabeya* is not affected by the surveillance effectuated by the Telecom. Once again, religion is used, by the High Sheikh and the man in *galabeya*, to support state and personal interests which clearly demonstrates how religious corruption can be deep-rooted and difficult to eradicate. The man in *galabeya* uses the fatwa from the High Sheikh while supporting it with passages from the Greater Book to warn against spreading false truths and rumors. His support for the patriarchal agenda surfaces when he says that "it [is] the right of a father—and those of a father's rank and position—[(referring to the state and government)] to watch over his children, using all available means" (135). Some women in his lecture start crying but the woman with the short hair redoubles her efforts. She prints "oppositional leaflets responding to the allegations made by the man in the *galabeya*, and declare[s] that she would continue the campaign" (135). Furthermore, she includes a passage from the scripture "which urge[s] people to respect and defend personal privacy" (135). Her untiring importunity and use of the passage reveal that Abdel Aziz urges women to counteract false interpretations by their own readings of religious texts. Accordingly, her views intersect with the Islamic feminist views because as Hanan El-Bahie puts it: "The role of Islamic feminists should be raising awareness on the importance of women studying religious texts rather than blindly following a sheikh's interpretation and mainstream preachers" (qtd. in Sabry).

Consequently, the woman with the short hair gains more support and becomes a source of influence. Her supporters transcend those of the man in *galabeya*'s. While Um Mabrouk stands

with the woman with the short hair and defends her, Ines stands with the man in *galabeya* and wishes to deter her. Sharing a history of sexism, these two women represent two examples of female submissiveness and female empowerment. The woman with the short hair defies the threats from the man in *galabeya* who claims that she is "planting seeds of evil among people by urging them to think, and ask questions, and engage in other such undesirable activities" (Abdel Aziz "*The Queue*" 170). However, she neglects his threats and continues with the boycott campaign. In the eyes of the man in *galabeya*, the woman with the short hair has gone astray. Women, in his purely Islamist views, should neither speak in the presence of men, lead political campaigns nor even speak about their rights. Righteous women are those who cover their entire bodies and obey men without questioning. Women's inferiority and men's superiority becomes granted by God when harnessing religious scriptures. However, Islam neither advances "the thesis of women's inherent inferiority" (Mernissi "*Beyond the Veil*" 4) nor promotes male dominance. In fact, it seeks to affirm "the potential equality between the sexes" (4). Abdel Aziz portrays submissiveness and empowerment in *The Queue* to show that these opposing poles exist within the same spectrum. She draws a line between justice and injustice to show that neither religion nor common sense endorse gender inequality and social injustice.

1.12. Conclusion

This chapter was dedicated to discussing Abdel Aziz's contemporary speculative fiction novel *The Queue* from an Islamic feminist perspective. It aimed to highlight, through the novel, the role social institutions play in the marginalization of and injustice against Arab women, chief of these is the use of religion by the male culture. Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* is an anti-patriarchal novel. It sheds the light on the social injustices and inequalities between men and women. It is a social and "gender critique" that seeks to present detailed characters that are "shaped by patriarchy and fighting against it" (Jaquette et al.). However, Abdel Aziz highlights that sexism against women cannot be reduced in the simple equation of religion and culture. She believes, through her novel, that sexism towards women lies at an intersection between culture, religion and politics. She places emphasis on the use of religion as an authoritative tool by the male culture, while also emphasizing the role Arab governments play to worsen the situation of women, albeit in a dystopic and bureaucratic atmosphere. The novel can, therefore, be considered as a post-Arab spring political and social statement that shows the comprehensive

understanding of the situation in Egypt and the prowess of a female Egyptian speculative fiction author.

Chapter Three: Misogynist Islam, Backward Arab Culture and Submissive Women in Twenty-Second Century Morocco in McHugh's *Nekropolis*

3.1. Introduction

'Patriarchy, oppression and injustice' constitute the dominant Western narrative about Islam and women. The Western academia as well as literary production have projected certain attitudes towards the Muslim world. Although an outsider's vantage point is not a new phenomenon, shaping and re-shaping the 'Other' in Western imagination have been to exert power and to achieve defined aims. Orientalist and neo-orientalist efforts have had a considerable influence on Western and even global opinion about the condition of the Muslim woman. Western politics, media, social and feminist organizations, artistic and literary productions have been weaponized to demonize Islam and set goals to 'save Muslim women' (Hirschkind and Mahmood 340). American feminist Maureen McHugh's 2001 novel *Nekropolis* is no exception. A science fiction and dystopian work, *Nekropolis* is set in futuristic Morocco which is "reduced to a homogenous stereotypical Western reference of orthodox Islam" (Foram 211-212). This chapter aims to use Islamic feminism for different ends than the previous chapter. It aims to expose the Western hegemonic discourse towards women and Islam through highlighting Western bigotry and attachment to false assumptions about the Arab culture and Islam. Adopting Islamic feminism as a lens allows for a thorough understanding of the nuances that can only be understood from a cultural relativist perspective.

3.2. Maureen McHugh: A Pen that Echoes Stereotypes about Islam and Women

Maureen F. McHugh, her middle initial standing for nothing, is an American science fiction and fantasy writer. She was born in February 13th, 1959 in Loveland, Ohio. An author of four novels and several short stories, McHugh's works were nominated for and won several prizes including the 1996 Hugo Awards and Locus Awards for her short story *The Lincoln Train* and novel *China Mountain Zhang*, the 1993 James Tiptree, Jr. award for *China Mountain Zhang*, and the 2012 Shirley Jackson award for *After the Apocalypse: Stories*. McHugh has "established herself as one of the decade's best science fiction writers" ("Maureen F. McHugh: Authors"). She believes that science fiction provides opportunities and understructure which cannot exist in other forms of writing. She emphasizes that "in science fiction we argue, we synthesize, we theorize. We never trust the way we've cast the world, never trust our own center … and I think

that sums up my fiction. We're always looking for the paradigm shift" (McHugh "MAUREEN F. MCHUGH: Family Matters). Along with over twenty short stories, McHugh has written the novels of *China Mountain Zhang* (1992), *Half the Day is Night* (1994), *Mission Child* (1998) and her 2001 novel *Nekropolis* which will be the discussion of this chapter.

Although published in 2001, *Nekropolis* is considered to be a pre-9/11 speculative fiction novel set in an Arab Muslim country (Durrani 10). The novel reproduces 22nd century Morocco as a dystopian, highly sexist and repressive state, isolated from the rest of the world and ruled by a fundamentalist theocracy guided by the rulings of the Second Koran, a reformed version of the Qur'an. Islam exists in the background and is "subtly hinted at" (Foram 208), it is in the context rather than the content. However, the strict religious rules of the Second Koran hover around the entire novel to produce a dystopic atmosphere. Women are enslaved by technological devices in order to obey their owner. Although set in the future, McHugh aims at criticizing the present, because as William Gibson points out that: "Nobody really writes about the future. All we really have … is the moment in which we are writing" (qtd. in Durrani 8). *Nekropolis* embodies the trend of writings negatively representing Islam in science fiction. Ironically enough, this criticism is not often accompanied by knowledge about the religion and culture of those in question, rather it is an attempt to force an Orientalist and ethnocentric point of view. Rana Kabbani writes that:

> It has become intellectually fashionable for American women writers—with little or no experience of the Muslim world, with no knowledge of Muslim history—to spew forth, in books and articles, on the "pathetic" state of women under Islam. What is worrisome about this growing literature—which is always popular with a Western readership that can never get enough about the "horrors" of Islam—is that it re-establishes the old racial stereotypes (qtd. in Hankins and Thornton 328).

This not-new phenomenon of negatively portraying Islam and Muslim women in science fiction comprises the writings of many American female writers. Prominent examples include Joanna Russ's *Two of Them* (1978) which depicts women as subjugated to men and secluded. It shows that Islam is the source of women's oppression. Furthermore, Louise Marley's *Terrorists of Irustan* (1999) envisions a Taliban-like planet where men are deemed superior by God and women are highly oppressed. The interest of contemporary American science fiction in depicting

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women under Islam often involves false and distorted images, "[e]choing stereotypical notions of Islam's supposedly inherent disregard for the rights of women" (Hankins and Thornton 327). These portrayals are a byproduct of the encounters between Islam and Western civilization. Pre-9/11 Western narratives tended to view Muslims as primitive, erotic, ignorant and slave traders. But after 9/11, these narratives extended to include descriptions such as fundamentalists, terrorists and blood-thirsty (Hashmi 10). The numbers of negative depictions of Islam by female writers of science fiction raises many concerns. On the one hand, these writers represent Muslim women adopting the religious covering as brainwashed, enslaved and oppressed. On the other, the large readership of their writings would result in the assumption that "the authors' representations of Muslim women are accurate" (328) stimulating Western women's sense of superiority.

Western prejudice in feminist American science fiction against Islam takes biased and ethnocentric shapes that distort and misrepresent the religion and the people. Western constructions are often lacking accuracy and thoroughness because there is an absence of a comprehensive understanding of Muslim societies and cultures. The portrayal of a timeless Islam, and the perpetuation of the image of the oppressed woman in head and body covering in contemporary American science fiction rests on a purely white supremacist Western feminist perspective and interpretation of the Muslim cultures. Edward Said puts it best in his 1981 book entitled *Covering Islam* when he says:

> All knowledge that is about human society, and not about the natural world, is historical knowledge, and therefore rests upon judgment and interpretation. This is not to say that facts or data are nonexistent, but that facts get their importance from what is made of them in interpretation… for interpretations depend very much on who the interpreter is, who he or she is addressing, what his or her purpose is, at what historical moment the interpretation takes place (Said 154).

Westerners '*know'* that Muslim women are oppressed. The source of their oppression is religion itself. Some even call for an intervention to save Muslim women. They believe that "Islam is predominantly sexist and pre-Enlightenment.... Thus, the West has to object to Islamic sexism whether arranged marriage, headscarves, limiting career options or the more extreme manifestations, female circumcision and stoning women for adultery" (Hutton qtd. in Mancini

414). Instead of recognizing the plurality of cultures, they deem difference as a clash of values. Therefore, what is required is a counternarrative discourse that reveals the authentic side of Islam and the Muslim society. One that confronts the stereotypical views all the while challenging the prejudiced traditional exegesis. Islamic feminism provides a rich discourse that confronts and challenges the works of "the prejudiced fiction writers or historians" who spared no effort in "dehumanizing Islamic culture" (Hashmi 12). The complex reality in the Muslim world should not be reduced in the superficial and simplistic reading that veiling equals oppression. Some Islamic feminists in Iran, for instance, promoted the chador as a national dress. Fai'zih Hashemi, with reference to Iran, argues that:

> The fabric of our society is traditional-religious, aside from that minute percentage who probably liked things like unveiling of women and following Western models, or considered such acts as women's liberation. I do not agree with that since to me, freedom is rendered meaningful in the context of culture. That freedom was only for a few people (qtd. in Shahidian 9).

3.3. Western Feminism and Islamic Feminism

The West regards Islam as inherently oppressive of women. While pointing the fingers of accusation to specific states and specific interpretations of Islam by the Taliban in Afghanistan for instance, overgeneralization by the American and Western public and media is the dominant discourse. Westerners identify that "the oppression of women as intimately linked to what is often portrayed as the violent nature of the religion and [affirm] that the cause of liberating Muslim women from their bondage is part of the American mission to the Islamic world" (Haddad et al. 3). This overgeneralization aligns all people under Islam with backwardness, primitiveness and barbarism. This stance of defining Arab and Muslim societies contributes to the general representation of these societies as static and passive and in need of modernization. Furthermore, representations and misrepresentations are hardly distinguishable. Hence, the problem lies in "whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer" (Said 272). Islam's misrepresentation by the West was reinvigorated after the events of 9/11. Islam was seen as terrorist in George Bush's politics with the slogan of 'War on Terror'. In addition to terrorism,

"the ideological rallying cry of "saving" the women of the Middle East has been a powerful tool in justifying U.S military intervention in the region" (Rich 1). According to the mainstream American and Western discourse, Muslim countries have no freedom at all, and it is chiefly women who endure the most such harsh realities. This fascination with the 'oppressed Muslim women' is the topic of the media and also of Western feminism.

Western feminism played an important role in support of war on terror. With organizations such as the Feminist Majority, the image of the veiled woman has been used to represent and to "prove Islam's unique oppression of women" (Rich 2). Evidently, the West exports the notions of the injustice pervading Muslim societies, identifying Islam as the source of all evils. The Feminist Majority, following the 9/11 attacks, considered "the *burqa*-clad body of the Afghan woman [to be] the visible sign of an invisible enemy that threatens not only "us," citizens of the West, but our entire civilization" (Hirschkind and Mahmood 341). The notion of the veil as a representative of Islam's oppression of women is used by politicians, the media and major feminist organizations in the West. The veil becomes a symbol of oppression in Western thinking. Indeed, the veil is the key element in the Western formula to persuade the public opinion that their cause is morally justified. Consequently, even those skeptical of Western feminist's "save Third World women" became sympathetic with the campaign of the Feminist Majority (340). Accordingly, all veiled women either in Afghanistan or elsewhere are identified as oppressed. Hence, the veil becomes emblematic of women's lack of agency and choice with regard not only to garment, but also to employment, political participation, education, and are considered to more likely suffer domestic and sexual violence. Voices of saving women from 'barbaric' and 'terrorist' Muslim men were rising higher than those of Muslim women. This benevolent act of forcedly emancipating Muslim women demonstrates that "Western feminism as the true oppressor" (Quinn 2). Viewing Muslim women against the American way of life, Western feminists conceptualize Muslim life based on value judgments. Therefore, what is different becomes oppressive in the view of the American standards. Western feminists rapidly jump to conclusion and "speak for all women, regardless of cultural differences" (Morton qtd. in Quinn 2). What is required, nevertheless is "to challenge the universal humanist assumption, prevalent in some western feminist thought, that all women's lives and histories are the same" (2). Women's experiences are influenced by internal cultural and socio-political factors

occurring in their indigenous communities, thus are different and should not be exposed to the same criteria of judgment.

Islamic feminists shed the light on the issue of Western perceptions of Islam and women. Leila Abu-Lughod's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* discusses the topic by highlighting the problems in the debate. She expresses that the Muslim woman suffers more from the injustice of globalization than she does from patriarchy. She argues that humanitarianism conceals the new face of colonialism. She highlights how well-intentioned Western feminism has served to support the war on Afghanistan. She addresses the problem from different facets such as the use of women's rights in Afghanistan as a justification for intervention, 'IslamLand' as a "the place where things are most wrong today" (69), and how "Islam is condensed in the figure of the victimized Muslim woman" (70). Furthermore, she criticizes the proliferation of the new genre of 'pulp nonfiction' about the Muslim world which recount the sensationalized accounts of women's rape and oppression. She also addresses one of the most 'iconic' and discussed symbols of oppression in IslamLand: 'honor crimes' (112). In addition to an analysis of Muslim and Islamic feminism. She asserts that "[i]t is never easy to cleanly distinguish freedom and duty, consent and bondage, choice and compulsion" (110).

Similarly, Leila Ahmed criticizes Western feminism for their "docility toward the received ideas of their culture" ("Western Ethnocentrism" 526). She regards this as working on collusion in order to perpetuate the image of Islam as unable of "emulating the 'progress' of the West [and] also keep[ing] women in a state of abject slavery" (Weber 125). Furthermore, she argues that the West and Western feminists' presumed 'knowledge' about the 'presumed' oppression of Muslim women is not because they know that all women in the world are oppressed, but because "they believe that, specifically, Islam monstrously oppresses women" (522). They believe that women, in the view of Islam, have "no souls and [are] thought of simply as animals" (522). Being able to support their claims on facts lying around in their culture, Western feminists argue, debate and affirm the 'miserable' status of women under Islam. Ironically enough, however, they would "freely admit that actually they know nothing about Islam or Middle Eastern societies" (522). Therefore, they 'know' that Muslim women are oppressed without clearly defining the particular manner of that oppression.

Challenging the ethnocentric stereotypes of Western feminism is an Islamic feminist undertaking, albeit not exclusively. Fatima Mernissi disavows the assumptions held by Western feminists that Muslim women are helpless victims of men and their religion. She believes that Muslim women, like Western women, are victims of social institutions that work within a society and a religion to exclude and marginalize others. In this light, Western women are oppressed by patriarchy the same as Muslim women. Religions can be used by the patriarchal ideology to marginalize women. To western feminists, the veil is a prominent symbol of oppression. While the veil, for Mernissi, is a mere symbol of 'a collective fantasy' "to make women disappear, to eliminate them from communal life, to relegate them to an easily controllable terrain, the home, to prevent them moving about, and to highlight their illegal position on male territory by means of a mask" (Mernissi "Virginity and Patriarchy" 189), Mernissi believes that Western women are also veiled, but have more discreet veils. She points out that the veil of Western women lies in youth and beauty, sarcastically commenting that she is glad conservative male elites are oblivious of this, otherwise, they would switch "from the veil to forcing women to fit size 6" (Mernissi "Scheherazade Goes West" 75). Contrastingly, the Western man tends to veil "the older, more mature woman, wrapping her in shrouds of ugliness" (74). The Western male-dominated fashion industry dictates more oppressive types of dressing than those of Muslim cultures.

Additionally, Islamic feminists criticize the monopoly of feminism by reducing it to the mainstream white secular Western form of feminism and excluding all other forms. This hegemony should be replaced by authentic feminist voices stemming from within indigenous cultures. In this regard, Homa Hoodfar points out that Islamic feminists "challenge and reform the Islamic doctrine from within rather than advocating a Western model of gender relations" (Hoodfar qtd. in Mghissi 81). While Margot Badran argues that "[t]he West is not the patrimonial home of feminism, from which all feminisms derive and against which they must be measured" (Badran "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s" 12). The hegemonic perspective of Western feminism is biased against non-Western women, as feminists portray Muslim women in victimizing stereotypes. Hence arises the necessity for an authentic representation of women and an understanding of the contexts underlying the social structures of the indigenous cultures. However, there should not be forms of division and exclusion among the rising feminist voices in these cultures. Haideh Moghissi argues that the cultural diversity in the Middle East dictates a

multiplicity of feminist voices. If Islam is the only 'constituent ingredient' of the culture of the region, then Islamic feminism is naturally "the only culturally viable alternative to West-initiated feminism" (Moghissi 81). Nor there should be divisions between global forms of feminism. Miriam Cooke argues against the separatist tendencies of both Muslim women and Western feminists. While most Muslim women would consider feminism as neo-imperialist and alien, Western feminists, on the other hand, would repudiate the fact of working on religious terms, as religion is regarded as a deeply patriarchal institution (Cooke "Multiple Critique" 92). Overshadowing other voices, be it secular or religious, will only impede the progress of women's rights activism. Coexistence and coalition are possibly the only solution for women's liberation (Moghissi 84).

While many Islamic feminists deem Western feminism as biased, ethnocentric and separatist, other Islamic feminists recognize the accomplishments and acknowledge Western feminism. However, these feminists are placed at a difficult situation. On the one hand, recognizing the 'Western women' and their movements for sexual equality provides a basis and a legitimacy for the movements in Muslim societies. On the other hand, the conservative Islamic literature considers the women's movements in the West as corrupt, worthless and misguided (Shahidian 6). This push and pull situation between a Muslim identity and refusing the status quo results in finding a spot that rejects both fundamentalism and Western feminist radicalism. In theory, all forms of feminism seek gender equality and social justice. However, the problem lies in defining equality, thus, two completely different definitions emerge. One that sees equality in sameness, the other in difference or in value. The problem of Western feminism, as recognized by Islamic feminists, is that they advocate for sameness between genders. Islamic feminists question whether sameness stands for true equality. Asma Barlas sees women as equal to, but not as the same as men. Equality here lies in value, that is to say that men are equal to women in value. However, they are not bound by the same laws. Barlas argues that the conceptual confusion of difference with sexual inequality has forged Western thought since the early beginnings. Moreover, the views attributing sexual difference has changed with conceptions of gender ("Believing Women" 130). That is why many Western feminists focus their efforts "on trying to establish the sameness/similarity of women and men and why feminists have been so persistent in calling for identical treatment of both" (132). Indeed, this can be clearly seen in the Free the Nipple Movement in the United States. This movement highlights the tradition of men

going out topless, whereas the same act is seen as indecency were women to take their shirts off in public. Free the Nipple highlights that this distinction is an unjust treatment of the female. Islamic feminists reject these forms of activism and consequently deny the total elimination of traditional gender roles and disregarding the physical differences between men and women. Therefore:

> Islamic feminists argue that they are not fighting for what Western women have gained but rather for their own particular rights as outlined in the Qur'an. However, many Western feminists argue that the conception of equality espoused by Islamic feminists is the product of naiveté and ignorance (Serez 68).

Western feminists' 'paternalistic' attitudes seek to impose certain definitions and understandings of equality on non-Western feminists. Initially, these attitudes and differences in views contributed in the rejection of the label 'feminism' by many Islamic feminists including Asma Barlas. In addition, Western feminists' secular views completely reject the notion of working within a religion to advocate sexual equality. They rule out any possible compatibility between the Islamic religion and feminism. They view the term 'Islamic feminism' as self-contradictory and mutually exclusive. In spite of that, the question persists of whether 'feminism' is solely a Western concept. Islamic feminists generate a "discourse of gender equality and social justice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Quran and seeks the practice of rights and justice for all human beings in the totality of their existence across the public-private continuum" (Barlas qtd. in Tønnessen 4-5). This is seen as false-consciousness and naiveté because they are presumed to be working within the institutions that seek to oppress them. This highlights the problems permeating Western feminist critiques of all that is not similar to Western ideals. Therefore, Islamic feminists like Barlas express that their "resistance was a displacement of frustration with real, live, feminists, all of them white... many of [whom] seemed utterly blind to the racial politics of speaking for women of color" (qtd. in Serez 68). Furthermore, Barlas highlights that she "came to the realization that women and men are equal as a result not of reading feminist texts, but of reading the Quran" (qtd. Tønnessen 2).

3.4. Depictions of Islam and Women in Western Fiction

Western literature interested in religious and gender themes has always held a central part in the literary canon. Literary works in this field has generally been tamed to follow the Western

narratives, specifically when it comes to Islam and women. Depictions of Islam and women based on Western constructions contribute in creating a world view molded after the Western narrative, far from the reality of the religion and the people. These alleged understandings of and 'knowledge' about Islam are constructions that misrepresent and distort the image of the religion. Arguing that the representation of Islam by the dominant Western discourse is valid and real is not only reductionist, but also irrational. The image of Islam in Western imagination and the real Islam must be detached. Therefore, as argued by Edward Said in *Covering Islam*,

> the term "Islam" as it is used today seems to mean one simple thing but in fact is part fiction, part ideological label, part minimal designation of a religion called Islam. In no really significant way is there a direct correspondence between the "Islam" in common Western usage and the enormously varied life that goes on within the world of Islam, with its more than 800,000,000 people, its millions of square miles of territory principally in Africa and Asia, its dozens of societies, states, histories, geographies, cultures. On the other hand, "Islam" is peculiarly traumatic news today in the West… During the past few years, especially since events in Iran caught European and American attention so strongly, the media have therefore covered Islam: they have portrayed it, characterized it, analyzed it, given instant courses on it, and consequently they have made it "known" (Said "*Covering Islam*" x).

Furthermore, lived Islam varies from one culture to the next, and from one state to the next. Islam is practiced differently in different part of the Islamosphere. The view that there is one unified Islam is inaccurate and invalid. Islamic groups vary from Sunni, Sufis, Shi'ah, Ahmadiya, Khawarij, and within these branches, there are other branches. Women-related issues are a result of patriarchal ideology manifested in the customs and traditions of each culture. Different interpretations of Islam have a direct impact on the status of women, hence the varied injustice levels between males and females across Muslim states. Not allowing women to drive in Saudi Arabia, female circumcision in Egypt, and honor killings in Iraq and Syria are few examples of cultural practices prevalent in Muslim states more than their counterparts. Islam is used by men to advance and privilege the patriarchal agenda. However, injustice against females is not strictly associated to the Muslim cultures, Christian cultures and all other cultures are innately patriarchal. Examples of the misuse of religion can also be traced in different cultures.

The 14th century Catholic church deemed women who treated the ill without training as witches, and they were executed. Thus, it is vitally essential that Arab women should not feel inferior to Western women, or virtually think that the Arabic tradition and culture are more oppressive of women than Western culture.

Historically, Western representations of Islam and Muslim women in literature have gone under various changes. Ever since the eighteenth century, Islam has taken a central place in Western thought and writings. Western narrative has been concerned with the argument that Muslim societies are backward. Islam has been viewed as a malicious religion that reduces women to obedient, sexual beings. Western writers have been concerned about the claim "that Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies" (Ahmed "Women and Gender in Islam" 152). However, the image of the secluded and oppressed woman has not always been the same. Syrian-American author Mohja Kahf in her book *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (1999) traces the history of the portrayals of Muslim women in Western literature. She argues that the Muslim woman in Western imagination and culture "has been a changing, evolving phenomenon" (4). She explains that "the question of the liberty, or lack thereof, of the Muslim woman" (6) in fact only appears around the 17th century, and that Western imagination and constructions of the harem and veils reach zenith only around the 18th and 19th centuries. Europeans viewed Muslims as enemies that were not different from the pagans in Europe back in the 8th century, particularly that Muslim conquest penetrated Spain and part of France. European eyes towards the East and orientalist gendered images came much later to justify Western domination over the region, especially with the climax of colonialist ideology. Kahf probes textual evidence about the Muslim world and Muslim women centuries before the inception of Orientalism "when the Muslim world was as powerful as, or even more powerful that Europe" (Michalak 639). She investigates the representations and portrayals of Islam and Muslim women in fictional European writings of the Middle Ages to the late Romantic period. She examines mainly "canonical, male authored texts in the Western tradition" (3). She investigates literary texts which are entirely fictional. She disregards writings based on real experiences and real event. For instance, travel literature, a literary brand based on real experiences of the author, is excluded.

Kahf explores a collection of texts ranging from English, Spanish, French and Italian literature throughout different time-periods covering medieval epic, Renaissance and Enlightenment prose, and Romantic poetry. She substantially disagrees with the author of *Women's Orients* (1995), Billie Melman, "for suggesting that the harem has always picked the imagination of the Western people" (Gunny 242). Alternatively, she reveals that the harem and the veil only penetrated Western representations in the 17th century. She argues that since the West was not in the position to 'Orientalize' the East, to make knowledge about it and to differentiate it, their tendency was "to make it the same" (Kahf 53). This is because the Muslim world was seen as an equal, if not better than Europe itself. Therefore, Europe neither had "the power [nor] the will to propagate [a] particular image of Islam", as Said puts it (Said "Covering Islam" 36). She argues that the tendency of Western literary production of the 19th century sought to feminize the Orient in juxtaposition to the dominant 'masculine' Europe. However, early on medieval texts represent even the women of Islam as 'masculine'. Prominent female characters of medieval literature are: the female termagant character Bramimonde, wife of the Saracen king, in *The Song of Roland* (ca. 1100), other noble and virtuous Muslim female characters have the names of Josian, Orable, Floripas and Melaz. Kahf asserts that the depictions of Muslim women in medieval literature are honorable and the Muslim world was not viewed as inferior or subhuman.

The winds of the Renaissance carried change, albeit slightly. Kahf emphasizes the differences and ambiguities in representation from one country to the other. On the one hand, Italian literature such as Giovanni Boccaccio's *Il Decameron* (1348 – 1353), in a similar manner of the Christian princesses, portray the daughters of the king of Babylon and the king of Tunis as princesses. Part of this "intimacy with the Islamic Other" (59) is because Italians were allies with the Ottomans. On the other hand, with the *reconquista*, Spanish literature demonized Muslims, although humorously. Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605 – 1615) depicts the noble woman Zoraida who provides assistance to the Christians against the Muslims, then unveils, converts to Christianity and becomes known as Maria. Kahf also conjures up minor characters from the writings of Shakespeare and John Fletcher, besides other playwrights such as Jean Racine and Philip Massinger.

During the eighteenth century, Muslim women were represented as helpless and oppressed in Western literature. The Muslim woman's images shifted from assertiveness to passivity. Alternative to the Muslim princess of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment period provides "the Odalisque—the 'woman of the room,' looking languidly toward the door, awaiting the arrival of her master" (Michalak 639). This negative representation along with the images of the harem was used as a counter-image for the exemplary Western woman (Gunny 243) and the ideal situation in the West. Kahf refers to the writings of Montesquieu, Daniel Defoe, Samuel Johnson, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Mary Wollstonecraft. With prominent works such as Rousseau's *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles* (1758) and Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), the Western critiques of the East, although allegorical, took a place which cannot be overlooked in the West. Their discussions of the East and the harem was allegorical to highlight Western women's condition. Fictional works such as Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* also share the stereotypes of the Western cannon. Shelly's Turkish-Arabian character Safi is taught "to aspire to higher powers of intellect, and an independence of spirit, forbidden to the female followers of Mahomet" (qtd. in Kahf 166). In fact, none of above-mentioned writers had any exposure to the Orient. The only writer with an actual experience with the Orient is Lady Mary Wortley-Montagu. Instead of advancing the widespread Western narrative of the oppressed Muslim woman, she "exerted particular effort to rebut it" (Kahf 118). As a female writer, her depictions and descriptions in the 'Turkish Letters' represent a counter-discourse for the male interest in the harem. Her works "initiate a female tradition of harem descriptions that continued to develop outside the dominant, institutionalized male tradition" (118). However, Lady Montagu is not the only dissenting voice. Eighteenth and nineteenth centuries works by Alexander Russel and Emmeline Lott represent counter-representations to the prevalent images of the harem in the West (Gunny 243).

Moreover, late Romantic literature maintained a reserved place for fictional oriental and Muslim women. Representations include works of poetry such as Byron's *The Giaour* (1813) which introduces Leila who is a harem beauty thrown into the sea and drowned for infidelity because of a love affair with a Christian lover. In Byron's *the Bride of Abydos* (1808), Zuleika, the mute and motionless, is juxtaposed to a Greek statue in her grace and beauty, albeit frozen into an object. Muslim women in Romantic literature are 'angelic paragons' in their contagious femininity awaiting the arrival of a noble Romantic hero to save them from their enslavement by

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the cruel often male Muslim villains (Kahf 152). The works of Byron influenced Victor Hugo's *Le Voile* (1829) featuring an unnamed Muslim woman stabbed to death by her brothers. Before killing their sister, the four brothers ask her: "N'avez vous pas leve votre voile aujourd'hui?" (Hugo qtd. in Kahf 163) asking if she has lifted her veil. Frightened, she answers that she has come from the bath. Without any further discussion, they thrust with their daggers and she drops dead. Byron and Hugo's imagined harem and honor killings represent "only a short step to modern Orientalism" (Michalak 639).

Twentieth century Western writing and literary production reiterate the stereotypes about Islam as a misogynist religion, Muslim societies as backward and Muslim women as helpless victims of their oppressors and of Islam. There are numerous works that negatively portray Islam and women. Worthy mentions include Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipul's *Beyond Belief* (1998) which is a non-fiction book written upon Naipaul's travels to the Muslim world. In the book, he attacks Islam because he claims that Islam enslaved and sought to wipe out other cultures. He argues that:

> Islam is in its origins an Arab religion. Everyone not an Arab who is a Muslim is a convert. Islam is not simply a matter of conscience or private belief. It makes imperial demands. A convert's worldview alters. His holy places are in Arab lands; his sacred language is Arabic. His idea of history alters. He rejects his own; he becomes, whether he likes it or not, a part of the Arab story. The convert has to turn away from everything that is his. The disturbance for societies is immense, and even after a thousand years can remain unresolved; the turning away has to be done again and again. People develop fantasies about who and what they are; and in the Islam of converted countries there is an element of neurosis and nihilism. These countries can be easily set on the boil (Naipaul 01).

Naipaul's attack on Islam and Islamic cultures involves an attack on everything that is Islamic; namely Islamic literature, Islamic dress, the *adhan*, women's veils and the household. His biased and limited vision concerning Islam and Arab and Muslim cultures are based on false perceptions and understandings, thus result in representing Muslim cultures as backward. Chief of these misconceptions is his belief of the local nature of Islam, that is to say that Islam belongs exclusively to Arabs, turning a blind eye on the universal nature of the religion. On a different

context, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) reveals to the reader that the role of woman in Islamic cultures is to satisfy men. He attacks the Quran because it places men 'in charge of women' and gives them the right to beat them. Through the character of Mahound, Rushdie attempts to relinquish the divine nature of the Quran. *The Satanic Verses* allegedly argues that the Quran is fabricated and not purely God-given. Rushdie protests against the suppression of the three pagan daughters of God namely *Lat*, *Uzza* and *Manat* simply because they were female deities. He implies that the prevailing patriarchal ideology at the time of the Prophet excluded any notions of female divinity, and contrariwise worked to demonize the female and frame her for humanity's sins.

Furthermore, Western writings of speculative fiction echo the prejudiced narratives against Islam and Muslim women. These works are not necessarily produced out of knowledge about oriental Muslim cultures, but are mere figments of Western supremacist imagination. Some of the speculative fiction works include, but are not limited to: *Strangers in a Strange Land* by Robert A. Heinlein, *Edenborn* by Nick Sagan, *The Years of Rice and Salt* by Kim Stanley, *Haj* by Leon Uris, *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card, *Budayeen Nights* by George Alec Effinger, *Bury The Unreasoning Mask* by Philip Jose Farmer, *Coyote Kings of the Space Age Bachelor Pad* by Minister Faust, *The Mote in God's Eye*, and *The Gripping Hand* by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournell, *Stand on Zanzibar* by John Brunner, *The Jewel of Medina* by Sherry Jones, *Evolution* by Stephen Baxter, *Effendi and Felaheen* by John Courtney Grimwood, *A Wind In Cairo* by Judith Tarr, *The Historian* by Elizabeth Kostova, *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman, *The Blood of Flowers* by Anita Amirrezvani, etc. (Hashmi 12). These works range from science fiction, fantasy, dystopia, alternate history, horror and futuristic fiction.

3.5. *Nekropolis* by Maureen F. McHugh: Narrative Structure, Plot and Themes

Maureen McHugh's *Nekropolis* follows a linear plot structure. It is told from a first-person narrative, unraveling the viewpoints of the four characters of Hariba, Akhmim, Hariba's mother and Ayesha. Although the story pursues the threads from four different perspectives, the focal character that the events of the story center around is Hariba. The novel is divided into five parts with each part focusing on the perspective of one character. McHugh's writing is straightforward and unpretentious, her prose compendious but picturesque. With a focus more on character development and less on ornate structure, she builds an unusually rich and peculiar

environment with simple elements. Emphasizing human emotions and psychological developments, Mchugh's novel can be considered a soft science fiction work. She believes that science fiction explores often concealed themes and topics and that "most of the time science fiction has [a] way of reestablishing our expectations, and our expectations are often hidden" (qtd in. Stansberry). Through the use of first-person narrative, the author attempts to place the audience in the mind's eye of the narrator, to experience the narrator's subjective views, and to feel close to the narrator's thoughts in the fictional realm. This subjective viewpoint can be seen in the use of the subjective pronoun 'I' and possessive adjectives and pronouns such as 'my' and 'mine'. To quote the first lines in the novel:

> How I came to be jessed. Well, like most people who are jessed, I was sold. I was twenty-one, and I was sold three times in one day, one right after another; first to a dealer who looked at my teeth and in my ears and had me scanned for augmentation; then to a second dealer where I sat in the back office drinking tea and talking with a gap-toothed boy who was supposed to be sold to a restaurant owner as a clerk; and finally that afternoon to the restaurant owner. (McHugh 1).

On the other hand, the subjective viewpoint is not only strictly used to get close to the narrator's thoughts, it can also insinuate the flawed nature of the narration process. First-person narrative style tends to be more unreliable than the omniscient, all-knowing narrative style. Therefore, the narrator is an imperfect witness capable of making mistakes, because of their limited vision of the events of the story.

Furthermore, because of the subjective standpoint of both central and peripheral first-person narrators, science and technological devices in Nekropolis's futuristic 22nd century setting are only hazily described. On the grounds of this, the novel can be considered as an epitome of the soft science fiction genre. Devices for enslavement as in the 'jessing' process, AI biological constructs such as the type of subservient slaves called '*harni*', and the augmented realities manifested in the '*bismek*' games represent examples of the futuristic, technological devices dispersed in the novel. The author seeks to create "a crucial and popular mode, even the mainstream mode, of thinking about life in a modern technoscientific world" (Rogers and Stevens 6-7). Her purpose of inserting technology is to create new situations where new human problems arise. McHugh's story seeks to "[embody] the notion 'just suppose'— or 'What would

happen if—.' In the speculative science fiction story accepted science and established fiefs are extrapolated to produce a new situation, a new framework for human action" (Heinlein 19). Therefore, McHugh's creation is an exploration of the human rather than the technological. She envisions Morocco as a country swept over by technological advancements, albeit imported from the E.C.U, referring to a Western utopia.

Nekropolis is a blend of the two genres of science fiction and dystopia. While technology and science represent the former, oppression, institutional slavery and their consequent poverty are indicators of the latter. The novel is set in a cataclysmic society where society itself is the antagonist. Futuristic Morocco is a place of controversy; a place where technology reigns supreme, all the while religious fundamentalism finds a stronghold and fear and distress are rampant in society. It is argued that dystopian fiction serves to "provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable" (Booker 19). This suggests that dystopias play part as an exaggerated analogy of the real world. Authors tend to discuss issues that already exist through altering few elements in order to amplify the political and social problems. George Orwell's *1984*, for instance, is an allegorical post-World War II novel that critiques totalitarian regimes and dictatorships such as Stalin's Russia, Mussolini's Italy or Hitler's Germany. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* critiques social hierarchy, mass production and mass consumption following the rise of the assembly line in Henry Ford's car factories. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a critique of gender roles, religion and theocracy. This is to say that part of what makes dystopian fiction gain popularity is its ability to resemble reality and magnify its problems. Consequently, McHugh's views about the Arab world, particularly Morocco, consist of her conceptions and beliefs. Therefore, her critique is established on a pre-judgment about the problems prevailing in the Arab world and are not based on reality. Through her novel, she believes that religion (Islam) is the root-cause of all the problems of Arab Muslim women. Religiously and socially-wise, she exchanges actuality for fictionality in the same manner that orientalists and neo-orientalists viewed the religion and the people of the Orient. *Nekropolis* is a feminist science-fiction dystopia that discusses religion and gender from a foreign point of view.

Nekropolis as the title suggests is set in a city where people take tombs as homes. Poverty stands between people and the luxury of a proper home. The title literally means 'the city of the

dead' which is a symbol for the situation of the people living in futuristic Morocco who are no different than corpses residing in tombs. However, the phenomenon of people living in graveyards is foreign to Morocco, because it is rather common in Egypt. In this regard, McHugh argues that "[t]he nekropolis [she] know[s] of is in Egypt, but [she] moved it to Morocco" (qtd in. Stansberry). This also suggests that she puts all Arabs in the same pot, and that her knowledge of Morocco is minimal and is based on stereotypes than actual facts. Overgeneralization is what characterizes Western perceptions of Arab cultures and Muslim societies, and seemingly McHugh's novel is no exception. The nekropolis equates the living with the dead, because both exist and even lie next to each other. Hariba, the protagonist, narrates that her family "lived in three adjoining mausoleums instead of a flat" (McHugh 8), and that "[n]ext to [her] bed were the dates for the person buried behind the wall, 2073 to 2144. All of the family was dead years ago. No one ever came to this death house to lay paper flowers and birds" (8). The wretched situation in the city forces people to accept any sorts of jobs, even those humiliating and degrading such as selling oneself as a slave or working in prostitution. Hariba is jessed which is a form of enslavement that includes planting a device in a person's head in order to be loyal to his/her owner. While Akhmim, the AI biological construct, works in prostitution and introduces the reader to the underground prostitution industry of Morocco. In fact, the real Morocco prohibited prostitution since the 1970s, but although illegally it still exists. Poor women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, especially divorced women (Venema and Bakker 54), and migrants from deep Africa constitute a large number of the working force in prostitution. Most of the prostitutes are concentrated in the Marrakesh area. The 2015 French-Moroccan controversial film under the title of *Much Loved* depicts the prostitution scene in Marrakech. McHugh's depiction makes an effort to be more realistic in sketching an image about the not-so-visible side of Morocco. The prostitution in Nekropolis includes prostitutes, homosexuals and even sexual orientations towards Artificial Intelligence.

The prevailing theme in the novel is love as manifested in the relationship between Hariba and Akhmim. Relationships between humans and *harni* (AI biological constructs) is that of a master and slave. However, Hariba and Akhmim's relationship breaks the rules and crosses the boundaries of what is acceptable and permissible. *Harni* are indistinguishable from real humans except for their handsome visages. They have been grown in a 'creche', taught and sold to humans. Their basic instinct is to serve humans, which poses a problem about whether the

relationship between Hariba and Akhmim is real love or just serving a superior being. Hariba asks Akhmim: "Do you love me because you have to? Is it because you are a *harni* and I'm a human and you have to serve me??" (McHugh 36). This problematic concern is continuously asked and constantly explored throughout the entire novel. The relationship is ceaselessly questioned as both characters need the other for certain purposes. On the one hand, Akhmim needs Hariba to feel that he has served his purpose of helping a human in distress. On the other, Hariba needs Akhmim to help her out upon her escape from her owner, and eventually to leave the country.

Gender is another major theme in the novel through which McHugh offers an exploration of gender and sexual relations. Due to the fundamentalist theocratic setting of the novel, future Morocco is packed with sexual divisions and inequalities. The society is established on beliefs of traditional gender roles where men are the breadwinners and women are housewives. Seclusion and veiling are represented in the novel by 'the women's household' which is a separate part for women, and the 'chador' which is a type of veiling. It is important to note that the type of garment known as the chador is not associated to the cultural sphere of Morocco or the MENA region. It does in fact belong to the Persianate culture including but not limited to Iran and Iraq, and those adhering to *Shia*. This, again, shows the limited knowledge of McHugh concerning the culture and the society of Morocco. Furthermore, most of the major characters in Nekropolis are women with the exception of Akhmim, the AI biological construct. McHugh mentions that many women readers and writers of science fiction tend to fantasize about many issues including gender, and that she "used to imagine [herself] as a boy, or no gender at all" (qtd. in Stansberry). McHugh's exploration of sexual topics stretches the two poles of sexual prejudice and religious intolerance such as the incident of flogging those caught practicing fornication on the one hand, and the extreme freedom in the prevailing prostitution and homosexuality on the other. She offers a simplistic categorization of the society and the women into saints and whores. Meanwhile, the extreme right-wing patriarchal rule intends to marginalize all women either through keeping them in the household, enslaving them, forcing them to cover themselves or exploiting them for pure-male satisfaction. In the novel, males are considered superior to women and often in positions of the father. When Hariba is met with troubles with her owner's wife, he intervenes in a fatherly way: "'Daughter,' Mbarek says, 'I'm not sure that this is the best situation for you.' He looks at me kindly. I wish Mbarek did not think that he had to be my

father." (McHugh 38). This fragile situation of women is chiefly related to the patriarchal ideology and the religious convictions that are not only promoted by men, but also accepted and embraced by women content by the patriarchal rule. Because of this, Nekropolis can be considered as an archetypal epitome of a patriarchal dystopia.

Another main theme in the novel is slavery. Unlike forced slavery, enslavement in Nekropolis is initially a willful independent act taken by the person by pure choice. It is represented by the jessing process which involves planting a device into a person's head so that they will not be able to escape their owners. Hariba describes the jessing process by saying that:

> The jessing itself happened rather quickly, at the first dealer's. There was a package with foreign writing on it, from the north across the sea, so even the letters were strange and unreadable. He made me lean my head back and open my mouth, and he sprayed the roof of my mouth with an anesthetic. Then he opened the package and took out the tool to do the jessing. Watching him, I had leaned my head forward a bit and closed my mouth. "Lean back," he said. I leaned back again and looked at the ceiling. The roof of my mouth felt thick, as if I had drunk something that scalded it, except of course that it didn't hurt. I felt the pressure of something pressed against the roof of my mouth and there was a sound like a phffft (McHugh 1- 2).

In this exact manner, people in future Morocco are enslaved. The poor conditions of the people are the reasons behind the peculiarity of why would anyone willingly embark on selling themselves to others. According to Ahmad Alawad Sikainga, slavery in Morocco was only abolished in 1925, as the country was under the French protectorate therefore "Moroccan judges assumed that since Morocco was a French protectorate and slavery was prohibited in French possessions, then slavery was illegal in their country" (Sikainga 65). Slavery is linked to Muslim jurisprudence, as "Moroccan *'ulama* and jurists made conscious efforts to ensure that the practice of slavery conformed to the *Shari'a* rules and the Islamic concepts" (70). So, perhaps McHugh constructs her story upon historical facts. Indeed, the Muslim fundamentalist setting of the novel, along with authorized institutions such as slavery and prostitution contribute to the credibility and plausibility of her retro-futuristic story. However, she points out in the acknowledgment of her book that the Morocco in the book is based on an entirely fictional creation, and that she would like to visit the real place someday, insinuating that she has never been to the country

before. On a different context, while Hariba's jessing is taking place, she notices that there is "a package with foreign writing on it" (McHugh 1). This may contradict with the historical fact that the French abolished slavery, and assumes that slavery is initiated by foreign tools.

3.6. An Islamic Feminist Reading of Nekropolis by Maureen McHugh

This section will include an analysis of *Nekropolis* from an Islamic feminist perspective. It seeks to highlight Western prejudice towards Muslim women in contemporary Western literary production. Islamic feminism will be used to correct misconceptions about Islam and women to the foreign eye. As such, Islamic feminism is used to combat Western ethnocentrism and prejudice with regard to Islam and Arab Muslim women.

In *Nekropolis*, Morocco is a timeless Islamic state marked by conservativism. Its people are guided by the Second Koran, which seems to infiltrate the people's lives in every detail. They would refer to the Holy Injunction and feel satisfied by its instructions. Since Morocco is a fundamentalist state, its people have a "rather conservative upbringing" (McHugh 3). Hariba is considered by Akhmim, the *harni*, to be a 'Holy Sister' because she represents the kind of person blindingly following the instructions of the Second Koran. In a conversation with the *harni*, she is described as a very solemn person, and asked whether this state is an outcome of jessing. She replies by saying that: "The Second Koran says that just as a jessed hawk is tamed, not tied, so shall the servant be bound by affection and duty, not chains, with God's blessing" (5). Ironically, the act of questioning the Koran's utterances does not come from the woman who is being oppressed by it, but by an AI, a machine which is biologically constructed as male. The *harni* interjects by asking her: "Does the Second Koran say it shouldn't make you sad, Hariba?" (5) to which she thinks that he has made a blasphemous act by mere questioning. This shows how deep the role that religion plays in the lives of Moroccan citizens. Besides, the fact that there is a Second Koran, a modified version of the Quran, indicates that there is a powerful agenda that seeks dominance and preys over the weak. The act of jessing or obedience are considered to be a blessing from God by the Second Koran. This shows how the male dominated culture uses religion in order to control people, particularly women. Indeed, most of the jessed people in future Morocco are women, which suggests that the male dominated culture altered the Quran in favor of males. "Jessing is supposed to enhance natural loyalties" (2) as Hariba describes it, and there is no escaping it. She is jessed to Mbarek-salah and works at his household to guarantee a

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better life than the one she has in the Nekropolis. In other words, he owns her and she cannot escape his custody unless it is in his intention to sell her to another owner and pronounces 'the trigger words'. Despite her inferior status and frail situation, she has conflicting thoughts about her life as a jessed woman: "If a girl asked me tomorrow if she should be jessed, I don't know what I'd say. It's not a bad life. It's better than being an old maid in the Nekropolis, the part of the old city where I grew up" (3). Her dialectical stance does not stem only from a pure personal conviction, but also from outside factors that are beyond her control such as poverty and the dominance of androcentrism.

Furthermore, studying and questioning the religious scriptures is not exclusive of females, as the Islamic feminist project attempts to instill. In fact, scrutinizing the validity of the religious texts is encouraged, and even deemed sacred. Taking a passive position is not only harmful to justice and equality intrinsic in Islam, but also unaccepted by God. To talk against the un-Islamic patriarchal structures supported by scriptures does not mean talking against Islam, but it can be seen as celebrating the higher principles of the scripture (Badran "Re/placing Islamic Feminism" XIII), thus coming one step closer to true Islam. Contrary to this, Hariba's excerpts from the Second Koran are not because she wants to break away with the un-Islamic and patriarchal practices, but as a display of piety and adhering to the words of the scripture. Submissiveness to an altered version of the Quran renders her a blind follower and an oblivious object of oppression. She continuously quotes the Second Koran as though to receive divine legitimacy in every aspect of her life. For instance, when Mbarek-salah supplies her with money and tells her to buy something for herself, she quotes a verse from the Second Koran: "A generous man is a wealthy man" (5). She conjures up the Second Koran again as a devoted and pious woman by saying that "[t]he Second Koran says ribbons are a symbol of devotion to the Most Holy, as well as an earthly master" (6). She quotes it once more in the context of charity: "A human in need becomes every man's child" (12). She expresses her utmost faithfulness and commitment to following the teachings of the Second Koran by saying that "[t]he Second Koran tells us that the darkness in ourselves is a sinister thing. It waits until we relax, it waits until we reach the most vulnerable moments, and then it snares us. I want to be dutiful, I want to do what I should" (47). By allowing herself to follow such an oppressive scripture, Hariba becomes her own incarcerator. Through the use of defamiliarization, McHugh attempts to show that the

Quran, and not the altered version, is an oppressive tool which is used by the powerful to subordinate others, and which carries in itself the instruments required to achieve such a task.

Almost all women in the novel including the main characters are conservative and traditionalist. McHugh views all Arab Muslim women as obedient, Islamist women. This perpetuates the stereotypes about Arab Muslim women's supposed lack of agency, and similar to the post-9/11 Western narrative, they are subordinated by the 'malicious' religion of Islam. Hariba, her mother, Ayesha and other secondary characters are represented in a conventional manner in McHugh's clichéd storytelling. In this regard, religion in the novel works as a source of oppression and solace at the same time. While Hariba serves an 'earthly master' because the Second Koran deems it a devout act, she finds an inner gratification in following the words of the sacred text without complaining. She works at Mbarek-salah's household and then is sold to another master, but her loyalty and commitment in work remains unchanged because it satisfies both God and her earthly master. Similarly, Hariba's mother lives an arduous and tiresome life, particularly as her husband died and she had to take care of their children alone. Nevertheless, she constantly thanks Allah ever for her disadvantages such as when she thanks him because he "made [her] small so [she] wouldn't need much" (103). Her sense of obligation towards Allah trespasses the limits in order to fulfill her religious satisfaction. Her commitment to following the words of God reach an unbearable extreme as she consigns her son Fhassin to oblivion and refuses to even visit him in prison in the aftermath of being charged with committing the crime of adultery. "Fhassin is dead to us all, though I pray for him" (103), she thinks. And although he used to be her favorite son, committing an act against the instructions of God makes her disregard her own flesh and blood. Apparently, her devotion to Allah exceeds that to her own family. In the same context, Ayesha, the closest friend of Hariba, is an old-fashioned woman who, unlike Hariba, is fortunate enough to get married and relies on her husband Alem in everything. Hariba describes Ayesha by saying that: "Ayesha is a modest person who wouldn't go around unescorted with a ... man who wasn't her husband" (9). However, her acceptance of the patriarchal institution is not because she is a religious person, as she admits that Hariba "was always pretty religious, like her mother" and that has been "her downfall" (145). She wants to leave the Nekropolis as though to escape a certain captivity of fundamentalism. Her conventional life is molded after the prevailing socio-religious norms and is unlikely rooting from an inner conviction.

3.7. The Meaning of the Veil in the Western Eye

In McHugh's creation, all women are veiled and secluded. There appears to be no other alternative for women but to cover themselves in the fundamentalist and Islamist future state of Morocco. The veil or *hijab* in the Muslim tradition is used to refer to a certain type of clothing that covers the entire body of the woman with the exception of the face and the hands. However, the term is used by the West to refer to the headscarf that covers the head and chest. In a similar manner, McHugh's conception about the veil surfaces when describing Hariba's clothing as she is "wearing lavender and pale yellow, with long yellow ribbons tied around [her] wrists, and [she] cover[s] [her] hair with a lavender veil" (6). Ayesha wears a rose-colored veil, Hariba's mother wears a chador and all other women are covered in veils. When Hariba is with Ayesha and the *harni* at the souk, she makes a remark and compares married women's veils to stalls in the souk by saying: "looking at the souk stalls with their red canopies like married women's veils" (11). Moreover, a woman without a veil appears to be bargaining with a man in the souk, and Akhmim realizes that she is a *harni*. He remarks that "[s]he doesn't wear a veil because she's a *harni* and therefore not a decent woman" (69) suggesting that only decent women wear veils. In Muslim societies, wearing *hijab* is a religious obligation for women in order to preserve modesty and decency. The verse in *Al-Ahzab* is often quoted to support this obligation: "O Prophet, enjoin your wives and your daughters and the believing women, to draw a part of their outer coverings around them. It is likelier that they will be recognized and not molested. Allah is Most Forgiving, Most Merciful" (33:59). In this verse, the *hijab* (or *jilbab*) is not just a simple head covering, but a type of dressing that covers the entire body of the woman. Modesty is asked from woman as well as men, and the *hijab* is considered Islam's approach towards preventing the sexual objectification of Muslim women.

McHugh perceives that all Muslim females have to put on veils, including little girls. In the fourth section of novel, Ayesha observes as her husband "Alem comes home in his blue coveralls, so Tariam can see him from far down the street. She runs into the street without a veil, in the short dress she wears in the house so her legs are bare, shouting, 'Papa! Papa!'" (159). Tariam is Ayesha's little infant girl, and seemingly she has to wear a veil. The culture of each state determines the age at which women begin wearing veils in the Arab and Muslim world. While in few cultures girls start wearing *hijab* at a younger age, others emphasize wearing it

when women get married or girls reach the age of puberty. Consequently, due to the fundamentalist nature of future Morocco, little girls have to put on some sort of garment that covers their heads. Tariam's father laughs upon seeing her running towards him and "scoops her up and kisses her curly head" (159). However, her mother Ayesha's response is different as she watches as "She grins at [her], knowing she has gotten away with something". She blames her father and thinks: "He spoils her so bad. It makes me mad because he spoils her and then it's up to me to try to correct her" (159), as if the little girl has committed a sinful act that needs to be corrected. "'Tariam!' I say. 'Look at you running naked in the street! Come in here!' I hate that, making me the bad one. But I know I'm too critical of him" (159). Accordingly, Ayesha's commitment to raising her little girl in the same fundamentalist manner as was her upbringing rests upon pure religious convictions, and not upon the enjoinment of her husband. This is an accusation of false consciousness by McHugh that attempts to show how Muslim women are oppressed by their religion and are embracing it as though they are helpless without the veil. Additionally, it works as a critique that an act of imposing the veil on little girls is considered to be true religion while it is part of the patriarchal structures in a male dominated society. McHugh shows that Tariam is taught and dressed like a veiled woman ever since she is born. Her gender identity is being molded by external socio-religious factors that attempt to deprive her from autonomously shaping her identity, but instead providing her with a follow-the-herd mentality. Her mother Ayesha feels that it is her responsibility to raise a veiled woman. However, Tariam "hates being dressed to go out, hates having her hair covered and is always pulling at her veil, but she likes the idea of going to see Hariba, so she's patient while [Ayesha] dress[es] her in bright yellow" (177-178). Ayesha is very strict about the veil that she refuses to let her daughter take off her veil as she feels hot and "pulls at her veil" (179). Even when she starts to cry of the anguish of the hot weather and the thick veil, her mother hushes and comforts her by saying they will "get some cold water" (179). McHugh attempts to show that Ayesha and Tariam represent an epitome for the entire state of future Morocco since the rules dictate that all women should wear veils whenever they go outside of the home.

Moreover, Hariba's mother, who remains unnamed throughout the entire novel, finds sanctuary in her own veil. Apparently, in McHugh's Morocco, widowed women have to wear a chador which is an outer garment that resembles a cloak and covers the head and body of the woman. The chador is essentially associated with the culture of Iran and Iraq and is foreign to the

North African culture. Hariba's mother wears the chador in the wake of her husband Samil's death. She is a conservative and conventional woman and religion seems to circle a large space in her life. The chador is the visible manifestation of her religious duties towards Allah as it seems to satisfy her self-worth. When she visits her son in the prison, she looks at the women who come to visit their husbands and says: "What is worse, a husband killed in an accident like Samil or a husband in a place like this? At least I am an honorable widow and I get to wear black. I feel the protection of my black chador now. My husband is dead, he is not here. I've always had a kind of secret pleasure in being a widow" (111-112). Protection and security for Hariba's mother lies in always living under something: either living under the shelter of a husband, or under the fabric of the chador when that husband dies.

Furthermore, when Ayesha and Aunt Zehra are plotting to disguise Hariba upon her escape from jessing, they dress her in a chador so that the police would not identify her. "She could dress like a new widow", Ayesha says, who brings her mother's chador and unfolds it. Then, she makes a remark that "[o]ne woman in a chador looks like another" (165) which can be a statement by McHugh that women's personalities dissolve in wearing the *hijab*. McHugh insinuates that new widows cover their entire bodies and faces and they are allowed to walk in the streets for necessity. She refers to *iddah*, or the period a woman must wait after her husband dies or divorces her. There is a scriptural basis for *iddah* in the Quran such as when Allah says: "Divorced women shall wait concerning themselves for three monthly periods. Nor is it lawful for them to hide what God Hath created in their wombs, if they have faith in God and the Last Day" (*Al-Baqarah* 2:228). In another verse, Allah says: "O ye who believe! When ye marry believing women then divorce them before touching them then there is no *iddah*, you have reckon with" (*Al-Aḥzāb* 33:49). The reason behind this -four lunar months and ten days- period after the death of the husband is to uncover whether the woman is pregnant from her deceased or divorced husband before marrying another husband. Its main purpose is to eliminate any doubts related to the paternity of the child perceived after this transitional period. McHugh's shares the ideas of seclusion with the Arab male dominated culture. This is evident in the full cover of body and face of new widows. In reality, in most Arab cultures, new widows should not go outside during the period of *iddah* as they are supposed to stay at the home. This has become a tradition and has been steered from the original intent of the text, neglecting the economic situation of the family after the death of the caretaker. In other words, women are not supposed to go outside

even for work. However, this is an un-Islamic practice, because as the Islamic feminist Fatima Naseef explains:

> Islam has permitted women to undertake lawful professions and crafts which are not incompatible with their femininity, or abuse their dignity. Islam has even allowed the widow or the divorcee to work during her *iddah* [waiting period before a second marriage, during which she is supposed to stay in her house] because if her work is necessary to her family and to the Islamic nation in general, she is encouraged to carry on with her profession (Naseef 101).

The novel, while consistent in its depiction of the veil, is not void of oddity and eccentricity. Seemingly, the highly religious atmosphere of the novel and the ultra-orthodoxy of the people allow for some breathing space. Indeed, girls have boyfriends and they experience love. When Akhmim asks Hariba if she has ever had a boyfriend, she replies that she had and "his name was Aziz" (28). Hariba and Akhmim later fall in love with each other and become intimately close. Similarly, Hariba describes as she sits "at a tiny table the size of a serving platter and watch[es] the boys hum by on their scooters, girls sitting behind them, clutching their boyfriends' waists with one hand, holding their veils with the other, while the ends stream and snap behind them, glittering with the shimmer of gold" (48). This shows that although Morocco is a conservative state, boys and girls mingle and hang out together outside without any restrictions from any authority whatsoever. However, it also shows that although girls are allowed to be with their boyfriends, they are not allowed to go unveiled. The rules dictate that if girls are veiled outside, they possess a justification for their misconduct. Hence, the veil plays part as a façade for devoutness, and a falsity of the entire ethical system that Muslims are guided by in *Nekropolis*.

Stereotypes about the veiled Muslim woman who conceals her figures inside and outside of the home are reproduced and reinforced in the novel. For the West, female dress is a sign of female agency or lack thereof. For instance, if a woman appears wearing a veil in the streets, then she is instantly viewed as oppressed in Western reductionist thinking. By contrast, if a woman chooses not to cover her head and dress modestly, it can be a sign of agency and liberation. In Western contexts, Western women who choose to wear little clothes or bikinis outside of the home are not viewed as sexual objects, but are seen as possessing personal

freedom. In this regard, if the Victorian dress represents an eternal symbol of oppression forced by the Western phallocentric thinking of the day, then the bikini is also a different form of male-imposed type of dressing that intends to reveal female sexual beauty and thus objectifying women. Hence, if the *hijab* is viewed as an oppressive tool imposed by pure Islamist male ideology in Western narrative, then all forms of Western dressing imposed by the fashion industry can viewed in the same regard. Considering herself a feminist, McHugh aligns herself with the white male supremacist ideology's conception of the Muslim woman. This shows that the unresolved conflict in the Western civilization has shifted by white men and feminists alike towards the Muslim woman and the veil or the so-called Islam's 'symbol' of oppression. In the view of the West, the "veiled woman stands in stark contrast to an unveiled, modern woman; her appearance violates socially valued images of Western women" (Mancini 413). So, what can only be considered 'normal' for Muslim women is to un-veil. Consequently, Islam is viewed as the patriarchal other and the veil stands as its eternal symbol of oppression.

3.8. Seclusion and the *Harem* Life

Nekropolis becomes involved in the Western fascination about the internal lives of Muslims and the *harem* within the household and the family. It provides depictions of the relationship between men and women which is characterized by seclusion and separation. Seclusion refers to the separate living quarters and private enclosures that seek to confine women to the company of other women within the home in traditional Muslim societies. Through this practice, men seek to protect women from other men whom are not their *mahram*. In the novel, seclusion is apparent in the public sphere through veiling, and in the private sphere in terms of separating male and female quarters within the house. At the beginning of the novel, the choice is between Hariba and the 'gap-toothed' boy to be jessed and sold to an owner. The buyer is a restaurant owner who "couldn't really have wanted the boy anyway, since the position was for his wife's side of the house" (1). Therefore, Hariba is chosen for this position because she meets the requirements of being a female which entitles her to serve at the secluded women's section. However, the *harni* Akhmim is allowed to come "over to [the women's] side sometimes". This is because "the master says that since it isn't human, it's allowed" (4). Because *harni* are not human, they are allowed in the women's quarters. "There is no impropriety — it's never alone with the mistress. In fact, now, after having it a couple of months, she pretty much ignores it"

(4). McHugh's interest in life in the private sphere of the Muslims matches the fascination of the orientalists in the *harem* life. She even criticizes the system of seclusion in Muslim societies through the character of Akhmim. Akhmim is a biologically constructed AI which "thinks of itself. It has a name. It has gender" (4). Accordingly, the *harni* "thinks it's male. And it's head of the men's side of the house" (4). Akhmim works as a criticism for the *harem* life through which McHugh attempts to show the false illusion of the secluded women's sections. In addition to highlighting the double standards of the entire system of the *harem* by illustrating how a biologically constructed AI, that resembles a man in every aspect and that 'flirts' like a man, is not forbidden near the women's quarters.

Furthermore, seclusion pervades the entire society of future Morocco: from the luxurious Mbarek-salah's household to the poverty-stricken society of the Nekropolis. When Mbarek-salah asks Hariba about her thoughts of the *harni*, she replies by saying: "I don't spend much time with it, Mbarek-salah. Its work is with the men's household". He praises her by saying that she is "an old-fashioned girl" (6) and that he likes this quality. Then, he requires that she takes the *harni* with her for socializing, to which she replies hastily: "'I must meet my friend Ayesha at her home in the Nekropolis, Mbarek-salah. My mother lives across the street. Perhaps it's not a good place to take a harni.' The Nekropolis is a conservative place" (6). She implies that she cannot be seen in public with what seems like a man. Once in the Nekropolis, Hariba and Akhmim visit Hariba's mother and her friend Ayesha. Hariba describes as they meet Ayesha who instantly "pulls a little at her rose-colored veil. She's startled, thinking of course that [she] brought a handsome young man with [her] … Ayesha is a modest person who wouldn't go around unescorted with a young man who wasn't her husband" (9). McHugh highlights that a Muslim woman is dependent on her husband or guardian to do everyday tasks such as going out shopping. Going out with a man who is not a *mahram* of the woman is against the religious guidance and the socio-cultural norms. In this regard, Hariba remarks: "Here I am, standing on the street in front of my mother's house, and the harni is pretending to be a man. It has no respect for my reputation" (10). This suggests that a woman's reputation can be hurt by just standing with a man. Contrarily, a man's reputation will remain intact was he to stand with a woman who is neither his wife nor his close relative. McHugh seeks to show the inequalities influenced by religious and cultural determinants and their repercussions on women's experiences. The strict social norms in the Nekropolis dictate that women should possess a certain amount of decency

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that prohibits them not to stand with men. As a case in point, the harni understands this and stands in the street, away from Hariba and Ayesha with his gaze on the ground. Hariba describes as the harni avoids looking at her, and think that "at least it has the decency to make it appear [they] aren't together" (10).

While they shop at the *souk*, Ayesha "doesn't refer to the harni, but as it follows [them], she glances back a lot" (10) as though afraid that someone would recognize her and form misconceptions about her. Irritated that they ignored Akhmim during their time at the *souk*, Ayesha requires him to approach and asks: "Are harni prescripted for taste?" (11), to which he replies: "What do you mean, the taste of food? ... I can taste just like you do, although … I personally am not overly fond of cherries" (11). She prompts: "No, no, … Colors, clothing. Are you capable of helping make choices? About earrings, for example?" (11). He picks a pair of earrings and hands them to Ayesha who "frowns, [and] looks at him through her eyelashes" (12). To her astonishment, Hariba watches as Ayesha flirts with the harni and thinks: "Ayesha! A married woman!" (12). Then, they ask about the price of the earrings, and the vendor names a price. Akhmim refuses to let Ayesha pay the price and calls the vendor a thief. Hariba watches as he "reaches to touch her, as if he'd pull her away, and [she] hold[s] [her] breath in shock — if the thing should touch her!" (12). In this passage, McHugh presents Ayesha, a happily married woman, as an immoral woman who secretly flirts and talks to another man (or more specifically a male AI) behind her husband's back. She attempts to show that women in the Muslim world are sexually repressed that they take advantage of any chances they get to covertly be unfaithful. In this regard, the Muslim woman is displayed as a fragile entity modeled after a saintly image in the male preoccupation. Additionally, the choice of the character's name is also representative of McHugh's covert intentions. Ayesha, or Aisha or A'ishah bint Abi Bakr, is the third wife of the Prophet Muhammad who played an important role in the life of the Prophet and the political life after the death of the Prophet. She is viewed as one of the eternal symbols of women's decency and dignity in the Islamic history. Alternatively, McHugh intends to present a distorted picture of this Islamic figure through the use of defamiliarization. Therefore, McHugh's work does not fall far from Salman Rushdie's work which commenced a ferocious attack on the most influential Islamic figures and on the sacredness of Islam per se.

McHugh occasionally reminds her readers that the Morocco in her novel is governed by strict societal norms. Individuals of the opposite gender are not allowed to trespass to each other's quarters, with the exception of the virtual game played by the 'mistress' and her guests called '*Bismek*'. Servants, slaves and harni play part as secondary characters in the story of the game, while the mistress and her guests are the principal characters. Characters are allowed to wear unusual costumes that fit the story, drink what seems like wine, and even kiss. Hariba describes Akhmim who is "dressed in a white robe that comes to his knees and brown sandals that have elaborate crisscross ties, and, like [her], his shoulder is bare" (21). He glances at her and smiles, she feels "embarrassed to be seen by a man with [her] shoulder and neck bare" (21). She remembers that he is not a man, otherwise he would not be allowed there. Anxious about her performance in the game, Hariba takes Akhmim's hand and squeezes it and thinks: "If he were a man, I wouldn't touch him" (22). Essentially, the entire system of seclusion is established to prevent male and female intermingling and, thus, prevent undesirable and forbidden relationships, which proves to be the case of Hariba's and Akhmim's relationship afterwards.

Moroccan Islamic feminist Fatima Mernissi who was reared in a *harem* residence, aims at correcting Western misconceptions about the *harem*. For this purpose, she distinguishes between the imperial and domestic *harem*, and states that the fascination of the West about the idea of the *harem* took a rather deceptive and misleading turn. She emphasizes in her 1994 book *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* that:

> [I]t would perhaps be helpful to introduce a distinction between two kinds of harems: the first we will call imperial harems, and the second, domestic harems... Domestic harems were in fact extended families, like the one described in this book, with no slaves and no eunuchs, and often with monogamous couples, but who carried on the tradition of women's seclusion.

> It is the Ottoman imperial harem that has fascinated the West almost to the point of obsession... By contrast, domestic harems, that is, those which continued to exist in the Muslim world after its colonization by the West, are rather dull... What defines it as a harem is not polygamy, but the men's desire to seclude their wives, and their wish to maintain an extended household rather than break into nuclear units. (Mernissi 34-35)

In *Nekropolis*, this distinction between imperial and domestic *harems* is ignored. In fact, McHugh's *harem* is domestic albeit with slaves and servants. Therefore, the line that Mernissi draws between the two types of *harems* that existed in the Muslim world is not a matter that concerns the author. The author's emphasis on depicting the domestic lives of women under Islam proves to be a case of Orientalist attitudes towards Islam and the Muslim world. The fascination of the West by the domestic *harem* and the veil started to become noticeable post 9/11 when modern incarnations of orientalism started to emerge in terms of the Western attitudes towards Islam and the Muslim world. Furthermore, Mernissi criticizes the Western distortions of the *harem*, and also the patriarchal institution of the *harem* itself because it is established to align with the male point of view. But to the female, the *harem* is an 'invisible rule' and a 'behavioral code' which are most of the time 'against women'. Clearly, seclusion and the veil are the dominant themes in the novel, and the views manifested in the novel are Orientalist views by a Western feminist author.

On a different context, McHugh advocates the claim that the *harem* is a social institution initiated since the earliest childhood. In other words, she proclaims that the *harem* is a social construction that defines certain roles to men and women in a structure so deeply-instilled that it becomes impenetrable. This is evident in the section of the AI Akhmim who was born in a creche; the only male in a group of five. He explains that humans want female harni, and this is why he had four sisters. He narrates his infancy by saying: "We were all one, in the way of harni, almost indistinguishable, until we were five years old and we had to start sleeping in separate beds and going to different classes so we would differentiate" (McHugh 65). In Islam, male and female children are separated in beds when they reach the age of ten. This is based on the Prophet's saying: "… and separate them in beds". The act of separating harni in *Nekropolis* is highlighted to show that seclusion starts at an early age in order to construct a male and female identities in isolated environments. This is highlighted when Ahhmim says that he and his sisters looked "almost indistinguishable" so that to emphasize the gender-construction dimension that seclusion promotes. Furthermore, harni are separated to avoid any misconduct, because since they are biologically constructed AI, they are attracted to each other by mere instinct. Akhmim recounts the details of their separation:

Before we were separate, we didn't play like humans. After we were separated, we would mimic each other a lot. And sometimes we'd play pretend. We'd play that my sisters had been sold to a human, and because I was the boy, I had to be the rich man who bought them. I'd sit in the chair and order them to do things for me: "Brush my hair," or "Bring me my shoes." Then they would go off to their room, which was usually Isna's bed because it was closest to the wall and farthest from the door, and they would pile on top of each other like mice keeping warm and lie together, happy in the touch and smell of each other. Alone in the chair, I'd feel the air on my skin and the way the edge of the seat cut into my thighs, until I couldn't stand it. I'd say that I was coming to inspect their quarters and when I pretended to find them, they would take me in and teach me harni ways, until I declared I'd never be human again. and then I'd curl up with them on the narrow bed and smell the milky smell of us all together (65-66).

This system of separation is criticized by McHugh because it promotes a masculinist agenda which does not allow for an autonomous gender designation, but one that is chosen by the male-dominated thinking of the patriarchal ideology. In this regard, Akhmim wonders: "What would happen if we were allowed to grow up right? Without being separated in the crèche, without being taught where our skin ended and someone else's skin began. It would have been nice to find out" (84). However, it unintendedly shows that separation between males and females at a younger age will prevent them from performing any kind of misconduct. Therefore, little boys and girls will have a healthy environment for growing up. Consequently, McHugh's criticism of the *harem* life is a partially-sighted critique of everything related to the Arab Muslim world, which overlooks all possible positive consequences.

Female restriction to the private sphere is a prevalent type of seclusion as depicted by McHugh. Hariba's mother is appropriated to think that a woman's roles are to take care of her husband, children and house. She is expected to do all the tasks of the house without any help from her husband. She describes that: "In the death houses it was a city of women and children and old people during the day" (106) because men are out working. She gains freedom from her 'imprisonment' in the private sphere after her husband Samil's death, and becomes responsible for raising her children. She says: "When I had four children and no husband, I did things I never would have thought I could do" (109). Apparently, life without a husband is doubly arduous on

women, because when her husband died, she is marked "as someone outside of life" (112). In a similar manner, Ayesha is a housewife who is tasked with taking care of her husband Alem, daughter Tariam, and her house. An epitome of an obedient wife and a strict woman, she not only accepts traditional gender roles, but cherishes them. Her father "never wanted [her] mother to have a single thought" (156), but to agree with what he says and decides for her. Having such a patriarchal upbringing, she always expects her husband to decide for her, and "wanted a husband who would be a real husband" (156) and a strong one, like all women in the Nekropolis. Radically enough, she wants her husband to be bossy, and despises any weak treats shown by men. She inspects the way Akhmim talks and treats Hariba, and thinks: "It was the way he was so unmanly that made me so uncomfortable. If I had spoken to any man that way…I think Hariba had raised her brothers and she had always been bossy, so that was why she liked the harni, because she wanted a man like that" (164). Seemingly, the quality of being 'unmanly' is unwanted, even detested by the women of the Nekropolis. These women demand that men act in a patriarchal manner and choose to be oppressed and pushed to the home with many burdens to uplift. The author identifies that the issue of Muslim women lies in falling as victims of false consciousness, because they think that their duties dictate that they marry and stay in the home, while in fact they are satisfying a male ideology.

3.9. Marriage and Sexual Relationships: Between Social Restraints and Personal Freedom

In *Nekropolis*, marriage is seen as a socially-imposed relationship, therefore, all women's prospects are to get married and have children. However, women are at the risk of being eternally cursed by not marrying as a consequence of the mistakes conducted by close family members. In a conversation between Akhmim and Hariba, he asks: "Did you ever have a boyfriend?" (28) to which she replies that she had and his name was Aziz. Then, he asks her: "Why didn't you marry?" (29) and she explains that her problems are because of Nouzha, or more precisely because of her brother Fhassin. Hariba was sure that Aziz would ask her to marry, but when Nouzha and her husband move to the death house across the street from their house, things become more complicated. Nouzha is both beautiful and young and is "trying to learn the difference between romance and life" (29). But Nouzha and Hariba's boyfriend Aziz are "outside, not inside the family where everything mattered" (30). Change is triggered by the illegal relationship between her brother Fhassin and Nouzha. "He and Nouzha were careful,

meeting in the afternoon when her husband was building houses outside the Nekropolis in the city and the rest of us were sleeping" (30). This act of adultery would impact the lives of all members of Hariba's family. For Nouzha and Fhassin, the risks resulted by infidelity and fornication are considered minimal compared to the pleasure they are presently experiencing. Nouzha "was married, and it wasn't very exciting anymore, not nearly as interesting as when her husband was courting her. Fhassin made her feel important — look at the risk he was taking — for her" (31).

Shame and disgrace are brought on both families when Nouzha's husband discovers their secret affair. After the scandalous events upon Nouzha's husband's awareness of their relationship, people "took [Fhassin] and Nouzha, divorced her from her husband for the adultery trial, flogged them both, then dumped them in prison for thirteen years" (31). In Islam, flogging is a punishment inflicted for fornication on both the man and the woman. Through this scene, McHugh is trying to show that Islam promotes violence, specifically against women because Nouzha is lured into this relationship as a consequence of the neglect and inattention of her husband. Therefore, in the view of McHugh, the punishments carried out by the people under Islam serve to perpetuate misogyny. However, Islamic feminist Ziba Mir-Hosseini points out that the rulings of *zina* in Islam are, in fact, gender neutral. Because they "specify the same punishments for men and women, and contain measures to protect women against false accusations, with such strict requirements of evidence that it is almost impossible to prove a case" (Mir-Hosseini "Criminalizing Sexuality" 18). Indeed, Islam urges that there should be four witnesses who observed the act of adultery for the punishment to take place. These measures are made to decrease punishment; thus, flogging becomes more of a symbolic act. One such example in the Islamic history is the woman who came to the Prophet and asked that she takes the punishment for adultery. The Prophet turned her away multiple times, arguing that she must give birth to the child, then suckle him until she weans him. However, McHugh mistakenly considers that Islam is extreme in the matter, while her knowledge about Islam is extremely finite. This is evident in the adultery punishment for the married man or woman. Nouzha is a married woman, hence, in Islamic terms, she should be stoned not flogged.

Ultimately, the consequent repercussions of the *zina* act affect not only Fhassin and Nouzha, but also their respective family members. Hariba becomes eternally cursed as she falls

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victim for social stigma because of the deeds of her brother. All hope for her to get married is lost because of a 'shameful' act not conducted by her. McHugh's criticism of the cultural practices that impede any change in women's conditions is an approach adopted by Islamic feminists, who, contrary to McHugh's approach, believe that all Muslim women's issues are a result of accumulations of cultural practices and false readings of the religious scriptures, and not because of religion itself. Accordingly, Hariba "didn't wait for Aziz to ask [her] to marry him — not that he would have now" (31). Her entire life is brought upside down by her brother's act. She narrates her condition after the incident: "I let my hair go black. I became a dutiful daughter. I hated my life, but I didn't know how to escape. When I was twenty-one, I was jessed" (31-32). Jessing and enslavement become the only solution for her, as a normal married-life becomes more of a fantastical dream that cannot and will not be realized. Her escape from people's criticism is to a worse condition (jessing) in order to feel safe and under the protection of someone, albeit a master who enslaves, berates and beats her. The mistress continuously strikes her, and because Hariba is a clueless person, she not only accepts her situation, but think that her life is not a bad life. She even thinks that the jessing is a blessing from God. The mistress's attitudes towards Hariba are that of a master and an obedient slave. In one occasion, the mistress orders Hariba to kneel down, and "[s]he looks at [her] for a moment, furious and speechless. Then [Hariba] see[s] it coming, but [she] can't do anything, up comes her hand and she slaps [her]. [She] topple[s] sideways, mostly from surprise" (34). She is beaten because the mistress thinks that the bed is not well-organized. Then, the mistress locks Hariba in a room as a punishment for her unspecified misdeeds.

In her solitude, Hariba is visited by Akhmim, thus their relationship begins. After losing her chances of getting married because of her brother's deeds, she thinks that a relationship with a biologically constructed AI is the only viable relationship she is left with. Their first kiss together reveals her fear of being rejected as she closes her eyes and waits for him to move forward and kiss her; "hearing the breeze rustle the lilies, the poppies, the roses on the bed. [she] wait[s] forever. Until he finally kisses [her]" (36). Then, she has queries of whether he loves her because he has to, as harni have to serve humans. Hariba's fragile situation urges her to find refuge in a biologically constructed AI after being abandoned by her mistress and seen as an unwanted and a flawed oddity in her society. Because harni are oppressed creations, Hariba sees a resemblance to her situation, thus feels safe in the company of her likes: the oppressed.

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Consequently, she unhesitatingly addresses Akhmim by saying: "I want you to be my lover" (38). Afraid that her fate will be that of eternal loneliness, she clutches to whatever faint sparkle of hope in a relationship, even with less than a human. Her fears are sustained when her owner Mbarek-salah decides to sell her to another owner because of the issues with his wife, therefore, Akhmim and her are separated from each other. "Alone again. O Holy One, I'm tired of being alone. I'll be alone my whole life, jessed women do not marry. I can't help it, I start to cry" (39). She feels her entire life and future are ruined, and that living life alone is unimaginable. For this reason, while Mbarek-salah is selling her to a new owner, she has the desire to "throw [her]self at Mbarek's feet and embarrass him into saying that [she] can stay" (41). McHugh demonstrates that women contribute as much to their own oppression, because Hariba wants to endure the burdens of slavery and the treatment of the bad-tempered wife in order to stay close to a human look-alike.

Although sold to another owner, Hariba's relationship with Akhmim is still vibrant and vigorous. She occasionally hovers around her old household, hoping for a sight of her unhuman lover and leaves paper flowers as a gesture of her undying love for him. In her loneliness, she contemplates her life without a man to fill the huge void she feels in her life and blurts out: "O Holy One, I dread the empty evening. Maybe I should go by Mbarek's street just to fill up time. I have all this empty time ahead. Tonight and tomorrow and this week and next month and down through the years, unmarried, empty, until I'm an old dried-up woman Evenings folding paper." (48). She thinks that life is filled with activities which avert the thinking that there is no meaning to life. According to the ingrained thoughts in *Nekropolis*, meaning for a woman is found only in marriage, when a woman has a home and takes care of her husband and children. The women, left with few options, choose to marry for all the wrong reasons. Especially when the economic situation for women ties their hands. In this patriarchal society in which forced marriage is the norm, girls and women are mere commodities and properties of men. Viewed differently, Hariba's choice to be jessed and love relationship with Akhmim can be seen as a rebellious act against social and cultural norms. Her defiance, although not always willful, stands as a statement of refusal of a long-established system that confines women to preordained roles. She, therefore, insists upon entering a socially and a religiously unacceptable relationship not only because she is marginalized by her society or that she actually loves the harni, but also because she feels internally satisfied to have committed such an unacceptable act that renders her

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nonconformist and odd in such an oppressive system. For this matter, she wonders: "Have I fallen in love with [Akhmim] precisely because he isn't human? I don't care, I feel love" (49).

Marriage seems to take a central part in the thinking of the women in *Nekropolis*. Hariba's mother reflects on the jessing of her daughter: "When she went to be jessed, I was saddened for her because who would marry a jessed girl? She would never have children" (107). A woman's life for Hariba's mother resembles a running wheel from which there is no escape. Marriage is regarded by McHugh as a closed institution which is not very different from imprisonment. However, in Islam, one of the requirements of marriage is the consent of the couple to the marriage. She compares her daughter to her childhood friend Ayesha and thinks: "When she and Hariba were young, Ayesha was the follower, but now that she has a husband and a daughter, she's somehow left Hariba behind. Hariba, for all her experience in rich people's homes, is still a girl, artificially preserved in the way spinsters are" (143). It is as though marriage is what gives value to women, and without it, women are devoid of meaning and perhaps even the privilege of being a human. In the same context, when Akhmim asks Hariba why she chose to get jessed, she replies by saying that it is because work is hard to find in Nekropolis, and that she "didn't think [she] would ever get married" (49). He insists that someone would eventually marry her, then he asks "is it awful not to get married?" (49). Through questioning the very nature and consequence of life without marriage, Akhmim once again represents the skeptical and resentful voice which McHugh thinks the Arab Muslim women are lacking. Marriage plagues the thinking of all women of future Morocco, as it seems it is the only valid future prospect for an Arab Muslim woman. Ayesha thinks that her friend "Hariba regrets giving up children the most. It's not as if being jessed means she can't have children, but who would marry her? Unless she could buy back her bond, and Hariba always said she was saving her money to have a little when she was old" (148). But to assume in a different way, Hariba is the only person who revolts against the 'prison of marriage' and having children, albeit to enter another prison of jessing and slavery. Through this illustration, McHugh probes the question of which is worse: marriage of becoming a slave?

After fleeing Morocco, Hariba and Akhmim find themselves in a Western utopia where the restrictions of their Islamist country are no longer standing. There, they have the liberty to proceed unashamedly with their relationship. Hariba shatters shame as well as the cultural and religious chains which have long prevented her from living the life she wants. Their once hidden

love relationship becomes public, and the so-called taboos of virginity disintegrate between the fundamentalist past which might never return and the unprejudiced future which appears to be never-ending. In her first attempt to have a sexual intercourse with the harni, guilt flows over Hariba and she is drawn to her conservative past. She describes as Akhmim "lays [her] on [her] back and kisses [her] some more, and then strokes [her] breast through [her] nightgown and [she] startle[s]" (245). Then, she asks fearfully "Is he supposed to? O Allah, what am I doing?" (245). Her fear from God and fear for her future still restrain her to her past. She immediately starts thinking about marriage: "I'm supposed to wait until I marry. Will I ever be able to marry if I do this? Is Akhmim who I want to marry? Yes, I tell myself, I am already in love with Akhmim and I came all the way to Spain" (245). The issue of virginity haunts her as spouses are supposed to be virgin in the night of their marriage. However, the rules that apply to women do not apply to men in what Mernissi calls "social schizophrenia" (Mernissi "Virginity and Patriarchy" 186). Consequently, the issue of virginity is a cultural practice and is not religiously backed. Since women are the weaker circle in the patriarchal society, they resort to virginity surgeries to restore the hymen which can be considered as "a survival strategy for women who are living in patriarchal gender ideologies with double standards" (Cindoglu 260).

On their second attempt, Hariba engages unwaveringly in her first sexual intercourse with her biologically constructed AI lover. That night while feeling lonely in a strange country, she asks him: "Do you want to make love?" (251). Because harni are supposed to satisfy their master's/mistress's desires, Akhmim feels that his duty is to make her happy. Then, she says abruptly: "I want you to make love to me" (251) to which he agrees and proceeds with the foreplay. Her conservative thoughts start infiltrating her head while thinking about engaging in this illegal venture: "It will hurt the first time, but then it gets better. That's what everyone says. But it will change us. It will be like a marriage. I can be a wife to him, I can give him what he wants. It can be as if we were jessed to each other — has anyone ever done that?" (251) Although performing a religiously forbidden and socially unacceptable act, she still thinks that their relationship will be another version of marriage. These thoughts are inescapable because she has lived her entire life in a community which dictates what is forbidden and what is allowed; one that especially puts more restrictions and punishments on women. Before Akhmim takes her clothes off, he asks her if she wants him to do so. Feeling embarrassed, she whispers in consent and wishes that he proceeds without asking. When he is completely naked, she looks at

him only once and then she chooses to look at his face only. This shows that she is placed in a push and pull situation with her conservative upbringing. Her first sexual intercourse feels unpleasant and she wants it to be done quickly, which reveals that Hariba's sexual relationship is a rebellion and a revenge against the norms of her society. Once finished, she is overrun by thoughts that her "mother would be ashamed" (254) and she feels ashamed herself. She notices spots of blood on the sheets, and goes to the shower to cry. After the sexual intercourse, she feels lonely again and that nothing has changed. Then she has second thoughts: "Well, something has changed. I'm not fit to marry now" (254).

3.10. "The Land of the Infidel": A Western Utopia by Comparison

'In the Land of the Infidel' is the inversely sarcastic fifth section title of McHugh's *Nekropolis*. It implies that the land of the 'infidel', or the utopian Western state of Spain, is a place where equality and freedom are the existing conditions. Across the sea from this utopia, lies Morocco (the land of the believers): a highly sexist, religiously prejudiced dystopic land where slavery and sexual oppression are the status-quo. McHugh depicts the Moroccan and Arab men as sexual beings who see the pleasure in sexually exploiting and imposing their androcentric patriarchal authorities on women. All that occupies men's thinking is their sexuality as can be seen in Mbarek-salah's sex doll which is shaped like a woman and fulfills his sexual desires the same as a real woman (151-152). On the other hand, she depicts the Western people who come to visit Morocco as highly respective of the culture and the religion of the people as "[foriegn women] are decently, if oddly, covered. They wear long skirts and sandals colored like children's candy" (92). In fact, McHugh does the contrary when she leans towards a white Western superior ideology that sees the Arab Muslims from an Orientalist point of view. Therefore, in deconstructionist terms, the respect of the Westerners of the Eastern traditions as depicted by McHugh cannot be said about her depiction of Arabs and Muslims in her novel. Subsequently, her declared intentions are subverted by her creation.

In Spain, there is a "general Western pity of oppression in [Morocco], especially for the non-males" (Foram 208). Hariba is astonished to see that people and especially women "have a lot of skin showing" (McHugh 206). She has used to see women in veils only, as it is considered both an imposition by religious and cultural norms and a personal conviction. She asserts that: "I can't dress like these women. I can't" (207). She fathoms the different realities in Spain where women are equal to men and they can work and study the same as their counterparts. They assure

her that they value humans and non-humans regardless of their gender or ethnicity. They protest against slavery and oppression as they "don't recognize ownership of people or [harni] in Spain, or anywhere in the E.C.U." (208). She meets Malik, an immigrant Moroccan professor of religious studies, who published a work that irritated people, showing that the fundamentalist Moroccan regime suppresses even intellectual endeavors. Hariba, as the name points out, feels that she has fled not only from the country of oppression and institutionalized slavery, but also from the 'backward' thinking that kept her static and unchanged. She is freed from the jessing and finds a respectable work in Spain and ultimately for the first time, she gets to dress the way she likes. She chooses not to wear a veil, disconnecting with, in McHugh's opinion, the most oppressive tool. Therefore, she becomes liberated and free from the chains of a probably irredeemable past.

"You need to take off the old hair" (256) are the words of the barber Gabriel whom Hariba visits in order to have her long hair cut. His words, although seeming spontaneous, insinuate that she needs to disconnect with her past. Indeed, he cuts her hair and puts it in a box, and she looks at the mirror as the 'new girl' starts to emerge as a phoenix rising from its own ashes. She thinks that the new girl "looks like a Spanish girl who has Arab parents. She looks modern" (256). She looks very different and free to decide and take action. This means a new beginning for her: a life without the fear of breaking the rules or being looked at with shame and disgrace, or being punished because for being the odd one in the herd. It means that all the closed doors of the past are open to her with a new haircut and look, loss of virginity, and the freedom that this strange new country provides her with. With the box that contains her old hair in her lap, she starts to think about what to do with it: she could send it to her lover Akhmim who broke up with her, or send it to her mother "but it would break her heart" (256-257), or send it to Ayesha who would probably burn it. She finally decides that it belongs to no one, because it symbolizes the old mask that she was forced to wear her entire life. She runs her fingers over her old hair and feels her "tears are so hot, they're as hot as blood" (257).

McHugh's ethnocentric attitudes tend to establish certain definitions of freedom and equality, without fully understanding the specific cultural and societal norms that are totally different from Western norms. Besides, she has her knowledge about Arab societies from mere conceptions and not from contact with Arab societies or solid truths. Therefore, all Muslim women are oppressed in her view, and as redemption, she wants to shape the Muslim woman in

the image of the Western woman. She shares the slogan of 'save Muslim women' with many white supremacist and colonialist agendas that seek not to save Muslim women, but to deem Islam as Malicious and evil and the Arab culture as inferior and backward. Equality for McHugh has its roots in the discourse of sameness, while for Islamic feminists, equality is in value, thus in difference (Barlas "Believing Women" 130). Consequently, judgment about a certain culture is always biased when viewed and judged from the point of view of that culture. Judgment becomes unneutral and the 'other' culture is deemed flawed and in a lesser position. The Morocco in McHugh's imagination is constructed on "the assumption that this backward society will remain absolutely unchanged, fossilized in time, unaffected by the sweeping changes brought in by technology all over the world" (Foram 209).

3.11. Conclusion

McHugh's *Nekropolis* tends to represent the Arab culture and the religion of Islam not as what they truly are, but according to a Western supremacist agenda. Such an agenda possesses "the power and the will to propagate that particular image of Islam, and this image therefore becomes more prevalent, more present, than all others" (Said "Covering Islam" 36). In McHugh's view, all Arab Muslim women are oppressed by their respective cultures and religion. There is no denying that culture plays an essential role in the life of women in the Arab world. However, to argue that oppression is the exclusive domain of the Arab culture and religion is both reductionist and misleading. Consequently, "in all cultures, including in the West, there are likely to be different segments of women that are subjected to different forms of oppression" (Bullough and Abdelzaher 11). Therefore, understanding the intricacies of each culture should be done not from an ethnocentric point of view, but from a cultural relativist perspective which allows for plurality and difference. While McHugh admits in the acknowledgment of her book that she "would like to visit the real place" someday, her fictional creation is based neither on contact with nor on knowledge about the culture of Morocco. It is rather based on mere conceptions which are most certainly influenced by stereotypes about the Arab Muslim societies.

Chapter Four: Islam and Female Empowerment in Wilson's Science Fiction Fantasy *Alif the Unseen*

Introduction

Western fiction on Islam and gender has predominantly been impregnated with negative representations. However, there are few examples in western literature that touch on the topic with fairness and objectivity. Contrary to the image of the oppressive Arab culture and misogynist Islam, such writings refuse to "invent[] exotic fictions about the East to prove a point about western superiority" (Wilson "*The Butterfly Mosque*" 276). As a Western convert to Islam who has concretely experienced the Arab culture, G. Willow Wilson wants to have her own perspective on Arab Muslim culture and women, and "not as [she] was told to see [them]" (80). As a Westerner and a Muslim, she refuses to take sides and takes pride in her hybrid identity. With such amalgamation comes a promise to expose the Western misrepresentations and distortions, and to offer an unbiased, objective and neutral representation. This chapter aims to discuss Wilson's debut cyberpunk fantasy novel *Alif the Unseen* from an Islamic feminist lens. With a focus on the author's perceptions of the Islamic cultures, the author's life, conversion to Islam and her thoughts about Islamic cultures in her earlier writings (particularly in *The Butterfly Mosque*) are discussed in this chapter, in addition to the analysis of *Alif the Unseen* from an Islamic feminist perspective.

4.2. G. Willow Wilson: A Western Muslim Pen against Western Prejudice

Gwendolyn Willow Wilson is an American fiction author, comics writer, essayist and journalist. She was born on August 31st, 1982 in New Jersey, United States, and grew up in Morganville. She was raised in an unreligious household and environment as her parents renounced the Protestant faith in the late sixties to become atheists. She describes spending her teenage years as "an upper-middle-class American white girl with bland politics and polite beliefs" (Wilson "*The Butterfly Mosque*" 43). She converted to Islam when she was twenty. As an author, her writings range from autobiographical fiction, fantasy, dystopia and cyberpunk, to comics and superhero fiction. Her prominent works include her autobiographical novel *The Butterfly Mosque* (2010), fantasy fiction *Alif the Unseen* (2012), *The Bird King* (2019), and many comic issues; most prominent of which is *Ms. Marvel*. She has won several awards including the 2015 Hugo Award for best Graphic Story for *Ms. Marvel*, the Middle East Book Award, the

Broken Frontier Award, Pacific Northwest Book Sellers Association Award and the World Fantasy Award for her 2012 novel *Alif the Unseen*, which will be the discussion of this chapter.

Wilson believes that writing is the career she has always imagined herself of doing. Speculative fiction has been her preferable genre in writing. She asserts that the "beauty of science fiction and fantasy is that the reader can take it on whatever level [they are] capable of" (Wilson "*Landscape of the Imagination*"), because reading speculative fiction can take multifaceted forms. On the one hand, it can be read for amusement and pleasure as the worlds of speculative fiction take the readers on unfamiliar journeys and where the characters are not "simply mouthpieces for whatever political agenda the writer has" ("*Landscape of the Imagination*"). On the other hand, the stories can be seen as a metaphor for political and social status quo, or women's rights or gay's rights.

Being a convert to Islam and a researcher in the fields of Islamic history and literature, her stories feature many aspects of the Islamic 'mythology'. Fortunately for Wilson, the exposure to the Muslim culture fueled and enriched her stories. Mixing the Muslim traditional folklore with the modern aspects of speculative fiction provides a hybrid of cultural and religious beliefs as well as scientific and fantastical elements. *Alif the Unseen* and *The Bird King* exploit the stories of jinn (unseen beings in the Islamic culture) who are represented as a version of tricksters who can change shapes to beasts and birds. Wilson acknowledges the role the Islamic culture played in constructing her stories and admits that jinn stories are in "the folklore—and in some cases, in the Quran itself. So [she] feel[s] hesitant to take credit for anything" (Wilson and Jackson). Furthermore, her stories make references to the ancient Arabic and Persian work of literature entitled *The Thousand and One Nights* or *The Arabian Nights*. This early work includes stories which can be considered as proto-speculative fiction (Nuruddin 138); a contribution of early science fiction and fantasy in the Islamic civilization. Therefore, Wilson acknowledges and celebrates the Muslim tradition for inaugurating the speculative fiction genre.

Moreover, verisimilitude challenges posed by speculative fiction are overlooked in Wilson's works. This is partly because jinn are part of the Islamic cannon not because they are urban myths, but because they are real creatures (Hankins and Wilson). Consequently, the fantasy genre about jinn has encountered negative reactions from the Arab Muslim audiences due to beliefs about the unseen, black magic and the damaging impact of contact with the other

world. Only recently that the genre found resonance and the authors from the Middle East became interested in this not-new genre, and the readership reached unprecedented levels by young audiences. Great examples are *The Yacoubian Building* by Alaa Al Aswany and *Antichrist* by Ahmed Khaled Mustafa. Writings about jinn have become popular as many writers from different parts of the world embraced and brought their insights and creativity to the subject. Wilson's *Alif the Unseen* bridges the gap between believable and unbelievable as the human world and the world of the unseen come into collision with each other.

Wilson's identity as an American Muslim female speculative fiction writer allows for multiple prospects and viewpoints. Being chiefly a comics author, fragments of her identity can be seen scattered across a multitude of works. Her Muslim voice arises in *Ms. Marvel* as Kamala Khan becomes a superheroine while exploring her hybrid identity. Her American identity ascends in *Wonder Woman*, an all-American female superheroine to whom the American identity is ingrained even in the choice of garment. *Cairo* represents the author's experience in Egypt and the time she spent in Cairo. Moreover, her identity and experiences are also manifested in her novels. For instance, the character of the convert in *Alif the Unseen* is an American woman who lives in the unnamed city and eventually marries a local man from the jinn, similar to Wilson's marriage of Omar Haggag. However, Wilson's depictions in her works do not always stand for her identity and experiences. She argues that if she is asked to do an issue of *Superman*, she will not immediately think to "bring a Muslim perspective into Superman" (Hankins and Wilson), because it would be plainly irrelevant. However, she believes that a writer cannot separate out religion, gender or one's background completely. They might "come out as certain emotional tenure" (Hankins and Wilson). Although women take a central spot in her writings, she does not hesitate to experiment with male characters such as Alif, the protagonist in her debut novel, or Vikram, the male jinn.

Wilson, like many SP authors, is influenced by the works of Margaret Atwood who owes the privilege of achieving "a kind of cultural ubiquity" (Wilson "On Margaret Atwood"). Atwood's works represent an exemplary model that showed Wilson that she could "address real-world issues in a meaningful way within the realm of fantasy and science fiction". Therefore, speculative fiction for her was not "simply an escape; it was also an arrival" (Wilson "On Margaret Atwood"). *Alif the Unseen* is not simply about quantum computing or the mythical

fantastical worlds of jinn, it stands as a commentary on the Arab Spring and the need of faith in the face of governmental and social oppression. It is also a personal inward exploration into the lives of many characters who represent a specimen of the Arab societies. She also wants to break the Western stereotypes about the Arab Muslim societies in the changing modern and technological world. Wilson explains the social and cultural contexts behind the writing of her novel. She says:

> I was tired of being forced into boxes. Pre-Arab Spring, people only seemed to want to hear about a handful of things when it came to the Middle East: terrorists, the exotic undeveloped Orient (which no longer exists), and The Crisis Of Muslim Women, about which most honestto-God Muslim women are somewhat perplexed. Even for nonfiction, there was a script, a narrative one was supposed to follow. The fact that Arab youth were not only adopting cuttingedge technology, but using it in revolutionary ways, was not interesting to people. It didn't fit the script. It didn't involve camels or gender segregation. It was very, very frustrating. So I said screw it, I'm writing a novel (qtd. in Coovadia 41).

Therefore, the novel itself represents an act of resistance against the dominant Western discourse on the Arab world in general and the status of Arab Muslim women in specific. The author represents the wave of American Muslim writers who positively depict Muslim heroines and take pride in their Muslim identity rather than trying to conceal it. She wears a headscarf herself and is often the focus of attention because of the unfamiliarity of a white American woman wearing a veil. She observes that there is a growing interest among Muslim writers to make their superheroines wear the veil and face cover instead of wearing masks. Prominent examples include *Qahera* in Egypt who wears a veil and defends women against sexual harassments in the street of Cairo, and in Pakistan *The Burka Avenger*, a school teacher who chooses to fight religious extremism and corruption (Reisman and Wilson). Despite the fact that she portrays many veiled characters, Wilson chooses that her Pakistani superheroine, Kamala Khan, goes out unveiled for two reasons. First, Wilson remarks that most of the Pakistani teenage girls in America do not publicly put on headscarves, and second, she wants the readers to ponder the fact that there is freedom of choice when it comes to the veil.

Wilson believes that speculative fiction is a powerful tool for transmitting messages especially that censorship pervades many countries in the Middle East. Dictatorships and oppressive regimes tend to censor books and journals that have direct messages and critiques of the regime or religion. They are oblivious of the fact that under the 'childish' themes of fantasy and science fiction were "powerful political messages" (Rosenberg and Wilson). She ironically remarks that bookstores are full of fantasy books such as *American Gods* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and that the regimes focus on the surface structure and fail to comprehend the deep political and religious metaphors which underlie these texts. In *Alif the Unseen*, Dina returns *The Golden Compass* which Alif lent her and comments that the book is dangerous and full of pagan images, to which Alif replies by saying that "[t]hey are metaphors" and she would not probably understand them (Wilson "Alif the Unseen" 4). Furthermore, she thinks that some of the people of the authoritarian regimes are in fact very clever and not lacking imagination which adds to the complexity of the Arab situation. Initially, she thought that freedom is 'dead' in Arab countries due to the collaboration of dictators, their supporters and the people who do not want trouble or to disrupt the status-quo in threatening ways. However, when the Arab Spring began, her thoughts changed and she started to believe that perhaps freedom is not dead, at least in the people's thoughts, it still exists (Rosenberg and Wilson).

On a different context, Wilson is conscious of the fact that she is an outsider writing about the Middle East, even though she lives in Egypt and has relatives through her in-laws. As a convert Westerner, she thinks that Westerners are generally lacking flexibility when they come to live in the Middle East. They bring their Western 'attitudes' and "expect one thing [but] find another" (Rosenberg and Wilson). This is portrayed in *Alif the Unseen* as the character of the convert who tries very hard to make peace but ends up exhausting herself. She argues that this is not the person she wants to be and that the convert character does not represent her in this facet.

4.3. Wilson's Conversion to Islam

Being the child of atheist parents, Wilson's exposure to religion is neither the result of obligation nor conditioning. She went to college at Boston University to study history. She mentions that she was "exposed to [Islam] sort of by accident by studying the Crusades in a history class, ironically" (Reisman and Wilson). At that time, her knowledge about Islam was scarce, because she neither knew any Muslims, nor been to a Muslim country. Moreover,

because atheism is a preposterous idea for her, she has always considered herself a monotheist. However, she did not know what kind of monotheism to adopt. Her religious journey is purely textual because she started to study a number of religions including Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. She writes in her memoir that during her journey to faith, she was certain that she is a monotheist. Therefore, she resisted the attraction towards Buddhism, because in her view, Buddhism is not theist enough. On the other hand, Christianity poses an unfathomable problem to Wilson, because the notions that God had a son, Trinity and inherited sin stand at odds with the idea of unification advocated by monotheism. Judaism seemed like the most viable religion and the perfect choice was it not for the exclusory idea that Judaism is meant for a certain tribe of people: the Jews (Wilson "The Butterfly Mosque" 12).

Although her views are shaped by an academic interest in religions, Wilson's religious awakening came after an adrenalin issue which brought her to the hospital. She writes in her memoir that "[b]eing ill had shaken something loose in [her] head", and that "[i]llnesses usually bring people to religion through the front door; [hers] brought [her] through the back" (Wilson *The Butterfly Mosque*"11). She contemplates the force that made her ill and helped her recover without conscious interference from her, and concludes that "[t]hat unified force was a God too massive, too inhuman, to resist with the atheism in which [she] had been brought up" (12). As an 18-year-old white girl and in the midst of pain and confusion, she makes a promise to a God she has "never spoken to in [her] life" (7) that if she recovers within three days, she would convert to Islam. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, her illness lasts for more than a year. This unanswered prayer had a counter effect on her because it sparked a certain interest in organized religion. Particularly because neither bad nor good experiences are indicative of God's judgment, they are simply part of being human, and that religion does not work in the personal favor of individuals. Unlike atheist Buddhism, polytheist Christianity and exclusionary Judaism, the fundamental belief of Islam is the absolute unity of God '*Tawhid*'. Besides, it celebrates, welcomes and encourages conversion without exclusion. She states that Islam spoke the words which she believed. Consequently, her promise to convert to Islam is not a 'coincidence' (13), but more of an assertion of inner beliefs that aligned perfectly with a religion that so happens to be Islam.

Moreover, upon her studies of Islam, Wilson considers that "to become a Muslim is sort of a deal between you and God" (Wilson qtd. In Wangsness). However, she has not initially been enthusiastic to accept and convert to Islam. This is mainly due to inner and outer determinants that would hinder her decision. On the one hand, she forethought about the hardships accompanying her conversion. On the other, the events of 9/11 took place while she was still in college and she thought that perhaps she has misjudged the religion (Hankins and Wilson). Later, she resumes her study and, after a couple of years, she becomes convinced that the attack on the World Trade Center is not endorsed by the religion, but is instead criminalized and denounced. Up until this point of Wilson's life, her approach to Islam has been purely textual and not based on contact with the Muslim culture. She asserts that she has "always been Muslim, since [she] discovered in the Quran what [she] already believed" (Wilson "*The Butterfly Mosque*" 23). In 2003, she had an opportunity to teach English in Cairo. During her journey, she converts to Islam as she "made peace with God. [she] called Him Allah" (23). The earlier unsettling notions of the clash of civilizations and the possible contradiction of an American Muslim were cleared from her thoughts, and one idea raced in her head that for the first time in her life, she "felt unified" (23). Wilson's journey to belief is informed by an educated, intellectual inquisitiveness and questioning of the very reality shaped by the West and the narrow point of view of some Muslims. She recounts her unwavering belief in Islam in *The Butterfly Mosque* by saying that:

> Through the bile and ignorance of the radical imams and self-righteous apostates, through the spin of the news networks and the pomposity of academics, I saw a straight, unwavering line. How could I be disappointed? I did not believe in Islam; I opened my eyes every morning and saw it (231).

In this context, faith to Wilson is "an affirmation of personal experience" (76). An experience which Mary Margaret Funk refers to in her book *Islam Is...: An Experience of Dialogue and Devotion* as a "connection with and consciousness of God" (Funk 17). Part of Wilson's experiences is concerned with trying to figure out an explanation of the things that she felt. Thus, she explains that: "When [she] stumbled into Islam, [she] wasn't looking for a radical new moral or social system. [she] wasn't angry at society. [she] was looking for words, the words, ones that would match what [she] had seen and felt but could not explain" (76). Through this inquisitiveness, she sought to experience Islam thoroughly. In other words, she experienced

Islam's ethos in its spiritual beliefs and practiced rituals. The balance that Islam creates, with an aim not only to regulate a person's relationship with Allah but also with other humans as well, provides inner self-content to Wilson. Furthermore, she sees that Islam is a liberating force which provides her with the freedom to live life as "[she] saw it, not as [she] was told to see it" (76).

Standing at the crossroads of two cultures, she writes that "[c]ulture belongs to the imagination; to judge it rationally is to misunderstand its function" (79). Her cross-cultural experience incorporates ironies from both Egyptian and American cultures. She claims that the two cultures are often conflicting and demand contrary things. For instance, she mentions that greetings hold symbolic meanings, and that the form of greeting in one culture can be found inappropriate in the other. In the United States, men do not kiss other men in greeting but they tend to kiss women on the cheek. Contrarily, in Egypt the opposite proves to be true. Each culture claims that the greeting kiss is not sexual, which poses a problem of why would Egyptian men avoid kissing women, and why would American men be anxious about kissing other men? She reaches the conclusion that "cultural habits are by and large irrational, emerge irrationally, and are practiced irrationally" (79). Therefore, she learns to trust and refer to her religion which becomes "one of the central arbiters of [her] daily life" (79).

Furthermore, upon her studies of Islam and first-hand experience with the Egyptian culture, she takes a neutralist and unbiased position. She criticizes the orientalist academics' often misleading and dishonest accusations of the Egyptian and Arab culture, especially when it comes to progressive Muslims in the West such as Ginan Rauf. Rauf speaks about female infanticide in modern Egypt. Wilson asserts that while female infanticide was rampant in the Arabian Peninsula before Islam, it was strictly outlawed by clear Quranic verses and scriptural texts with the coming of Islam. Rauf, who speaks in the West about Egypt, is "creating a monster that didn't exist, and parading it in front of people too far removed from the real Egypt to question her" (Wilson "*The Butterfly Mosque*" 275). Due to the specificity of Arab cultures, there is a sort of an 'unwritten rule' that says that it is not permissible for a white person to criticize an Arab while speaking about the Middle East. However, Wilson breaks this rule and performs what might be called a counter-orientalist defense position based on factual information

and defines an Orientalist as someone "who invents exotic fictions about the East to prove a point about western superiority" (276).

To quote Edward Said: "No one today is purely one thing" (Said "Culture and Imperialism" 336). Wilson's identity proves to be challenging, especially that a certain dialogue between national and religious identities evolves. She marries an Egyptian physics teacher named Omar Haggag and accepts to go back to the United States with her husband where she resumes her writing career. Being an American convert married to an Egyptian Muslim man comes with its mandatory inconveniences. She is conscious of the fact that different spaces imply different situations in which her identity is continuously challenged. She understands the implications of being a Muslim for Americans, which might insinuate that she is considered a traitor in her original culture. She emphasizes that "Islam is seen as antithetical to what it means to be American. [However] [w]hen [she is] in Egypt [she is] in the religious majority, but at the same time, [she is] a foreigner, and that comes with certain privileges but also certain boundaries" (Wilson qtd. in Lau). Thus, as an American convert who has made contact with the other culture and experienced Islam, she possesses the vantage point of an outsider who sees how Muslim culture is perceived, and an insider who fathoms how a culture perceives itself. Furthermore, she is mindful of how perceptions from the outside can be harmful and dangerous. At the same time, she understands that it is "more rewarding - and more difficult - to think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others than only about [her own culture and people]" (Said 336).

Once married and placed at the crossroads of her American upbringing, Egyptian experience and religious conversion, Wilson resorts to Islam "which [is] neither Egyptian nor American and often contradicted both" (Wilson "The Butterfly Mosque" 79) to mediate and resolve her difficult situation. For her and Omar, disputes are better solved with reference to the Quran and the hadiths. She emphasizes that due to her multi-layered identity, arguments with her husband fall always in the gender and freedom of movement spectrum (79). Before arriving at Egypt, she lived her life publicly and independently. However, she learns that Egypt proves to be a different case as private life is an inherent characteristic of the Egyptian society. In this view, she and her husband sought to construct a "intermediate cultural space" (80) in which their life would be tolerable. Consequently, in the course of her reconciliation and study of the Islamic

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scriptures, she becomes "surprised by how often Islam, in its purely textual form, took [her] side" (80) on matters related to the life of women.

4.4. Wilson's Counter-Discourse on Gender and Middle Eastern Men

As Wilson converts to Islam and makes contact with the Arab society, she discovers gender norms substantially different from the American norms. Upon her lived experience in the Egyptian society, her perceptions about the Egyptian values and norms, which are considered oppressive by the West, gradually shift to become more appreciative and understanding. Furthermore, she becomes aware of the different situation in Egypt, and learns the Western mistake in the assumption that under the façade of language and customs lies a Westerner "waiting to emerge" (Wilson "The Butterfly Mosque" 69). She understands that American and Egyptian perceptions about gender norms stand far from each other, and that the 'bridge' she wants to cross, while clinging to her American principles, does not exist even in her relationship with her husband Omar (69). However, the intricacies and differentiations of the situation in the Arab societies reveals to Wilson the xenophobic nature of the Western discourse on Arab Muslim societies.

Arab Muslim men have been presented by the Western media in the most twisted and oblique fashion. References to terrorism, violence and oppression have always made their way in the portrayal of Middle Eastern Muslim men. Initially, Wilson has had certain anxieties and worries about Middle Eastern men whom she "had been taught to fear" (43). The Western discourse has instilled in her mind that "they always seem like nice guys. It's only after you've gotten involved that you discover the honor-killing wife-imprisoning fundamentalist reality beneath the façade" (43). However, after her experience and interaction with men in Egypt, the Western portrayal not only seemed exaggerated but extremely fallacious and invalid. She reveals a different and intentionally 'hidden' side of Arab Muslim men who, in her experience, are protective, kind and respectful. The men even "began to treat [her] with the same protective chivalry they extended to other Muslim women" (108). Before marrying Omar, she possessed skeptical ideas about men especially that she becomes aware of the 'traditional' type of man that Omar represents who, in her mind, would compel her to the traditional roles of taking care of the household. Omar clears her annoyed ideas and assures her by saying that he is not marrying her

to be "a servant", but because he loves her. He points out that she has "this idea of a stereotypical Arab man in [her] head, and [she] keep[s] confusing [that man] with [him]" (204).

Moreover, Wilson recalls the courteous and mild men in the time she spent in Cairo. With her friend Jo, they used to shop at Mohammad and Namir's *duken*, whom used to teach them street Arabic. Mohammad and Namir helped Wilson and Jo to fit in within the Egyptian society and feel less alienated. They "defended [Wilson and Jo's] honor by insisting that within the confines of their shop [they] should be treated like Arab women" (130), hence with utmost respect. Another incident happened to Wilson while buying chicken at Am Mahmoud poultry shop. American and Canadian tourists were passing by and saw Wilson, dressed in a long skirt and wearing a scarf, holding a bag of greens. Apparently, the scene was unusually odd for the tourists because her skin color and features are indicative of a Westerner who seemed out of place. Embarrassed and unsure of what to do, she found herself being pulled into Am Mahmoud's shop by his relative, and Am Mahmoud himself stepping outside to block the view of the tourists. She recounts that he "had protected [her] from exposure and embarrassment as he would an Egyptian girl" (211).

Although Wilson finds most of the Arab men in her experience to be 'chivalrous', respectful and protective, she acknowledges the existence of some despicable men. Her first 'nauseating' encounter has been with a man she asked for directions in Cairo less than twenty-four hours since her arrival. She was with her friend Jo when the man asked her for a 'blow job'. Arriving at the city center, unavoidable stares from every man they encountered were filled "with an expression of repressed sexual anger" (25). Wilson reveals both sides of the Egyptian men which indicates her unbiased portrayal of the Egyptian society. Indeed, *mu'aksa* or sexual harassment in public spaces which includes flirtation is a rampant phenomenon in Egypt. Sexual harassment is considered a violation of the traditions and morality of the Egyptian society. However, this phenomenon is a "form of sexual and gender-based violence – [which] has a long and deep history in Egyptian public spaces" (Hammad 46). Therefore, Wilson's harassment is not associated with being a Westerner, but because the traditions and morality of the Egyptian society has shifted due to many historical and socio-political factors.

4.5. Wilson's Views on Women and Islam

Similar to Middle Eastern men, Arab Muslim women take a central position in the Western discussion, and for that matter, in Wilson's body of work. Her works discuss gender issues neither from the position of an anti-Islamic polemic, not from an apologia as do most of the works that have appeared since 2001 (Rashid 140). On the one hand, those works present women as subservient to their respective patriarchal cultures in terms of being forced into the private sphere, secluded and veiled, accepting forced arranged marriages, denouncing falling in love as a *haram* act, and living their lives devoid of romance in married relationships. On the other hand, other works focus their attention on the presentation of a counter-discourse which presents the Arab culture in a positive light, therefore, risking the exposure to an apologetic rhetoric. Wilson, with a body of work that ranges from autobiographical fiction, novels and comics, manages to avoid the aforementioned polarities through exhibiting the different sides and showing "the beauty and ugliness of being a Muslim and an American" (Rashid 140). Hence, she produces an honest portrayal of women's life within cultural and religious dynamics.

In her memoir, Wilson argues against the stereotypical representations of women in the Western views. She actively compares the women's roles in Islamic societies and in the West. She considers the Arab Muslim woman to be "far less free than a woman in the West, but far more appreciated" (Wilson "*The Butterfly Mosque*" 250). In the Western view, Arab Muslim women are either oppressed or victims of false consciousness. However, living within Arab societies and becoming accustomed to Arab cultural norms, Wilson has made the distinction between the affirmation of cultural norms and the misconceptions and illusions, and has learned the unstained truth about the Western portrayal. She argues that "[w]hen people wonder why Arab women defend their culture, they focus on the way women who don't follow the rules are punished, and fail to consider the way women who do follow the rules are rewarded" (250). This highlights the Western double standard, which seeks to obscure the positive aspects of the Islamic culture for whatever political agenda, and evokes questions about the validity of a Western-centered viewpoint.

In connection with the aforementioned, striking examples of the twisted Western double standards about gender issues in the Muslim world prove to be a case of a socio-cultural analysis gone awry. Wilson mentions in her memoir that she wrote an article for the *New York Times Magazine* about the experience of a "miniature society" of Egyptian women in women-only train

cars. The article was praised by her husband's mother Sohair as being very human, since Wilson sought to study women's society in the Muslim world as human beings, not as "monkeys" (260). Unfortunately, furious responses to the article were centered on imposed gender apartheid in Egypt. Ironically enough, a week later when an announcement was made by some Japanese officials in Tokyo about the insertion of a woman's car to the Tokyo subway in order "to protect female commuters from inappropriate male attention", the decision "was hailed as a step forward for women's rights" (263). Apparently, the Western scale is either malfunctioning or is adjusted to work at certain, perfectly chosen intervals, especially with regard to the Arab culture. In this regard, Wilson asserts that she "had underestimated the amount of fear and prejudice surrounding Arab culture in the West" (263).

Furthermore, the impact of Westernization served to eclipse significant roles of women in the Muslim world. For instance, remarkable religious positions are exclusive of females. Modern day Egyptian religious matters are predominately directed to male *sheikhs*. Wilson explains that female *sheikhs'* roles are presently superfluous because Westernized countries, such as Egypt, accept men and women "to be socially intimate" (269). Therefore, as a byproduct of Westernization, women are marginalized from such esteemed positions. However, this has not been the case in the past. The role of the *sheikha*, or the female spiritual leader, is a position given to a woman with knowledge of religion to instruct and guide other women in search for answers about their religious life. The tradition of female leadership in Islam is "declining in the modern age" (268), especially in countries like Lebanon and Egypt which adopted foreign Westernized practices. In contrast, Wilson explains that in Syria, spiritual knowledge for women is sought from *sheikhas* rather than *sheikhs*, because the interactions between men and women on personal levels are reduced to the minimum. Therefore, the established system in the Arab culture before Westernization proves to be far more empowering for women than does after its advent.

Indeed, the Islamic history is ample with examples of Muslim female jurists, *sheikhas* and *mufits*. The most recurring question is whether women are only qualified to work in the sciences of transmission (*al-naql*) that depend on memorization and narration, such as hadith, and not qualified to work in the mental sciences (*al-aql*) that require analytical mental abilities and extensive knowledge? Scientific evidence shows that women played a prominent role in

many areas of religious work during the early and middle Islamic eras, where there is a skilled female *mufti*, preacher who guides society, a teacher and a *sheikh*. Prominent female figures are Zainab bint Aby Salamah Al-Makhzomyyah, Hajmyyah bint Ḥay Al-Oṣabyyah Ad-Demashqyyah, Amrah bint ‘Abdul-Raḥman, Ḥafṣah bint Sirin, Aishah bint Al-Faḍl ibn Ahmad Al-Kasani, Fatimah bint Muhammad Ahmad As-Samarqandī, Um Al-Baqaa' Khadejah bint Hasan, and many others (Abou-Bakr and As-Saa'dy).

Moreover, Wilson approaches Sheikha Sanaa, one of the few *sheikhas* left in Egypt, to discuss gender-related topics. She asks the *sheikha* whether the typical model of a Muslim woman is to take traditional gender roles; that is to be a wife, a mother and a housekeeper. Sheikha Sanaa responds by referring to two prominent figures in the Islamic tradition: Maryam umm Isa (the mother of Jesus) and Asia, the Pharaoh's wife. According to Sheikha Sanaa, those two figures represent the opposite of a typical woman. Maryam had no husband, while Asia defied and disobeyed her husband (271). Certainly, those women did not take traditional roles, because they chose to walk the right path, even if it meant rebelling against established norms. Consequently, the *sheikha*'s stance corresponds with the Islamic feminist's reclaiming of the Islamic history in support of a gender egalitarian Islamic discourse. According to the Islamic feminist discourse, women's roles have been gradually reduced due to androcentric attitudes, a detachment from the Islamic history and the false readings of the sacred texts. As a case in point, in comparison to "a former, better Egypt" (270), female spiritual leadership has eroded, in Wilson's view, due to misogyny.

Additionally, Wilson wonders about the decline in the number of *sheikhas* and relates the problem to the existing political situation in Egypt. According to her, misogyny is the unintended offspring of political oppression. The 'closing fist' of the ruling system in Egypt directly impacts men. Consequently, those "brutalized men turn around and brutalize the next most vulnerable population" (270) or, in other words, women. Furthermore, she states that the *sheikhs* who are in charge of female students are predominantly all Wahhabis (or members of the Wahhabi group). Therefore, encouraging intellectual ambition and female leadership is an implausible idea within a reality where they are in charge of the religious intellectual field due to "their puritanical beliefs" (270). The marginalization of women from positions that are chiefly held by men is,

therefore, both a consequence of political oppression of men, and of puritanical beliefs of a certain religious doctrine with a strict attitude towards the inclusion of women.

On a different context, the Western media uses Arab Muslim women as a tool to portray the Arab Muslim cultures as oppressive and domineering towards women. The Middle East is often synonymous with the violation of human rights, honor-killings, polygamy, hollowness of marital romance and the promotion of the seclusion and marginalization of women from the public sphere including work and education. For the Western media, the veil is physical evidence for the oppression of women, because it symbolizes the helplessness of women to decide for themselves the choice of garment as they are forced to cover from head to toe. Wilson exposes the narrow perspective of the media and its promotion of false truths. She emphasizes that:

> there was so much about Islam and the people who lived it that was left unsaid in the media and in public discussion, and I could do something about it. Staying silent when I saw news stories that were incomplete or religious issues that were poorly analyzed felt tantamount to lying. Beyond that, I had to relearn how to talk to my own people (272).

Conversely, Wilson reveals a different side of the Muslim woman than the one circulated in the Western media and public discussion: the independent woman. Indeed, she points out the outstanding role which Muslim women take as head of the family, as in the case of Omar's mother Sohair. In addition, she argues that similar to women in the West, Egyptian young women are shifting towards the type of women who favor education and career building as opposed to the traditional housewife. Moreover, through her lived experience in Egypt, she recognizes that there is a great female independency that consequently allows for female empowerment. According to her, the woman is "the one who builds relationships with the vendors of the best meat and the freshest fruit [in the market], and argues for the lowest price; she knows herbal remedies for dysentery; it is she who cooks for ten people out of three pots when relatives drop by unexpectedly" (207). Therefore, she declares that in Egypt, "women create the civilization the men merely live in" (207). Such privileges are indicative of an independent female space that falsifies Western conceptions.

Correspondingly, it becomes explicable why many Arab Muslim women are skeptical of Western feminism, because it is against common sense to exchange influence with rights. In Wilson's view, a brave and smart Arab Muslim woman "can steer the fortunes of her entire

family with a minimum of exposure and risk", contrarily, "giving her a full complement of western rights would limit the scope of her power by exposing her to the same public scrutiny as men" (270). Therefore, advocating for rights in this context might not only cause the 'idiotic' to become on equal footing with the competent and eligible, but might also agitate unnecessary disruption. In this regard, women would "end up with less than [they] started out with" (271). Consequently, this stance not only contradicts the claim that Middle Eastern women are victims of false consciousness, but can also be seen as a conscious attitude against a movement that would limit their existing influence and significant roles in family and social matters.

Although not explicitly expressed, it is safe to say that many of Wilson's views align with the Islamic feminist school of thought. With an emphasis on reading the religious scriptures from an egalitarian perspective, Islamic feminists seek to show that neither the Quran nor Islam itself advance claims about female oppression and marginalization. In this light, Wilson shows that her readings of the texts of Islam reveal to her that those facts are the underlying principles of the Islamic message. She emphasizes that religion does not draw a "limit on the public spaces that women can inhabit; nothing prevents them from running businesses or driving cars, there is no reason they must walk behind men or cover their faces. A woman's role is not defined by the kitchen and the nursery" (80). Similar to the Islamic feminists, whenever she is placed at an argument, she refers to the Quran and the *hadiths* to resolve disputes.

Furthermore, she also revisits the history of Islam in order to strengthen her arguments about gender in Islam. She argues that in the seventh century, Muslim women enjoyed more liberty than they do in the contemporary times. She mentions that Khadijah, the Prophet's first wife, sets an example of early Islamic female freedom. Khadija ran her own business and the Prophet himself worked as her employee. As opposed to modern standards, she proposed to Muhammad, and they married, even though she is fifteen years older (80). This powerful entrepreneur, along with other outstanding women in the Islamic history, epitomize the Islamic view on gender and women. Moreover, Wilson's critical attitude questions some religious interpretations of the *Sharia* law by groups such as the Wahhabis, some religious figures and fundamentalist *imams*. However, Wilson's Islamic feminist views seem to be more 'moderate' in that individual and personal '*ijtihad*', especially in the case of *sharia* law, would "likely to

produce fringe cults [such] as enlightened visionaries" (159) and there would likely to be chaos if anyone interprets *sharia* law for himself.

Conscious of the fact that the American and Egyptian cultures pose different long-standing traditions, Wilson regards Islam as a liberating force and different and often contradicts with the cultures of its upholders. She is "surprised by how often Islam, in its purely textual form, took [her] side" (80) especially on matters related to gender and women. She shows her unwillingness to compromise her critical attitudes of anything deemed in contrast of religion in her marital and social life. Her reference to the religious scriptures to prove and solidify her position is evidence of a consciousness of Islamic feminism, although not openly expressed. As a developing movement, Islamic feminism welcomes the contribution of scholars, authors (fiction and non-fiction) and researchers from different cultural backgrounds. It "seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence" (Badran "Feminism in Islam" 242), and that these rights are central to the Islamic message. This message had been diverted from its intended path by androcentric readings of the scriptures and the patriarchal cultures of people under Islam. Therefore, Wilson's identity as an American Muslim, and self-positioning in defense of Islam against Western stereotypical views, and as an advocate of the egalitarian message of Islam theoretically label her an Islamic feminist.

4.6. G. Willow Wilson's *Alif the Unseen*: Plot and Themes

Alif the Unseen is a cyberpunk fantasy novel written by the American author Gwendolyn Willow Wilson in 2012. It is told from a third-person omniscient narrative. The plot follows a linear structure, which tells the story of Alif, a computer-hacker in an unnamed Arab state. In this novel, Wilson creates a fantastical world rich in Islamic folklore and Muslim 'mythology'. With a potential that matches the picturesque imagination of the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, J. K. Rowling and Neil Gaiman, Wilson's work is vivid in imagination, powerful in language, intense in events and genuine in character portrayal. In this regard, she does not attempt to copy any other work, but instead "she has her own fertile imagination and fanciful narrative style" (Maslin). Although set in an unnamed state, and is packed with fantastical elements, the novel stands as a social and political commentary on the events parallel to its production, either in Egypt (the author's meanwhile place of residence) or in the rest of the Arab states during political unrest and social turmoil.

The novel is a blend of fantasy and cyberpunk that combines the fantastical worlds of jinn with computer science. Cyberpunk is a subgenre of science fiction that focuses on scientific and technological achievements in a social and political dystopia, whereas fantasy is a genre of speculative fiction that features magical elements and is often inspired by folklore and mythology. In the novel, Alif, the protagonist who is an Arab-Indian hacktivist, in an attempt to track his love, an aristocratic young woman he is in secret relationship with called Intisar, creates a software which can identify her online through the frequency of language use. This achievement, a step closer to quantum computing, the possession of a book called the *Alf Yeom* (gifted to him by Intisar), and the fact that he is one of many wanted hackers place him at a very dangerous encounter with state security and its head the 'Hand of God'. Earlier in the story, Intisar breaks up with him because he does not represent a worthy mate due to his inferior status and mixed descent. He later discovers that she is engaged to a royalty, and to his surprise, that royalty is none other than Abbas Al Shehab, the Hand himself. In search for protection, he and Dina, his next-door neighbor and childhood friend, set out to meet Vikram the Vampire who they discover is one of the hidden folks (the jinn).

With an aim to understand the secret behind the *Alf Yeom*, Vikram takes Alif and Dina to the American convert, a scholar interested in ancient manuscripts and books, who reveals to them that they are holding the original copy of the *Alf Yeom*, the book encompassing the secrets of the jinn. Alif realizes that the Hand is after the *Alf Yeom* in order to build a quantum computer to take control over the State. After a brave encounter with state security at Al Basheera Mosque, Vikram gets mortally wounded, Dina and the convert escape with help from Vikram, and Alif and Sheikh Bilal (Al Basheera's imam) get caught and imprisoned. In the prison, Alif experiences physical and psychological torture. Similar to Abdel Aziz's *The Queue*, *Alif the Unseen* portrays a regime that suppresses all those in opposition. Like Amani in *The Queue*, Alif undergoes extreme psychological torture with methods that seem to be uniquely related to some Arab regimes in both Abdel Aziz and Wilson's views. While in prison, Alif is frequently visited by the Hand to interrogate him about the location of the *Alf Yeom*. The Hand ignores Alif's constant warnings that the *Alf Yeom* cannot be coded. Meanwhile, one of Alif's hacker friends who goes virtually by the name NewQuarter01 comes to save Alif and Sheikh Bilal. The fact that NewQuarter01 has easy access to the government prison is because he is royalty whose real name is Prince Abu Talib Al Mukhtar ibn Hamza, and therefore, can have "some time alone with

[imprisoned women]" (Wilson "Alif the Unseen" 273). They escape on NewQuarter01's fancy car, and after a long chase from the prison guards and the police, their car breaks down and they become safe, albeit alone and far from life, on the dunes of the desert.

Alif, Sheikh Bilal and NewQuarter01 circle aimlessly in the Empty Quarter until they arrive at the city of Irem which Vikram once told Alif about. Irem is the city of the jinn; "a world turned sideways" (99) that lies at a waterless and lifeless location in the desert that frightens even the Bedouin. When they make it through, they find themselves in the peculiar and fantastical world of the jinn, which is unlike anything they have seen before. Dazzled by the surroundings, they encounter different classes of jinn: shapeshifters, giants, *marids*, *effrits*, ghostly-like figures and others. Much to their surprise, they meet Dina and the convert with a baby from Vikram in the city of Irem. They learn that Vikram died once he fulfilled the job of getting Dina and the convert to safety. Moreover, Alif discovers that the *Alf Yeom* has always been in the possession of Dina and that the Hand did not get hold of it. Having the book, Alif begins to code again and to improve his earlier program in order to defeat the Hand. Feeling relieved and restoring his strength, Alif regroups with his old friends and new friends (the jinn) to plan and take action against the oppressive government.

While planning their next move, Alif and the others find out that the Hand, state security and his army of the jinn are in the city of Irem. They escape back to the world of men to realize that the entire country is under a revolution. People protest outside and riots ignite under the banner of overthrowing the ruling system. Alif discovers that his program Tin Sari has been used by comrade-hackers to expose government corruption. Although anonymous to the public, in the eyes of his fellow friends and virtual companions, he is a hero. At their final encounter, the Hand uses all his powers to take personal revenge against Alif in NewQuarter01's appartement, while the streets under are crowded with angry people in search for a royalty to quench their agitation. The Hand summons his daemons, the apartment shortly becomes overrun by angry rioters, and the daemons attack Alif who falls through the window to be saved by one of his shapeshifter jinn friends. Finally, the Hand is hanged from NewQurter01's apartment by the angry rioters.

The novel is packed with political, social and religious themes that present commentary on the Arab Spring and life in an unnamed Arab state. Technology is also another theme through which Wilson seeks to show that the "Arab youth were not only adopting cuttingedge

technology, but using it in revolutionary ways" (qtd. in Coovadia 41). Wilson, who is hopeful about the changes taking place in many Middle Eastern countries, uses technological and magical elements to present her story and to discuss matters related to her as a convert in an Arab culture and other matters related to Arab social life. For instance, the characters of the convert and Alif find difficulties of belonging, regardless of differences of ethnicity and different backgrounds, as the former is a blue-eyed American who comes to study, while the latter is a half-Arab half-Indian. Furthermore, Wilson commentates on gender and gender-related issues. In the novel, there are various implications about women in the Arab culture and under Islam that present Wilson's view on Arab Muslim women.

4.7. An Islamic Feminist Reading of *Alif the Unseen*

G. Willow Wilson is an example of the few Western authors who have authentically written about the Arab culture, Islam and women. In *Alif the Unseen*, she presents exceptional female characters who are empowered rather than oppressed by their culture and Islam. This section will include an analysis of *Alif the Unseen* from an Islamic feminist perspective, which seeks to highlight how Arab women take pride in their culture and embrace the Islamic teachings as a source of their empowerment.

Alif the Unseen offers critique not only of the political scene, but is also interested in the society and culture of the Middle East, especially with regards to gender and Arab Muslim women. In this concern, the novel is congested with gender-related themes. It occasionally stands as a critique of the patriarchal practices that seek to restrict female potential. Conversely, in other instances, it praises the culture and religion of the Middle East and regards them as means for female empowerment. Additionally, the novel depicts female characters who sometimes stand at odds from one another due to their contrasting beliefs in gender justice. Among these characters are Intisar, Dina, Alif's mother and the American convert. Furthermore, the novel seems to be absorbed by themes of the veil, seclusion, women's life in the public sphere, marriage and polygamy. It shows a different side of the Arab Muslim women, one which has been concealed by the western media and in public discussion. It, therefore, stands not only as a contemplation of the scene in the Middle East, but also as a critique of the western stereotypical view with regard to the submissive and oppressed Arab woman.

Alif, the novel's protagonist whose real name is later revealed to be Mohammed, is introduced to be demeaning towards Dina. However, he shows that he is not a misogynist, because he falls in love with Intisar and is especially intrigued by her intellect and educational level. In fact, his degrading thoughts are exceptionally reserved for his childhood friend Dina whose educational level could not match that of Intisar, especially that the latter works on her senior thesis. Early in the novel, Dina returns a book that Alif lent her entitled *The Golden Compass* and asks if he is going to ask her about her thoughts about it. He replies by saying that he does not care, and that the "English was probably too difficult for [her]" (Wilson "Alif the Unseen" 4). She interjects by saying that she understood every word and that the book is dangerous because it is filled with pagan images. Alif's lack of interest in an educated conversation with Dina surfaces, and he chooses to abruptly shift the conversation to yet another personal insult: "Don't be ignorant. They're metaphors. I told you you wouldn't understand" (4). Furthermore, Alif's approbation of Intisar is attributed not only to her academic level but also to her social status. During the conversation with Dina, his thoughts shift to his aristocratic girlfriend and thinks that she is probably swimming in the pool in her father's villa. Whereas Dina has always been the poor girl living next to Alif in the same duplex since they were children. Apparently, in Alif's point of view, social status is indicative of sheer intellectual potential or lack thereof.

Alif's thoughts about Dina and Arab girls seem to be shared by his mother. Due to his mixed Arab and Indian heritage, Alif's Indian mother discusses with him the possibility of settling into a career and marrying one of the 'lovely' Indian girls, to which he comments: "But not Arab girls" (6). Following this remark, Alif's mother makes a loosely inclusive statement about Arab girls who, in her view, "give themselves airs and walk around with their eyes painted up like cabaret dancers, but they're nothing without their money. Not beautiful, not clever, and not one of them can cook" (6). This outsider's point of view about Arab girls presents an Eastern, female non-white perspective that aims to celebrate one's ethnic heritage than to belittle the other. Internally, there is an unescapable feeling of not belonging, and this is mirrored in Alif's own thoughts. Examining his reflection in the mirror, he recognizes the mixture of Indian and Arab blood with features that steal from both and refuse to take sides. His thoughts about his physical appearance materialize as he thinks that "he would never pass for a full-blooded Arab" (7). This concern emerges after losing hope in the possibility of being with his beloved, as it

appears that "[n]othing less than full blood, inherited from a millennium of sheikhs and emirs, was enough for Intisar" (7). Consequently, his mother's opinion about Arab girls is to deter Alif from a false hope which could be an eventual disappointment with severe repercussions on him. Seemingly, his mother's opinions have a great influence on the construction of his thoughts about Dina, whom he thinks is unable to understand the underlying symbols and images in a novel.

Moreover, in Alif's own thought, he is unwanted in his absent Arab father's view. He assumes that in his father's eyes, he represents a "problematic son with dark-skinned pagan blood in his lineage, the product of a union unsanctioned by his grandparents; impossible to wedge into good society" (48). His father's practical thinking would prefer a beautiful and well-mannered daughter to a dark-skinned son, because a daughter has the prospect of marriage, whereas a son "needed his own prospects" (48). Regardless of her ethnic background and similar to her Indian mother, a daughter could attract attention and eventually get married, which presents a chance for her to conform to the Arab society. On the other hand, Alif finds a difficulty to fit in into the society and renders himself an outcast in the view of others. This explains the countless hours spent in his room, in front of his computer with his virtual friends. In addition to the hiding behind a pseudo-name even publicly, as though the name Mohammed only represents the Arab part of his identity.

4.8. 'Married in the Eyes of God': Legalizing Sexual Relationships

The Muslim marriage or *nikah* is a contract signed by the man and woman in the presence of the woman's guardian and two male witnesses. The hadith of the Prophet that: "There is no marriage except with (the consent of) a guardian" (Abu Dawud 521) shows that a woman cannot marry herself, otherwise it becomes *urfi* marriage which is forbidden in Islam. The contract permits the husband and wife to enter sexual intercourse as they become legally married in the eyes of God and society. In this context, Alif and Intisar sign a contract in complete secrecy and without the presence of a guardian nor any witnesses. Living apart and meeting secretly, they both agree that their relationship stays a secret, and Alif is convinced that Intisar is his "wife in the eyes of God if no one else" (Wilson "Alif the Unseen" 14). It takes Alif three nights to congregate his bravery in order to "uncover more than her face" (18). Unclothed, they enter into a sexual intercourse and create a 'blood stain' that becomes a symbol of eternal

binding for Alif. As soon as they are done, Alif continuously confesses his love for her until she urges him to stop, "frightened of the power she now possesse[s]" (18).

To Alif's peace of mind, being married in the eyes of God means to dispel any doubts concerning guilt over committing a sin that is against moral sense. Yet, he and Intisar still fear the stigmatizing gaze of society as though they are internally conscious and convinced of their wrongdoing. Intisar critiques her society for its double standards concerning public versus private illegal relationships. In this concern, Alif entertained her need for secrecy in their relationship as she always prefers "to meet at night" (3). This is particularly because society claims that which is not. "Society didn't mind if you broke the rules; it only required you to acknowledge them" (3). Accordingly, the rules dictate that one recognizes the mainstream conventional life, even though many people are hardly ever abided by. Both of them know that "what [they] were doing went against the prevailing custom and [have] taken pains to avoid being caught" (3). In this manner, society shifts focus from the sinful act itself to the stigma following people's knowledge about it. In other words, society approves of wrongdoing as long as everyone is oblivious about it. For Alif, "Intisar, noble and troubling, with her black hair and her dove-low voice, [is] worthy of this much discretion" (3).

Alif and Intisar have met in a digital forum where young men have a space to criticize the government without being detected. Intisar partakes in their conversation with an intellectual approach sometimes to take sides with the government and the Emir, other times to add complexity to the young men's critique. In Alif's point of view, Intisar's "knowledge [is] so broad, her Arabic so correct, that her lineage [is] quickly apparent" (19). He has been convinced that aristocrats, like Intisar, are seldom to use the internet, because it is full of disreputable people. Being intrigued by her, he starts to send her emails and they start to talk in private. When they decide to meet for the first time at the occasional teashop, he becomes nervous and envies her "the enfolding anonymity of her veil" (19). Her veil provides her with the power that he lacks, especially that his hands and feet shake, and his face flushes. To Alif, Intisar has "the upper hand. She could observe him, make up her mind about whether he was handsome, assess his tendency to wear all black and decide whether this offended her or not" (19). She enjoys the privilege of anonymity on a multifaceted level: online under pseudo names and in the real world

under the hijab. On the other hand, Alif feels naked in the real world and not as he openly demonstrates within the safety of his home.

Eventually, Intisar and Alif agree to meet in a place more private than their occasional teashop: Alif's own home. They decide that she wears her plainest garment in order not to attract the unwanted attention of Alif's neighbors. His mother goes on a trip with his father and the maid is urged to visit her relatives. Alone, this marks the first time that Alif lifts Intisar's veil to see her face, on which occasion he is astounded by her beauty. With an air full of embarrassment, they sign a marriage contract that Alif found on an online website "that catered to Gulf men seeking to cleanse the sins they planned to commit elsewhere" (18). As if the contract covers the sins to be committed. Guided by instinct, they enter into a sexual relationship after three nights together, and create a 'blood stain' that supposedly marks the beginning of a new stage in their lives. The contract is one of the manifestations of misinterpreting religion which is not only conducted by Alif, but also by the Gulf men seeking an easier solution to approve and authorize their wrongdoing. Originally, a marriage contract is part of the Islamic marriage and is supported by many religious texts. However, the contract that neglects the essential conditions of the presence of the guardian and witnesses is similar to seeking permission for *zina* or adultery.

Aristocratic and literate, Intisar has caught Alif's attention and stunned him with her self-assertion. She reveals a feminist consciousness that is, as shall be discussed afterwards, secular and not Islamic in orientation. An early feminist reflection of Intisar's thoughts in the novel is when she thinks about the City as female. "Intisar once told [Alif] that the City hates her inhabitants and tries to suffocate them. She—for Intisar insisted the City was female remembers a time when purer thoughts bred purer air" (2). One of the main concerns in the feminist undertaking is the gendered language. Earlier writers and thinkers such as Virginia Woolf sought to invent female vocabulary and replace male dominance over language with female-based language so as to overcome phallocentric hegemony over language. Later feminists and writers, especially with LGBTQ shift in academia, there was a growing interest in using gender-neutral language. Therefore, neutralization which "implies that gender-neutral forms are preferred over gendered forms" (Sendén et al. 2) becomes the most viable solution for resolving the debate over

biased language forms. In this context, Intisar's use of the pronoun 'she' for the City over the more neutral pronoun 'it' shows a more radical feminist self-actualization.

Furthermore, Intisar refuses to exchange her luxurious life with a substitution that involves love and traditional gender roles. She tells Alif that love is not everything and asks: "Where would we live? What would we live on? I can't spend the rest of my days in a two-room apartment in Baqara District, doing my own laundry" (Wilson 210). Apparently, she prefers a man with higher social status, and Alif is not that man. She has been put at a crossroad in her life in addition to the fact that her decision is not made by herself alone, but with an influence of other social forces. For instance, Alif is not a descendant of pure Arab blood, which represents the minimum requirement for marrying Intisar, besides his family status. In addition to familial influence over Intisar's decision as her father would never accept less than an emir. Indeed, the influence of the family on the girl's decision in marriage in Arab societies is massive, and in more extreme case, fathers marry their daughters without the latter's consent.

Moreover, Alif's fear of the guilty conscience about his relationship with Intisar is accentuated in a discussion with Sheikh Bilal. While discussing good and bad deeds in Islam, Sheikh Bilal asks Alif an important question: is consuming fictional pork in videogames considered a sin? To Alif's bewilderment, the Sheikh's answer illustrates that if the person playing the videogame believes it is a sin, then it "would weigh on him as one" (219). Sheikh Bilal believes that conscience "is the ultimate measure of man" (219). However, consuming pork in videogames is different than consuming it in the actual world. On the other hand, 'fictional adultery' is an entirely different matter because it involves actual people; their emotions and desires are projected on their computer screens. Then, the Sheikh proceeds towards the essence of the issue, which Alif feels an instant personal attachment with, when he asks: "Who knows how many adulterous relationships begin on the internet and end in the bedroom?" (220). As properly diagnosed, the Sheikh's words highlight the false relationship with Intisar which started with a contract that is meant to ease the burden of conscience.

Additionally, Sheikh Bilal explains that even if the online relationship does not transcend its cyber stage, the spiritual damage is real. The emotions and desires invested in such relationships are real, therefore, they can be a doorway to adultery. Accordingly, virtual relationships are not "fiction based on real life [but] … real life based on a fiction" (220). People

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tend to reveal the parts of their characters that please other people, and as such they "believe the person [they] cannot see or touch is perfect" (220). This proves to be not only deceitful but also dangerous, especially in cases that eventually end up in marriage. Although virtual relationships are not specifically invoked in Islamic scriptures, Sheikh Bilal's conclusion is based on *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* which enables him to project solutions to contemporary issues. Furthermore, Alif asserts that the deceptive and dangerous characterizations can also apply to arranged marriages; a once rampant phenomenon in Arab societies.

4.9. Love Marriage, Arranged Marriage and Polygamy

In *Alif the Unseen* and in most Arab societies, topics related to marriage take a central part in most discussions. The prospect of marriage for girls, the choice of the wife for boys, intermingling before marriage, conformity to societal norms, polygamy and the religious view of marital relationships prove to be some of the most agitated topics on the matter. In the novel, Alif and Dina are childhood friends who live in the same duplex and often meet on the roof of their houses. On one occasion, Alif's mother opens up the topic about talking to Dina on the rooftop. She urges Alif the he should stop talking to her and meeting her because "[Dina's] parents will be wanting to marry her off soon. Good families won't like to hear she's been hanging around with a strange boy" (6). This highlights the strict social rules regarding the intermingling of boys and girls which, ironically, affects the latter more than it does the former. Surprised by his mother's startling statement, Alif replies by saying: "Who's strange? We've been living in the same stupid duplex since we were kids. She used to play in my room" (6). Apparently, Alif's thoughts about Dina are still the same innocent childhood thoughts that refuse to transcend that particular stage, even though she is "a woman now" (6).

Women's lack of agency over the body is embodied in forced arranged marriages in which the father decides the husband of his daughter without her consent. Even though a descendant of aristocrats, Intisar's choice in marriage is overlooked. She loves Alif and even goes further to sign a marriage contract and lose her virginity in the aftermath of their constant secret meetings. However, her father's decision cannot be reversed. Anguished and clueless, she confesses to Alif her sorrowful feelings: "It was all settled without me. I tried, Alif, I swear to you I tried everything—I told my father I wanted to finish university first, or travel, but he just looked at me as if I'd gone crazy. It's a friend of his. Putting him off would be an insult" (14). In

addition to her father's statement that her husband-to-be is his friend, aristocrats cannot accept less than an equal for their daughters. Alif realizes afterwards that the man asking for Intisar's hand is his archenemy: Abbas al-Shehab (The Hand). Revealing her hand from under the glove, he sees "an engagement ring glitter[ing] between [her fingers] like a stone dropped on uneven ground" (14). Although the Hand's engagement to Intisar proves to be a scheme in order to possess the *Alf Yeom* and catch Alif, Intisar's decisions and feelings in the plainest matters related to her life are hardly ever considered. She represents a pawn at the hands of both traditional and political patriarchy to do with it whatever serves their agendas.

Alif the Unseen's criticism of the patriarchal culture is voiced, especially that the damage of forced marriage impacts the female and stands at odds with the Islamic ethos. Consent and coercion mark the debate over the ability to exercise free will or the opposite. On such basis, love marriage and arranged marriage form opposing lines in marriage. On the one hand, love marriages tend to be more stable because they involve an independent choice of the partner. On the other hand, unilateral decisions in arranged marriages tend to eclipse female agency and victimize the female. Despite the fact that arranged marriages are cultural practices in many Muslim societies, there is no evidence that Islam encourages such practices. In fact, the opposite proves to be true as the Prophet said: "There is nothing like marriage, for two who love one another" (Ibn Majah Al-Qazwini 59). Therefore, love is encouraged in Islam without transgressing the laws transcribed by *shariah* law; that is to avoid committing sins before marriage such as meeting secretly and kissing. In addition, the hadith of the Prophet when he tells a man who did not yet see his fiancé to: "Go and look at her, because that is more likely to create love between you" (At-Tirmidhi 2: 457) can be read as a case against arranged marriages in which the husband and wife see each other exclusively on the wedding night.

Pre-marital relationships are scandalous not only for the girl, but also for her father and male siblings. The social stigma following people's knowledge about the 'scandal' brought by their daughter is punishable by physical assault and even death in more extreme cases. Following her computer hack, Alif realizes that Intisar's fiancé (The Hand) knows about their secret relationship, and subsequently so does her father. Relieved to a certain extent, he assumes that the Hand "did not yet have formal control over [her]" (64) and whether the scandal reaches her father or not depends on "whether her [fiancé] decide[s] to reveal [it]" (64). While the Hand has

little to do in this matter, it is in her father's "rights to beat her to the verge of death" (64). This shows Wilson's criticism of the double standards of the Arab society which favors to punish the female and condone the same acts for the male. Additionally, Alif's thinking shifts to the Hand's consequent action that involves releasing her from her engagement in order to avoid embarrassment. He imagines that their secret *urfi* marriage would eventually lead "Intisar [to] be thrown out of her father's house with only the clothes on her back, and [he] would manfully assume responsibility, leaving her in his mother's tender care as he prepare[s] their marital household" (36). Although sarcastic, this damsel-in-distress scenario reveals the true nature of the male thinking about the Arab woman; whose state is fragile and sensitive.

On a different context, Wilson condemns the Arab practice of polygamy as domineering and filled with injustice. Throughout the entire novel, Alif's father is absent as he is with his second family, far away from Alif and his Indian mother. His father's frequent visits have been since Alif's early childhood, and have abruptly stopped due to his work and preoccupation with his first wife. He only telephones Alif's mother occasionally from the "flat where his first wife lived" (34), which he refers to as 'home'. In addition, Wilson also delves into the repercussions of the injustice caused by polygamy on the children. Alif's half-sister, Fatima, and her family hate him, as he is always considered "a dark little '*abd* [due to his lineage], not a brother" (22) or part of the family. As far as Alif and his mother are concerned, they are never considered as family for his father. To his convenience, Alif's father already has three offspring "Fatima and Hazim and Ahmed, the light-skinned progeny of his first wife, and neither his family nor his wallet would tolerate more mottled interlopers" (34). Alif's sole concern is equal treatment and, in fact, he has always "demanded that his mother be given equal time" (266). Dina expresses her dissatisfaction with the treatment they receive by saying: "May God forgive them for the sins they have committed against you and your mother" (22).

Islamic feminists emphasize the injustice that underlies the practice of polygamy on women. The origin of polygamy in Islamic thought and practice can be traced to the third verse in surah Al-Nisa: "If you fear that you will not deal fairly with orphan girls, you may marry whichever [other] women seem good to you, two, three, or four. If you fear that you cannot be equitable [to them], then marry only one, or your slave(s): that is more likely to make you avoid bias" (The Quran 04:03). Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud point out that there is no evidence in

the Quran on the principles that regulate such practice. In fact, Wadud argues against the justifications circulated in Muslim societies and shows that the rationale behind polygamy is un-Islamic and un-Quranic. For instance, the claim that a financially capable man is required to take more than one wife "assumes that all women are financial burdens: reproducers, but not producers" (Wadud "Qur'an and Women" 84). Another rationale that legalizes polygamy for men is the woman's inability to have children. Since the desire to have children is natural, then "consideration for the barren man and the barren woman should not exclude either from the chance of marriage" (84). The third rationale in favor of polygamy is the claim that if one wife cannot satisfy the man's sexual needs, then he should marry two, three or four. This is, according to Wadud, is un-Quranic because it "attempts to sanction men's unbridled lust" (84).

Similarly, Barlas believes that the position of the Quran on polygamy is "the most notoriously decontextualized of all" (Barlas "Believing Women" 190). She believes that polygamy was part of the tribal Arab social structure in the seventh century where warrior men used to 'own' slaves, concubines and war captives. She highlights that the *ayah* 04:03 mentions a special case in which it is permitted to marry more than one wife: orphan girls. Even if this reading is not accepted, Barlas points out the emphasis of the Quran to be equitable towards the wives and the Quran's candid position that "in spite of good intentions, men cannot deal justly between their wives" (191). This is particularly because of the man's incapability to love two or more women equally as the Quran says that "God has not made for any man two hearts" (33:4). Both Wadud and Barlas claim that the practice of polygamy, like slavery, is purely cultural, and that Islam came to organize and eradicate such practices. Therefore, placing the *ayah* 04:03 in its historical context, Islam has limited the number of wives at a time when no other system or law regarding such practices existed. Correspondingly, while Wilson accepts the ontological status of the Quran as the word of God, she deems the subjective interpretations that consequently lead to injustice towards women as unacceptable and, as highlighted in her novel, are against the true intentions of Islam and the Quran.

4.10. The Culture of Rape

According to Matthew B. Ezzell, rape culture is a "culture in which rape is pervasive, prevalent, and normalized through societal attitudes about gender, sex, and sexuality" (Ezzell 9). Absurdly, in most cases of rape in Arab countries, the victim is commonly blamed and the rapist

is often sympathized with. In such countries, either rape is denied and trivialized, or women are often sexually objectified, blamed for their rape, and shamed. Although penal codes for rape in some Arab states include life imprisonment, they nevertheless prove to be problematic, because the difficulty lies in the proof of rape and the provision that the rapist avoids persecution if he marries the victim. Those social and political obstacles, in addition to social stigma, pile up to silence the victim; thus, normalizing rape and further promoting the culture of violence and the misogynistic attitudes towards the victim.

Representing Arab social and political realities, *Alif the Unseen* is antagonistic toward sexual assault and rape. Images of verbal and physical sexual assault are present in the novel. Such an example is when Vikram saves Alif and Dina, and says to Dina: "You owe me your life, but your virginity will suffice" (Wilson "Alif the Unseen" 93). Although veiled, Dina is not exempt from experiencing verbal sexual harassments in the streets as well. In an attempt to present a neutral depiction, Wilson reveals another side of the Arab societies where some women are subject to sexual harassments or *mua'kasa* in the streets. In fact, sexual harassment in public spaces is prevalent in Egypt and in other Middle Eastern countries. Wilson's choice of Dina to be publicly harassed is perhaps to criticize the voices blaming the girl or woman for her sexual harassment because of her clothing. In addition, Wilson exposes that blaming the victim is not established on a rational basis, but is instead part of a dominating culture which preys on the weak.

Moreover, rape of political female prisoners is a common means of torture in most states in the Middle East. Incarcerated political women face the horrors of sexual violence, including rape and forced nudity. In the novel, Alif watches the news at Al-Jazeera as his online friends, known to him solely by aliases, are caught by the regime. He recognizes that one of them is a girl, and immediately starts thinking about the possible aftermath of her arrest: "She would probably be raped in her prison cell. She [is] probably a virgin, and she would probably be raped" (11). Alif's thinking is neither anomalous nor drastic, but is instead based on previous knowledge from news about supposed survivor-witnesses. Indeed, there is abundant evidence about political female prisoners and activists being subject to sexual harassments and rape. One prominent example is Loujain al-Hathloul, a Saudi female activist and advocate for women's

rights, who was imprisoned for three years and reports that she was subject to sexual abuse and rape by multiple people during her entire three years' imprisonment.

The political female prisoner's fate in authoritarian regimes' prisons seems conspicuous and obvious. Vikram addresses Alif and Dina after being chased by government agents that they will be both within the custody of "a State political prison within [a] week" (115). The situation for Alif would be very terrible; but for Dina, Vikram states that "we know how particularly unpleasant that will be [for her]" (115). Gruesomely real and abominably terrifying, Vikram remarks that "[Dina will] wish she'd given [her virginity] to [him] after all. At least [he] would have made it good for her" (115). Furthermore, in the wake of Alif's capture and Dina's escape to Irem (the city of the Jinn), the jailer discusses with Alif torture procedures inflicted on prisoners and proclaims that "every man has his limits" (251). Then, he adds that every woman has her limits as well for the reason that "God made woman perversely easy to brutalize, didn't He? It does seem unfair" (251). This statement shows both the objectification of women and reduction of the female into a sexual body, in addition to the reduction of female self-assertion and lack of agency.

Furthermore, male-dominated governments are supported by corrupted sheikhs who are willing to twist religion to be suitable for those in power. Wilson conjures up the issue when NewQuarter01, a royalty hacktivist, goes to save Alif from the prison. He tells Alif that "they keep women in the cells opposite [Alif]—[he] told [the guards] [he] wanted some time alone with one of them. They just gave [him] the keys and took a cigarette break" (272-273). Bewildered, Alif asks if they let him do that, thinking perhaps that only guards and tormentors are able to spend time with imprisoned women. NewQuarter01 answers by saying that "[t]here are some very well-paid sheikhs who say captive women—prisoners—are like slaves from a shari'ah point of view. So their liege-lords have the right to fuck them. If you've got a title you can pretty much walk in and out of this place whenever you want" (273). Wilson's critique of *mufti al-sultan* (religious scholars who dedicate their *fatwas* in favor of the ruler's whims) is to show that these corrupt *muftis* are harnessing religious power to devour the weak and subsequently transmit a wrong image of Islam as an enslaving, sexist, misogynist and phallocentric religion to the entire world.

4.11. Seclusion and the Veil: Symbols of Empowerment or Oppression?

Western preoccupations about seclusion and harem life in Islamic cultures have been to emphasize discrimination between males and females, and to establish a representation about harem life as a personal brothel, where women lie in suggestive poses for a single man. However, the prospect of seclusion as a way to protect women, especially when women autonomously choose to occupy private places, has never been accentuated by Western literature and art. While it is true that in the early Islamic cultures it was in "a man's right to keep his women concealed—invisible to other men" (Ahmed "Women and Gender in Islam" 117), modern women started to occupy public spaces and to enjoy more liberties than they did in the past. Mandatory seclusion is seen by most feminists as a way to oppress women and confine them in the household. However, female choice to live separately as an act of piety for fear of unlawful intermingling with men can be seen either as an independent choice indicative of female agency or as an inability to recognize oppression and inequality.

In the novel, Dina is a pious young woman and Alif, her next-door neighbor and childhood friend, is aware of her unshakable devout disposition. Her religious character marks illicit any private intermingling with people from the opposite sex. Being both chased by state security and conscious of the unlikelihood to return to their surveilled houses, Alif decides that they go to his friend Abdullah's place instead. Following this disquieting decision, Dina looks uneasy and Alif assures her that Abdullah's place is public and that it is "a shop, but only for people who know people. [He pledges that he] won't make [her] break any rules. [They will] leave a door open or something" (60). This shows Dina's absorption in complying with *shariah* law and not breaking any rules. There are numerous texts in Islam that forbid men and women's private meetings such as the hadith of the Prophet that forewarns: "Behold! A man is not alone with a woman but the third of them is *Ash-Shaitan*" (At-Tirmidhi 4: 225). Or the hadith that: "No woman should travel except with a mahram [a family member whom she is forbidden to marry]" (Agreed upon). States such as Saudi Arabia criminalize *khilwa* (or meeting privately with a member of the opposite sex); the West views that such criminalization is a violation of human rights including the freedom of expression and privacy.

In attempting to create a private space for Dina to sleep during the night, Alif and Abdullah bring cotton mattresses and a bed sheet which is strung on the wall to create a curtain similar to a tent. Feeling guilty, Dina prompts that the situation is wrong, because she "told [her]

mother [she is] staying at Maryam Abdel Bassit's place. If she finds out [Dina is] lying she'll be crushed" (69). Clueless and in a situation out of their control, a secluded place for the only female in the company of two males is the only plausible idea. Wilson probes the privilege that women enjoy in seclusion: to see without being seen. Indeed, Alif "hear[s] Dina shift on her mattress. With the angle of the light from the window, he realize[s] that she could probably see him through the curtain, though he could not see her" (70). Such privilege is often neglected by Western and secular feminists; whose focus is solely on the discriminatory facet of seclusion, and the lack of freedom associated with it. Ironically, female freedom to be secluded is constantly labelled Islamist, as though 'Islamist' women are the sentinels of patriarchal ideology. This shows the crooked views with which such topics are discussed. Furthermore, Dina not only accepts seclusion but also advocates it as a measure to protect the female and to follow God's instructions. In this context, Alif reveals to Dina that he could see Intisar online through having untraceable access to her computer. Even though the 'seeing' does not include looking at her images but only tracing her online activity, Dina immediately respond that it is a wrongful act and that "[i]t is only given to women to see without being seen—men must act in the open or not at all" (187). Such devotion should not be viewed as a case of false consciousness, but as an eagerness to maintain the female's private space in which she feels most protected and in possession of certain advantages.

Despite her strict commitment not to break any laws with anybody, Dina breaks the rule of *khilwa* with Alif multiple times. Being next-door neighbors, Dina often knocks on the wall between her house and Alif's, and they meet on the rooftops of their houses. Her transgressing of the boundaries she has chosen to adopt shows a quarrel within herself. On the one hand, she considers Alif equivalent to a brother as they used to be friends since they were children and she used to "play in [his] room" (6). On the other hand, she has unexpressed feelings of love and affection she cannot openly communicate because they are not yet married, and because he loves Intisar instead. This shows how conflicted are her personal feelings and religious ideals. Alif realizes Dina's sincere feelings towards him and thinks that

> he should have known years earlier, when they were still almost children, and [he]
> remained the only boy she would seek out and speak to alone. He ached then, ached for
> their conversations on the roof, cursing himself for treating her intimacy in such an

offhand way. Her decision to veil had irritated and alarmed him as it irritated and alarmed her family, and he had been too absorbed in himself to realize that her continued friendship was a kind of plea, a thread back to the life she had left behind (267).

However, even after Intisar breaks up with Alif and he confesses love to Dina, the latter never lets him trespass her specified boundaries except when she chooses to show him her face. After revealing her face to him, she lays down a personal principle that she will never accept anyone else for marriage.

The veil holds different meanings for different people based on their identities and orientations. For religious Muslim women, the veil is a religious obligation and a celebration of Islamic cultural heritage. Muslim secular feminists see it as a cultural tradition that has its roots in the pre-Islamic era. For Islamic feminists, it is a symbol of Islam and the Middle Eastern cultures, and they emphasize the freedom of choice associated with it. For Western feminists, it is Islam's eternal symbol of oppression; a garment intended to marginalize the role of the Muslim female. Moreover, the veil, at certain periods in history, was a symbol of class, as women with higher social status were veiled whereas women from lower classes used to go unveiled. At other periods in history, it became a symbol of resistance against the colonizer, whose intention was to mold the Other on their image; therefore, wiping out the culture of the Other. Most religious sheikhs and men regard it as a means to protect the female from the lustful gaze of other men. Those men see it as a prevention of committing *haram* acts for the man as well as for the woman.

Similarly, the veil means differently to different characters in *Alif the Unseen*. Wealthy and privileged, Intisar's veil is unmistakably a symbol of class. However, with such privilege comes certain restrictions and limitations. For instance, she cannot go out unveiled, because the consequences of such an act would affect the family's name. In other words, aristocratic women are hostages to their family's entire reputation. Ironically, such burden drops its weight exclusively on female individuals in the family. For that reason, women are extremely circumspect not to draw any unwanted attention to themselves, therefore, to their families. Perhaps this is why Intisar asks Alif to meet in their common teashop that is "neither attractive nor memorable" (13); one which is unvisited by any natives from the city. Enjoying such anonymity, Intisar allows for unveiling and kissing at the back of the teashop. Moreover, she

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consents to have a sexual relationship with Alif and loses her virginity as a consequence. For Intisar, the veil is merely a façade to cover her sinful deeds. This is the reason she wears "her plainest robe" (17) and not her elegant hijab to stealthily enter the complex where Alif lives without being seen by the neighbors.

Due to her well-established lineage, Intisar neither has the freedom of choice nor the bravery to take off her unwanted body cover. For this reason, when her "family is ruined" (424) and that she once was meant nothing after the revolution and the fall of the regime, she instantly discards the veil. To Alif's disbelief, the odd scene of the familiar young woman amongst the crowd captures his attention as "the spill of silky dark hair was familiar, and the set of the shoulders, and the jet beads woven into hem and cuff. Intisar was wandering through the crowd with vacant eyes, her head and face uncovered" (423). Apparently, the real Intisar was waiting for the appropriate circumstances to emerge beneath her 'imposed' veil. In this context, the veil is a symbol of oppression because Intisar's internal beliefs and actions contradict with the idea of the *hijab* which is emblematic of modesty in clothing and in daily practice. However, discarding the veil allows for living a life without contradictions, inconsistencies and inner conflicts. Intisar's internal beliefs would finally match her external actions and practices. She will not only be free from the veil, but also from the constraints that the veil implies. In other words, she will be free to live the life she has always wanted to live.

Contrarily, Dina's veil is indicative of freedom of choice, female self-assertion and empowerment. At the age of twelve, Dina decides to wear the veil; a decision disapproved by her parents as her mother's tears were shed and her "father's angry retorts carried easily through the common wall of the duplex" (22). Being Egyptian emigrants in the unnamed City, her parents' reactions are understandable because the hijab would be an impediment, especially for hard working citizens. The veil for Intisar, an upper-class girl, is a "mark of rank, not religion" (23). However, Dina represents imported labor "a shabby Alexandrian, expected to become the bare-faced, underpaid ornament to someone's office or nursery, perhaps even discreetly available to whomever was paying her salary" (23). Her decision is, therefore, a mark of religion as she decides against her family's and society's aspirations, knowing that such a decision would have repercussions on her family's economic conditions. Her parents view that a "saint was not profitable" (23), thus, acknowledging the hindrance that the hijab presents between them and

familial economic prosperity. On the other hand, Dina's individual choice to wear the veil is a sign of freedom of choice and the agency to decide for herself.

Moreover, Dina takes pride in wearing the veil, even though she "was the only girl in the whole school who wore *niqab*, and everybody was waiting for [her] to take it off" (379). Confronting societal pressures and numerous daily challenges, it would be rational to take off the hijab, especially that her parents not only disagree with such a decision but encourage her to take it off. Pride in the veil and faith in God work as driving forces for Dina to confront the hardships posed by the garment. Such pride and self-assertion materialize when she and Alif go to an Anglo-Egyptian café. Being the only *munaqaba* in the place with Western bare-headed and bare-faced women in autumn outfits, she is "less uncomfortable than [Alif] …, asking the waiter for more ice and an extra napkin with clipped coolness, tucking the folds of her black robe beneath her without embarrassment" (88). Dina shows that devoutness and pride are not opposing one another. She epitomizes female self-assertion that fuels its power from following God's words, and not rebelling against it. Therefore, even though signaling the presence of Islamism as Leila Ahmed suggests ("A Quiet Revolution" 8-9), the veil can also be a symbol of pride and confidence in the female as dictated by Islam. In addition, the Middle Eastern cultures see that "the things that are most precious, most perfect, and most holy are always hidden: the Kaaba, the faces of prophets and angels, a woman's body, Heaven" (Wilson "*The Butterfly Mosque*" 141).

Through her actions and conversations, Dina shows an understanding of Islam that transcends the typical obsequiously flunkey designation. Surprised by hearing her sing, Alif asks Dina if women of her 'kind' are allowed to sing or listen to music, thinking that "women who believe the veil is mandatory also believe that music is forbidden" (72). She responds by saying that some veiled women tend to follow such rules, but she does not. Apparently, Alif, like most men, believes that veiled women are forged from the same template as they read the same religious books such as Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Abdel Wahhab. However, Dina's independent understanding of Islam, as shown in the personal pronoun "I don't [believe that music is forbidden]" (72), reveals that some 'Islamist' women who take the veil as their garment of choice are not all narrow-minded and prejudiced. In fact, some of those women actively attempt to understand Islam and adjust their position accordingly. In Dina's own understanding, "[b]irds make music, river-reeds in wind make music. Babies make music. God would not forbid

something that is the *sharia* of innocent creatures" (72). This shows Dina's independent reasoning instead of a passive acquiescence to a sheikh's guidance or conformity to the stereotypical veiled woman model.

The veil represents a private world for Dina where she feels safe, strong and powerful. After working for numerous hours on the computer, all that Alif sees is bright light and kneels at Dina's feet asking for help. After a brief moment of hesitation, Dina kneels to face him and throws "her veil over his head" (240). Inside her veil, Alif starts to feel less pain in his head and instantly begins to contemplate the "world she [has] created for herself" (240). Dina stands as a living proof against the claim that the veil is a "mobile home", as Ibtissam Bouachrine describes it, that "is a constant reminder that women's natural place is the home" (88). Dina is neither secluded at home nor does her veil present an obstacle in the face of challenges. In fact, she saves Alif multiple times and proves to be stronger and smarter than he is. Furthermore, the veil allows Dina to be less what other people want her to be and be her true self, because she never bothers "with the skin-bleaching creams so many girls [use] to poison themselves" (241). Therefore, the veil not only prevents women from being sexually objectified, but also provides them with honesty, particularly with oneself.

Alif the Unseen is a representative case of scarce Western lack of bigotry towards Islam. In fact, it celebrates Islam and perceives it as an empowering force for Muslim women. Wilson argues that "there was so much about Islam and the people who lived it that was left unsaid in the media and in public discussion" ("The Butterfly Mosque" 276). The versions of Islam most circulated in Western media are those of an extremist, violent and misogynist religion that occupies the Middle East. These politically-triggered images about Islam are, unfortunately, the most prevalent. Women under Islam are oppressed and marginalized in Western views. The picture of the veiled woman is a proof of Islam's bias and discrimination between Muslims. However, Islam as an empowering religion which enables women to contribute in public as well as in private life is often overlooked. The Western perceptions are far less true than lived Islam. For this reason, Wilson asserts that: "With Islam [she] gave [herself] permission to live in the world as [she] saw it, not as [she] was told to see it" (80). She becomes surprised by how Islam is a gender positive religion that does not limit the female to pre-defined roles.

In the novel, religion plays an important role in the life of Dina as she follows a religious and pious path as a veiled devout woman. As a matter of fact, she is saved by religion and, correspondingly, saves Alif as well. After being attacked by the Hand's army of jinn in their final encounter, Alif and NewQuarter01 become clueless in the face of the hidden folk surrounding them from every corner. Dina's words appear as a faint light becoming brighter as she says: "I seek refuge in God from the outcast Satan" (383) pleading Alif to repeat after her. This moment captures two men who are unable and scared to do anything, and a young woman who dauntlessly confronts a dreadful force through uttering the word of God. Stepping backward until the sunlight beams from the windows hit her veil, Dina does not look "black but gold" (384) in her robe. This strong image of a woman in veil saving men using religion is a response to all Western degrading portrayals of the veiled Muslim woman as unassertive and passive. Contrarily, Wilson portrays religious women as a beacon of hope, because such women find refuge in their religion when all other paths are shut.

Before meeting Vikram and knowing about the secret hidden folk living among them, Alif becomes overwhelmed with suspicion and disbelief especially that he is sent to meet one of them. As a believing woman, Dina comments: "You read all those *kuffar* fantasy novels and yet you deny something straight out of a holy book" (86). Earlier in the novel, he lends Dina *The Golden Compass*, which is a fantasy book that has jinni trickery. In Alif's point of view, fact and fiction are completely different things; and he gets angry because when things become real, they are scary. Alif's disbelief is what makes him incapacitated in the face of the jinn; whereas Dina's belief in the existence of such creatures as well as her belief in God as the all-powerful and all-knowing is what invigorates her courage to stand between the jinn and Alif.

Additionally, the veil as an Islamic dress is a source of female empowerment for Dina. Although Amina Wadud expresses that: "If you think that the difference between heaven and hell is 45 inches of material … [you will] be surprised" ("*Inside the Gender Jihad*" 219), Dina's choice to wear the veil and embrace the Islamic ideals is not male-imposed, but like Wadud, she wears it and chooses to uncover to a person she loves. Like a sixth pillar, it seems that people cannot discuss gender in Islam without discussing the veil. In fact, the veil is not the best dress as "the best dress is the dress of *taqwa*" (The Quran qtd. in Wadud 219). However, to choose to veil against familial desires is an expression of personal choice and a part of a woman's identity. In

Dina's case, the veil is indicative of assertiveness and agency, a symbol of demonstrating control over the body. Indeed, the veil as an imposed garment that symbolizes modesty and religiosity can be open to debate. However, many Muslim women see the Islamic covering as empowering and liberating (Zempi 3) especially that their choice is not compromised.

4.12. Conclusion

Alif the Unseen presents itself as an anti-patriarchal, anti-prejudice against Islam and an honest portrayal of the Arab culture, Islam and women. Unlike McHugh's *Nekropolis*, *Alif the Unseen* acknowledges the cultural differences in the West and in the East, and views the Arab women to be empowered and not oppressed by their religion. Wilson and McHugh, both of whom are Western, stand at odds from each other when Islam and gender are in question. Wilson sketches a picture where Islam is a religion that emphasizes social justice and approves of female assertiveness and agency. Her views align with the Islamic feminist views with regard to advocating the egalitarian message of Islam and women's roles in the public and private spheres. Her counter-narrative presents an extraordinary female character who embraces Islam and is embraced by it. From a Western point of view, Islam becomes a liberating and empowering religion that guarantees men and women's rights, and not a misogynist religion. Wilson refuses to fit into boxes and follow a certain script or narrative (Coovadia 41), but instead seeks to show the Arab culture and Islam for what they truly are: a culture and a religion different from Western norms and beliefs. Islam, in Wilson's view, is an egalitarian and gender-positive religion that is misunderstood and misinterpreted by both the Arab men with a certain agenda, and the West with false arguments with an aim to fulfill a bigger scheme of hegemony over the East.

General Conclusion

There is not a single point of view about Arab Muslim women's issues. It can be argued that one's own vantage point that comprises one's own background, ideology-based beliefs about and experiences with the Arab world influence their understandings and perceptions of Arab gender issues. Arab and Muslim feminists relate gender injustice to the cultures of Arab societies. Those cultures establish their practices on Islam, hence the interpretations and misinterpretations of the religious texts. This justifies the negative attitudes and conceptions with which topics related to Islam are addressed and treated. On the other hand, Western feminists believe Islam to be a sexist and misogynist religion. Besides, the Arab cultures are considered to be backward and incompatible with modernity. Such push-and-pull situation with opposing views that place religion at the center causes confusion and bewilderment, and raises queries about Islam and its message. Arbitrating such a difficult situation requires a neutral point of view, one that is a result of a convergence between Western and Islamic identities, takes pride in both identities and refuses to take sides.

The above issues have been the subject of discussion in this study. Encompassing different views on the issues of Arab Muslim women in contemporary speculative fiction, this study sought to bring closer Arab and American perspectives on the topic. The selected authors showed different insights in their works based on their identities, ideological beliefs, understandings and experiences with the Arab world. The trio of gender, Islam and culture proved to be problematic as the three works reflected different views on the matter. As an Arab feminist, Abdel Aziz emphasizes, through *The Queue*, the role that patriarchal structures play to marginalize women. She highlights how the male culture uses religion to dominate over women. The two characters who frequently use the religious discourse are the High Sheikh and the man in the *galabeya*; both of whom exhibit commitment to God and the regime. Religious corruption is highlighted as the two characters use religion to maintain the status quo and to oppress women. Abdel Aziz points out, through her novel, that gender injustice lies at an intersection between religion (or the misuse of religion), culture and politics. Additionally, she shows an Islamic feminist consciousness as one of the characters (the woman with the short hair) defies the interpretations of 'the Greater Book' by the man in *galabeya* and provides her own interpretation; therefore, standing against the male misinterpretations. The novel can be

considered as an anti-patriarchal critique because it seeks to highlight the injustice that women suffer in the different areas of social life.

Unlike *The Queue*, McHugh's *Nekropolis* points an accusing finger at Islam as the origin of female oppression in the Arab world. As an American feminist, McHugh has never been to Morocco (the setting of her novel). Her thoughts about gender in the Arab world are not based on contact with or knowledge about the culture and religion of the MENA region. Rather, the future Morocco in the novel is "reduced to a homogenous stereotypical Western reference of orthodox Islam" (Foram 211-212). The people of Morocco comply with the guidance of 'The Second Koran', a reformed version of the Quran, which infiltrates social life and daily practice. Women are veiled, secluded, subjugated, oppressed and incapable of independent reasoning in McHugh's future dystopia. The most visible sign of religious oppression is the jessing process. Jessing comprises planting a device in the human brain to increase loyalties to an 'earthly master'. Hariba, the protagonist in the novel, is jessed and believes that jessing is a blessing from God and quotes the religious text by saying: "The Second Koran says that just as a jessed hawk is tamed, not tied, so shall the servant be bound by affection and duty, not chains, with God's blessing" (McHugh 5). The Arab culture is depicted as highly oppressive of women, and the Arab men as sexual beings. On the other hand, 'the land of the infidel' or the West is presented as a utopia; one which is respectful of women regardless of their backgrounds and ethnicities. Accordingly, McHugh's *Nekropolis* is an expansion of Orientalist thinking that manifests in literary production with an aim to demonize Islam and the Arab cultures.

Positive portrayals of the Arab cultures and Islam in Western literary production is informed by knowledge about and contact with those cultures. Wilson's *Alif the Unseen* depicts gender and Islam in a positive light because, unlike McHugh, the author has actually been to Egypt. The author is a convert to Islam whose conversion comes after textual familiarity with the religion. Wilson becomes aware of the faulty facts that have been circulated in the Western public discussion for years which intensified after the 9/11 events. Taking pride in her American and Muslim identities, she refuses to invent "exotic fictions about the East to prove a point about western superiority" (Wilson "*The Butterfly Mosque*" 276). Rather, she takes a neutral position and seeks to depict the East in her writings as it is and as "[she] saw it, not as [she] was told to see it" (76). In *Alif the Unseen*, women are neither oppressed nor victims of false consciousness.

Wilson criticizes some patriarchal practices in her novel such as polygamy and governmental oppression which applies to both sexes. However, she shows that traditions such as seclusion and the veil, which have long been attacked as symbols of the marginalization of women from the public sphere, are in fact symbols of female private space in which she feels safe and empowered, especially when the female choice is not compromised. Dina, one of the central characters in the novel, cherishes this fact and announces that "[i]t is only given to women to see without being seen" (Wilson "*Alif the Unseen*" 187). Wilson understands the fact that there are cultural differences between the East and West, and that Western beliefs in universalism overlook such differences. She believes that the Arab Muslim woman is "far less free than a woman in the West, but far more appreciated" (Wilson "*The Butterfly Mosque*" 250). She portrays the women in the East to be empowered not oppressed by Islam.

The different viewpoints of Abdel Aziz, McHugh and Wilson stand as a reminder of the value of approaching topics related to a specific culture from cultural relativist rather than ethnocentric perspectives. The latter promote universal worldviews that instead of encouraging intercultural dialogue, they seek to impose a monologue; a singular Western vision that refuses difference. Because the Western and Arab cultures are different, "ideals like justice, equality, and morality do not point to any particular norms or practice norms at all, except as each particular culture comes to define them" (Blumenson 223). The different cultural traditions should not allow one culture to feel superior or treat other cultures with contempt. Rather, as the Greek philosopher Herodotus puts it best, "[e]veryone without exception believes his own native customs, and the religion he was brought up in, to be the best; and that being so, it is unlikely that anyone but a madman would mock at such things" (3:38). Notions of equality, justice and ethics are informed by religious and cultural principles that have existed in societies since their inception. Therefore, "[t]here is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society's code as better than another's" (Rachels and Rachels qtd. in Park 161). To argue that the veil or seclusion are eternal symbols of oppression without understanding the complexities and particularities of such practices is not only reductive but also misinformed Orientalist thinking.

Patriarchal practices infiltrate gender relations in the Arab world, though not exclusively. The assumption that the Arab cultures are the only cultures in which women are prejudiced against and marginalized is made to reference Western superiority. In fact, all cultures are

inherently patriarchal. Some cultures like the Arab cultures are charged with false accusations for certain political agendas. This fact holds true as representations of women in Western literature have been changing and evolving throughout history. Indeed, the Western preoccupation with the Muslim woman's liberty or lack thereof only appeared around the 18th century. Before that, the image of the Muslim woman was that of forceful queens (Kahf 4-6), in which times the West neither possessed the force nor the tendency to 'Orientalize' the East (53). Fatema Mernissi believes that just as the Arab woman is veiled, the Western woman is also veiled, only more discreetly. While the veil of the Arab woman consists of body-covering, the Western veil is about youth and beauty. The West covers only the older woman, "wrapping her in shrouds of ugliness" (Mernissi "*Scheherazade Goes West*" 75). Whereas the younger women are forced "to fit size 6" (74) to be valued and cherished in their cultures. Therefore, the claim that Arab cultures are the only patriarchal cultures is neither true nor accurate, because "in all cultures, including in the West, there are likely to be different segments of women that are subjected to different forms of oppression" (Bullough and Abdelzaher 11).

Islamic feminism, as an academic and intellectual movement concerned with the study of religious texts, is appealing to different women either in their local societies and cultures or in the West. However, the label Islamic feminism is problematic because it creates divisions within Muslims and scholars of Islam, especially with those who think that feminism is a Western importation. In fact, many Islamic feminist scholars initially rejected the term and objected to being labelled as such. Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas refused to be called Islamic feminists (Pepecilli 94-95) because such labelling would limit their audience. Indeed, a project that is interested in studying the religious texts should not be based on the exclusion of those who reject feminism for being Western. One of the flaws of this project is its welcoming of different voices including non-Muslim voices, and declared antagonism towards Islamists. An egalitarian project based in Islamic societies, supported by Islamic texts, and believes in the premise of equality in Islam should not exclude anyone whose identity is Muslim, regardless of their religious beliefs and identities. Unconditional acceptance of non-Muslim contributions and rejection of Islamist principles highlights the double standards with which Islamic feminism addresses identity-based issues. The adoption of a stance which excludes those legitimate of the egalitarian message of Islam, and includes Western contributions is indicative of a tendency towards apologetics, which weakens the position of Islamic feminism in the Muslim-majority societies.

Although this study has tackled Arab Muslim women's issues from Arab and American perspectives, research on the topic is still needed. Representations of Arab women in different literary productions from across the world need further investigation and study. Furthermore, comparative studies that investigate secular and religious feminist voices in literature produced by Arab women are still required. As a new phenomenon, Islamic feminism presents untouched territories in academia. There is still research needed on the project, its development in the Arab world and in the global context, its literary production, and its use as a methodology for analysis. Moreover, research is required on the differences between Islamic feminisms in different Arab and Muslim countries, between Islamic feminists in the Arab world and in the West, and between theory and practice. Further research is also needed on the problem of gender equality versus gender complementarity in Islam.

Islam is a religion of justice that gives men and women their full rights and shows them their responsibilities towards God and each other. As a social system, it establishes laws that prevent transgressions in gender relations. In the eyes of God, the only difference between males and females is *taqwa* or piety. Allah says: "Oh humankind. We have created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into tribes and nations that you may know each other. The most honored of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you" (The Quran 13:49).

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Glossary

Agency: the ability to make independent choices and take independent actions.

Androcentrism: the practice of emphasizing the masculine points of view and interests, therefore marginalizing femininity.

Assertiveness: marked by a confident behavior and a self-assured attitude.

Authoritarianism: a political system that is characterized by strict obedience to authority, as opposed to personal freedom.

Bureaucracy: a system where complicated administrative procedures are required.

Circumcision: an originally male surgical procedure intended to remove the skin on the tip of the penis.

Cultural Relativism: the theory that customs and beliefs of a particular culture are not absolute; therefore, they should be understood based on that culture.

Egalitarianism: the doctrine based on the premise that all human beings are equal; therefore, they deserve equal rights.

Empowerment: the process of becoming more confident and stronger in advocating one's rights and controlling one's own life.

Ethnocentrism: the attitude that one's own group is better and superior to others.

Exegesis: the practice of interpreting religious texts such as the *Quran*.

Femme-fatale: is a seductive woman who can easily attract men with her beauty and charms.

First-Person Narrative: Unlike the God-like omniscient narrator, a first-person narrator's view is limited to the experiences of the narrating character who takes an active role in the story.

Gender: besides the biological differences between the sexes, gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of the male and the female.

Gender-bias: is the tendency to differentiate and prefer one gender over the other.

Islamic jurisprudence: the practice of deriving laws from the religious texts of Islam including the *Quran* and the *hadiths*.

Misogyny: a term that is used to describe any hatred of and prejudice against women.

Odalisque: a sexually attractive female concubine or slave in a *harem*.

Omniscient: is a narrative perspective marked by an all-knowing, God-like narrator who knows everything about the characters and the events of the story.

Oppression: the state of suffering unjust treatment especially when a cruel authority persecutes a minority.

Patriarchy: a term used to describe power relationships between males and females. It refers to the domination of the male over the female.

Phallocentric: emphasizing the masculine viewpoints and interests.

Private Sphere: refers to life in the home and family, especially with regard to household domestic activities and raising and educating children.

Public Sphere: an area in social life that pertains to life outside the home, especially with regard to socio-cultural, economic and political life.

Seclusion: the act of keeping someone (especially women) away from other people.

Sex: the quality of being male or female. The biological division between male and female based on their reproductive functions.

Sexism: prejudice and discrimination usually against women.

Speculative fiction: an umbrella genre that encompasses science-fiction, fantasy and dystopia amongst other genres marked by adopting non-realist perspectives.

Submission: the action of succumbing and yielding to an authority or a superior force.

The Greater Book: in *The Queue*, the Greater Book refers to the sacred book or *The Quran*.

Theocracy: a form of government ruled by divine guidance or religious authorities.

Totalitarianism: a political system and a system of government characterized by a dictatorial authority that requires citizens to be in a state of complete obedience.

Verisimilitude: the quality of being real, or marked by a resemblance to reality.

Acronyms

CEDAW: Conference on the Elimination of all Discrimination against Women.

MB: Muslim Brotherhood.

MENA: Middle East and North Africa.

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization.

SIS: Sisters in Islam.

Transliterations

Al-aql: the science of interpreting and understanding the meanings of the *hadiths* and the *Quran*.

Alf Yeom: The Thousand Days. The opposite of *Alf Layla* or the Thousand Nights.

Al-janna: refers to heaven or paradise, a promised land rewarded to those who obeyed God's rulings.

Al-Mizan: literally the scale, a divine principle for organizing the universe.

Al-naql: the science of transmitting *hadiths* or saying of the Prophet. It relies on memorization.

Al-Tabur: is the Arabic transliteration of Basma Abdel Aziz's novel *The Queue*.

Asbab Nuzul: the contexts in which the *Quran* was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.

Aya: a verse in the *Quran*.

Burqa: a loose type of veil that covers the entire body including the face. It is usually worn in Muslim states like Afghanistan.

Chador: a cloak-like type of veil that covers the entire body except for the face. It is usually worn in Iran.

Da'iyat: or wa'izat are women who give religious lessons and instructions to other women.

Darajah: a degree or a rank, often used in the *Quran* to express the value or worth of some over others.

Fatwa: an Islamic legal ruling on a matter in Islamic law (*sharia*). It is given by a *faqih*, or a qualified Islamic legal scholar.

Fiqh: known as Islamic jurisprudence, fiqh is the human practice deriving laws from Islam's texts such as the *Quran* and the *hadiths*.

Galabeya: a hooded robe worn by men especially in North Africa.

Hadith: the body of recorded sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) transmitted through a line of narrators.

Haram: forbidden in Islam.

Harem: a private separate space for women (wives, female servants, concubines) in a Muslim household.

Hijab: refers to any type of veil. It is usually used to refer to the headscarf that covers the head and neck, but not the face.

Iddah: the period of time that a woman must wait after divorce or after the death of her husband to get married from another man.

Ijtihad: a term in Islamic scholarship which refers to independent reasoning, especially in the study of the *Quran* and the *hadiths*.

Imam: an Islamic leader. *Imam* is usually used to refers to the one who leads Muslim prayers.

Jilbab: refers to a loose type of veil that covers the entire body. It is worn in most Muslim countries.

Jinn: are creatures created from fire.

Khatib: an imam who delivers the sermons of khutba (a religious lesson).

Khilwa: the act of being in a private place with a member of the opposite sex, especially illegally.

Kuffar: infidel. One who is not a Muslim and opposes Islam.

Mufti al-Sultan: a religious scholar who devotes his *fatwas* in favor of the *Sultan* or the ruler.

Munaqaba: the woman who wear *niqab*.

Nikah: marriage in Islam.

Niqab: a veil that covers the entire body except for the eyes. It is usually worn in most Muslim countries.

Qawwam: refers to men who take care of women. The man's duties include providing for and protecting the woman.

Qiwamah: the practice of providing for and protecting the female, often the wife.

Rad al-Shubuhat: refuting misconceptions.

Sharia: is the divine laws for mankind. Such laws are derived from Islam's texts.

Shaytan: is a *jinn* creature who defied Allah. It is Arabic for Satan. The leader and most wicked of *jinn* is known as *Iblis*.

Shia: a Muslim group based on the rejection of the first three *Caliphs*. *Shia* are mostly found in Iran and other parts in the Muslim world such as Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen.

Shirk: the belief in polytheism, that there is more than one God.

Sunnah: the way of life of the Prophet Muhammad. It refers to anything transmitted on the life of the Prophet including his words, acts and tacit.

Surah: a chapter in the *Quran*.

Tafsir: or exegesis, is the science of explanation and interpretation of the Islam's sacred text (*The Quran*).

Taqwa: refers to piety which includes consciousness of and fear from God.

Tawhid: the belief in the Oneness of Allah. The doctrine that Allah is the only God.

Urfi: *urfi* marriages often lack a legal contract, instead they are based on customs and traditions.

Zina: adultery or the act of an illegal sexual relationship.