ARAB FEMINIST MEDIA STUDIES

Towards a poetics of diversity

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Arab women are often portrayed on Arab television satellite channels as wearing skimpy clothes and dancing in sexually provocative ways. At the same time, it is interesting to note that the Western media continue to depict Arab women in stereotypical ways as evidenced by the plethora of images of them wearing the burqa (Salam Al-Mahadin 2007; Faegheh Shirazi 2001). Who, I would ask, is this Arab/Muslim1 woman made to appear to seamlessly flow between two such extreme representations? While the Western media appear to be desperate to catch her covered up so that they can jump on the bandwagon of human rights and call for divesting her of her oppressive clothing, the entertainment industries in many Arab countries have now apparently accepted and embraced the eroticisation and sexual objectification of the female body. How is it possible that both Western and Arab media can capture images of Arab women that bear very little resemblance to the everyday reality of most Arab women’s lives today?

This selective form of “strategic moulding” is not exactly a misrepresentation of Arab women, for women wearing the burqa do really exist alongside women who have adopted a personal style and fashion sense drawing from “soft pornography” that often shows up on Arab television and movie screens (Moataz Abdul Aziz 2004; Mona Bakir 2004; Charles P. Freund 2003). But what merits our attention as feminist media researchers is, in my view, the political, social and economic agenda which shapes both Arab and Western media choice in ways that delimit a certain type of Arab woman and attempt to “discursively condition” the reader/viewer to accept her as a certain norm.2 Western audiences, to borrow a term from Kierkegaard, have been “levelled” (Hubert L. Dreyfus & Jane Rubin 1987) by an incessant flow of images to conjure up the proverbial motif of the woman in the black tent whenever the term “Muslim/Arab woman” is used; one need only to search for the term “Muslim woman” or “Muslim women” in the images section of Google to be inundated with women in burqas. Conversely, much of the current debate around the Arab world about women in the media has centred on the increased eroticisation of female bodies in the entertainment industry, particularly on game shows and in music videos.

The schism that exists in these contradictory, and indeed unrealistic, portrayals ought to be the springboard from which to launch a feminist Arab media studies project to explore how the Arab/Muslim woman still persists as one of the most distinguishable signifiers of post-9/11 media discourse in both the Arab and Western worlds. By this, I mean that she is the field of struggle par excellence for contested ideologies, be they intra-Arab or Arab and Western (Al-Mahadin 2004; Meyda Yeşenoglu 1998).
But developing feminist Arab media studies is a rather difficult task considering there is no systematic tradition for Arab feminist studies on which a critical media tradition could be based. Unlike feminist studies in the West, Arab feminism is predominantly defined by individual researchers who largely are organised not by theoretical approach, nor by systematic waves of feminist thought similar to their Western counterparts. The importance of organised work is that it allows one to methodically trace the chronology of the social, political and economic inquiry into feminist issues. Extensive borrowing from Western feminist studies by Arab researchers—admittedly, I am one of them—has, in my view, thrown Arab feminism into its current state of disarray. While Western feminism has had its own first, second and third waves, as well as an engagement with post-feminist debates, Arab feminism has been, in the main, a mix and match of heavy borrowing from Western theoretical formulations and has primarily focused on the need to amend laws to improve women's lives (Valentine M. Moghadam 2003). Less practical and more abstract debates are usually perceived by feminist activists and academics alike as being too intellectually decadent. Islamic feminism is probably the only form of indigenous feminism to which the Arab world can lay claim. In a world where family law derives its force, ethos and binding provisions from interpretations of Islamic Sharia, it is virtually impossible to secularise Islamic feminist debates about women, in particular those debates that pertain to issues such as marriage, custody, alimony, etc.

In the Arab world, the woman—specifically her body—is a much contested and debated discursive space. It would not be an exaggeration to argue that it is the "ultimate signifier" with a multitude of signifieds that spill into various aspects of social, political, religious and economic life (Al-Mahadin 2009). Indeed, the Arab world possesses a social order subordinated to and constructed by the female body—specifically how that body should be regulated, landscaped, exposed, covered, disciplined or annihilated. The Arab world possesses a social order that both subordinates, and, in various important ways, is subordinated to the female body. The Arab man is perpetually caught in the "woman" trap set by a social order that constructs male subjectivity through the medium of the female body. The Greeks believed that the presence of the god Hymenaios was essential at any wedding to ensure the couple led a long and happy life. His namesake, the hymen, plays an identical role in Arab societies, hence the perpetual trauma of the Hymenaios complex; a woman who forsakes her virginity before marriage or has sex out of wedlock could be killed at the hands of male relatives to cleanse the family honour. Feelings of shame, dishonour and fear thereof breed their own deep-seated anxieties which usually translate into neurotic fixation with controlling the potential source of disgrace and ignominy. If, for Jacques Lacan, territorialisation is a reference to the manner in which the body of the infant is organised around erogenous zones (Adrian Par 2005, p. 69), then, for an Arab male, territorialisation is a spacio-temporal organisation around the hymen. This eventually leads to the articulation of a male subjectivity that can only anchor itself in a female subjectivity; without a female body as a point of reference, male honour has no discursive anchorage.

This extrapolation of honour might seem out of place in a discussion about Arab feminist media studies, but it steers the debate back to the “integrity” of the female body as represented by the two fetishized versions of women in both the Arab and Western media. My choice of the word “integrity” is quite deliberate since it captures the double meaning of “wholeness” and “incorruptibility.” For a female body to possess integrity, it has to have the hymen—to be “unlacking”—which deems it chaste or incorruptible. Women’s attire plays a significant role in securing that integrity on various planes of meaning and style; a wide
array of veils and fashions have been adopted by women who choose to cover their hair and their bodies, except for their faces, hands and feet. The choice to wear a veil is both social and religious, and sometimes even economic. Some women wear it by choice, others under duress. Some choose colourful designs, others go for black. There is a plethora of colours and styles and degrees of conservatism. One thing is for certain, women who wear the burqa represent a very small percentage of veiled women. In a country like Saudi Arabia, a woman can be fined or arrested for not covering up in public, but in most Arab countries she is expected to dress modestly—in most circles—but it is not a crime punishable by law if she were to choose to wear revealing clothes. Some Arab countries are much more liberal than others and even within the borders of the same country, upper-class communities tend to be much less religious and more westernised in their manner of dress and mores. The custos morum of religion notwithstanding, most Arabs would be hard pressed to draw a picture of what a typical Arab/Muslim woman would dress like, but they would tell you one thing: it is not the one in the burqa or the erotic singer/dancer. Both represent a very small fraction of real women in the Arab world.

To query the status of Arab/Muslim women on an international media landscape rather than delimit it to Arab contexts has serious implications for an Arab feminist media project. It is a strategic displacement of a body whose semiotics and subjectivity cannot be reconciled without globalising the debate. Such debate does not simply mean widening the geographical parameters of that bio-power, but, more importantly, it requires that the Arab feminist media operate inside and outside a certain textual world-hood. By allowing these two representations of women to encounter each other, collide, be juxtaposed, brought to bear tension on the normative practices of the contexts that produce them, we are in effect allowing their respective corporeality to splutter out some truths. It is counterproductive for an Arab feminist project to succeed without taking its token woman on a ride around the globe to come face to face with its sameness and otherness as depicted in the media of the Other(s) (Ghazi-Walid Falah 2005). It is not simply a question of writing the feminist Arab project in English rather than Arabic, or for it to borrow from Western theoretical formulations or to choose to develop its own branch of theoretical feminism. In my view, an Arab feminist media project should be entrusted with the task of examining how Arab media have fought their ideological, consumer, political, social and economic wars through the female body, largely in response to a perceived threat from outside powers. This has been true since the nationalist movements of the early twentieth century, throughout the colonisation decades that followed and, more poignantly, since 9/11. A case in point is the 9 August, 2010 cover of Time magazine which featured an Afghan girl with a sliced-off nose and ears under the heading “What Happens if we Leave Afghanistan.” Aisha was allegedly mutilated by the Taliban for running away from her husband. The ideological meaning of the cover is seemingly self-explanatory since the “war against terror” has been gendered at every turn.

Another example of the impact of international media productions on local contexts are imported television shows. Over the past two years, the Arab entertainment industry has been inundated with Turkish soap operas that have been dubbed into Syrian Arabic. These have proven to be very popular despite the fact that they present a system of social and religious values that stands at odds with the generally conservative nature of most Arab societies (Michael Kimmelman 2010). Arab women, who constitute 90 percent of these soap operas’ viewership, are transported to a fantasy world of male characters gushing with love and female characters who live the ultimate rags to riches fairy tale. But it is not quite
that simple. The unexpected success of these soap operas poses two important questions: Why is the audience more than willing to accept open displays of physical intimacy between unmarried couples on the screen, and representations of semi-clad women on Arab satellite channels? Have such representations become normative? Secondly, what points can be taken from psychoanalytic theory to help explain Arab women’s positive response to these Turkish soap operas?

If the portrayal of women in skimpy clothes on Arab satellite channels appears to offer the fantasy of a virtual harem in a sexually repressed society, then it seems to me that Turkish soap operas might offer the hope of love in emotionally repressed societies. Both fetishize bodies and emotions and fill an ever-expanding gap in Arab cultures. There exists a tiny disclaimer in the psyche of the Arabs that neither men nor women could possibly attain that phantasy/fantasy in the realm of the real. It is important to note, however, that without qualitative audience research it is not possible to fully appreciate the influence of these genres in Arab societies.

Another problem facing feminist media research in the Arab world is the almost total absence of psychoanalytic theory in Arab media studies, which has, in my view, left a huge gap in research. Interpreting sexually explicit material on Arab television, or approaching notions of love and desire as they filter through to audiences would be considerably strengthened by drawing on psychoanalytic concepts. That said, to borrow notions such as the Oedipus complex, for example, and try to apply them to an analysis of Arab societies would yield rather laughable results. There is a pressing need to develop more indigenous psychoanalytic approaches to the forces that drive male–female interactions because without them we are simply set to import theories that bear little relevance to Arab realities. I stress the importance of psychoanalysis due to the important role that I believe it could play in deciphering the complexities of fantasy-building and fetish on Arab screens and linking them to everyday life.

In the Arab world, the woman is the Word. She is the self-signifying sign that constructs the signifieds of all other “words,” particularly that of “masculinity” or male subjectivity. The seven hundred or more Arab satellite channels that exist today are either religious constructs that pull the audience towards the right-wing social conservatism or venues of pseudo-entertainment geared towards lessening the alleged impact of religion. Both derive their substance from discussions about women, as well as exposés and images of them. They mediate their messages through women’s bodies. It has been argued that the West is phallocentric because of the woman’s perceived lack, but in the Arab world she is territory that constructs that symptom called “man” (Jacques Lacan [1975] 1982).

This may explain why Western paranoia, islamophobia and a culture of fear are guaranteed to be provoked by images of the woman in burqa. She is the ultimate source of anxiety because the (male) viewer/gazer is being forced to see her as an extreme sexual object by virtue of the fact that she is drawing his attention to her covered body. There are no more poignant problematizations of Islam than the covered body of a female on a book cover, in a newspaper photo or on television. Richard Dawkins, the famous author and scientist, described the burqa as a “full-bin liner thing” and said that whenever he saw that Islamic clothing, it made him feel very bad. It was, in his words, a source of “visceral repulsion” and a “symbol of the oppression of women” (cited in Liz Thomas 2010). It did not occur to him that many women actually choose to wear the veil or the burqa. To describe something as a source of visceral repulsion implies level of anxiety and trauma that goes beyond the usual pangs of guilt one feels at seeing an injustice. It is almost as if Dawkins
feels he has been deprived of the right to see the woman behind the burqa. His male
jouissance or pleasure somehow has been denied him. His gaze has no access to the object
and that can be viewed as the most traumatic form of violence against the gaze. So,
Dawkins chooses to gaze upon this woman as a trash can. If he cannot access the object,
then the object must be discarded like rubbish. That is not much different from the
annihilating force of hymen-related honour. If the woman/object ceases to be a source of
honour, she/it must be killed off to redeem that honour. If Dawkins cannot gaze upon the
woman’s face, then that same gaze must symbolically annihilate her by regarding her as a
trash can.

It is only due to her paramount importance as the ultimate signifier in Arab societies
that Western media have hijacked the Arab/Muslim woman as an ambassador to the Other;
hence the gendering of what now appears to be a central, global ideological war. It is the
task of Arab feminist studies, in my opinion, to straddle both worlds which, despite their
much-publicised differences, have united as one Superego in the fantasy/phantasy that
maps the Arab/Muslim woman.4

NOTES
1. I shall use the terms Arab and Muslim women interchangeably for the purposes of this
paper although there are Christian Arabs and non-Arab Muslims.
2. I have argued elsewhere that the Arab media does not want this type of woman to be the
norm, but rather the antithesis of the rise of right-wing religious extremism through
combating it with pseudo-liberal consumerism that focuses on selling women a fantasy and
men a fetish through these images of “do-me feminism.” Such images are meant to be
recreated in the private sphere of the home in the confines of legitimate relationships
between men and women. See Al-Mahadin (2007) for a more detailed discussion. For an
extended overview of do-me-feminism and raunch culture, see Stephanie Genz and
Benjamin A. Brabon (2009).
3. Arab viewers are fully aware that social and religious norms prohibit such modes of dress
and behaviour in public. This explains why the majority of Arab/Muslim women would wear
such excessively revealing clothes or dance in an openly erotic manner only if no men were
around (segregated gatherings, such as women-only weddings) or around their husbands
within the confines of a legitimate relationship. Within women-only gatherings, which often
resemble a harem context, women wear very little and dance very provocatively and openly.
It is also within these settings that women compete in wearing the latest fashions, hairstyles,
jewellery, make-up and even in showing off their post-plastic-surgery bodies.
4. I use the term superego to denote the “moralisng,” “cruel” and “insatiable” agency
that purports to be setting the ethical parameters of how and what women should be like.

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