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AVANT-GARDE FEMINISM IN EGYPT, ISLAM AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN LITERATURE

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Abstract: This article addresses feminism and its specificities in the context of the Arab and Islamic world and introduces pioneers in Egypt – such as Aisha Taymur (1840-1902), Zaynab Fawwaz (1850-1914), Nabawiyya Musa (1886-1951), Huda Sha'rawi (1879-1947), and Malak Hifni Nassef (1886-1918) – up to recent names such as Nawal El-Saadawi (1931-2021). The biographical and autobiographical genres are addressed and authors like Lebanese Anbara Salam al-Khalidi (1898-1986) and Palestinian Fadwa Tuqan (1917-2003) are also mentioned in this regard. The article discusses issues of feminism in Arabic and focuses on Arabic literature written by women and the representations of Muslim women in the West.

Keywords: Islam; Arab feminism; Feminist pioneers; Arabic literature; Orientalism

Introduction

Addressing the development of feminist thought in the Islamic world as researchers in Brazil involves engaging in a dialogue with ideas that are strongly consolidated in the Western mindset about what the Islamic world is and, above all, who its women are. For Harvard professor of Religion and Indo-Muslim and Islamic Cultures Ali Sultaan Asani, many people, due to complete ignorance, do not understand or appreciate the diversity and nuances of the phenomena, often grouping them under a single label (Ali Sultaan Asani, 2009: 3). Such distortion of sociocultural diversity, especially of the "Eastern world"[4], is related to the Eurocentrism of the Modern Age, as pointed out by Edward Said (2007) in *Orientalism*.

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4. The "Eastern world" is understood as all the sociocultural and geographic diversity that shares a colonial past of economic, sociocultural and imaginary exploitation by European peoples.

In the case of Islam, the construction of the relation of alterity, the result of colonialism, was successful in establishing stereotypes in the European mentality that have repercussions in various spheres of thought. When combined with the misogyny of patriarchal societies, orientalist stereotypes about women were responsible for relating Muslim women to a double image. The first one is a representation of Arab women that associates this group with sensuality, promiscuity and eccentricity. The second one associates them with the oppression of the Islamic religion, which would have in its men the representation of savagery and barbarity.

Both representations correspond to narratives constructed about historical processes, their agents, organizations and thoughts, which centralize male agency and reproduce the idea of the absence of a female voice. Given that such an interpretation silences the role of women and their presence in Arab political and literary scenarios, this article proposes to emphasize some female writers and their works from the 20th century onwards.

By presenting the pioneers of Arab feminism and focusing on Egypt, the article aims to stress their interpretations of the world based on their works that associate the demands and denunciations of a patriarchal society with the abuses committed by the colonial power. The works of Nabawiyya Musa and Huda Sha'rawi analyzed in this article not only encompass considerations on the role of women in society, but also highlight the flow of ideas in Egyptian society and the coexistence of nationalist, Islamic fundamentalist and feminist demands in the social and political fields.

In addition to these pioneers, the article also addresses recent names and the introduction of feminism in Arabic literature during the 20th century. The article discusses the way Arab female writers are represented in literature when these works are translated and published in other countries and debates the representations of women in Western media, Orientalism and the importance of historical revisionism, seeking to include female's works in historical and literary debates.

Arabic literature written by women and the (auto)biography

The increased visibility of women in Arabic literature, especially in Egypt, and the rise of Arab-Islamic feminism are related to the political, economic, social and technological changes of the transition from the 19th to the 20th century. As pointed out by Marilyn Booth:

> The 1890s were a decade of enormous upswing in book and periodical publication, facilitating emerging practices of self-writing. Two decades later, a new social landscape saw the appearance of organized feminism in Egypt following thirty years of energetic if uneven debate on shifting normative conceptions of the appropriate intersection of gender status, national society and economy, and class. The often faint strains of autobiographical writing affixed to female signatures thus emerged as feminist discourses were surfacing among Egyptian and Ottoman Syrian intellectuals, and as Arab women were becoming known as authors and activists. (Marilyn Booth, 2013: 36).

The material conditions of the first two decades of the 20th century favored the dissemination of women's thoughts and actions in the public sphere by the modern press. However, before dedicating themselves to publishing other textual genres, the translation of foreign works and biographies were the main activity of the authors who produced between 1890 and 1920.

Booth (2013) points out that Aisha Taymur (1840-1902), recognized as one of the representatives of the Western novel translation movement, expanded her production to include poems whose main theme was the women's intellectual invisibility:

> Taymur corresponded with other female intellectuals and praised their books in print, linking her own accomplishments to others, as in one celebrated poem. Composed conventionally as a monorhyme ode, the poem is heavy with doubly meaningful rhetoric impossible to deliver in translation but whose running thread is a proclamation of elite women's abilities and persistence in intellectual pursuits despite their formal invisibility. Taymur exploits tropes of veiling and gender-based sequestration (both of which the Arabic word hijab conveys) to assert women's pre-eminence—their intellectual visibility (Booth, 2013: 47).

Aisha Taymur was part of a period of expanding native intelligentsia. However, intellectual production was still mainly male (Booth, 2013: 39). It is in this context that her efforts to legitimize the production and the identity of women writers at the end of the 19th century with her poems and rhetoric went beyond the expectations of her time by positioning women as subjects of discourse (Booth, 2013: 47).

In the transition to the 20th century, among the various forms of participation in political and intellectual life, there was an intense movement of women who had roles in the Arab press as writers and editors of books and articles whose themes were the trajectories of their compatriots. More than participating in the public debates with their productions, these women were responsible for creating vehicles for the dissemination of their work and ideas. Using the technology of the press during a period of controversy, whether of religious or nationalist nature, groups of middle-class Egyptian or Syrian-Lebanese women living in Egypt founded women's periodicals, such as *Al-Farida* and *Al-Fatat* (Hoda Elsadda in Radwa Ashour; Ferial J. Ghazoul; Hasna Reda-Mekdashi, 2007: 112). Among the published works, it is noticeable the biography genre: Four compendiums of biographies of women were published in Egypt in 1910 (Marilyn Booth, 1995: 121).

Among the representatives of this movement of remembering women within the biographical literary tradition, Marilyn Booth (1995) underscores the pioneering work of Zaynab Fawwaz (1850–1914), a Lebanese woman living in Egypt. Booth identifies a connection between the Islamic tradition, which focuses its precepts and history on men, and the preference of early 20th century Egyptian female writers for biographies and, later, autobiographies:

> This genre had emerged in the second century A.H. because the evaluative preservation of life histories was crucial to determining the trustworthiness of

> sources for the *sunna* (words and practices of the prophet Muḥammad, a source of Islamic practice second only to the Qurʾān), beginning with the Companions (*ṣaḥāba*), those relatives and associates of Muḥammad who were the first transmitters of *ḥadīth* (Traditions, which made up the *sunna*). (Booth, 1995: 124).

Booth, in *Locating Women's Autobiographical Writing in Colonial Egypt* (Booth, 2013: 42), adds that, although authors such as Zaynab Fawwaz wrote biographies, a genre widely known for presenting exemplary figures, there was no recognition of their work by male intellectuals. This situation, in Booth's interpretation, derives from the criticism of the interference of women writers, such as Zaynab Fawwaz, in the content of the text and the association of the theme – the lives of exemplary women – with the practice known as "gossip":

> In addition to linking self to subjects, Fawwaz includes a few acquaintances amongst her subjects and thereby offers glimpses of herself as observer and commentator on these lives, noting that she relied on oral information—stories circulating among women she knew. This leads Fawwaz into the realm of what is often labeled "women's talk" or "gossip" which becomes a valued source, presupposing women's networks as trustworthy channels. Women's talk (often disparaged by reformist men writers of the time as a waste of time or worse) thus enters the "high literature" of exemplary biography. (Booth, 2013: 42).

The establishment of a communication network among women, more than a means of obtaining information for writing biographies of women, contributed to the socialization for women in patriarchal societies and colonial contexts. Therefore, the attribution of the term "gossip" reproduces the logic of diminishing this textual genre and women writing.

By recalling the lives of women with the addition of personal comments, Zaynab Fawwaz contributed to the formation of a new discourse based on biographies. The inclusion of women in this genre challenged the historical male exclusivity by seeking to build a new reference of behaviors, understood as exemplary, for women readers:

> But the biographies in the women's press assume and construct an active, female reader. Furthermore, they assume a shared context in which reading holds the power to change the subject who reads. The textual construction of a readership, coupled with a target audience of schoolgirls among others, strengthens the notion that biographies in the women's press were a kind of conduct literature, both exemplary and didactic, that worked "by appropriating positive prescriptions rather than immobilizing prohibitions." The narrative was shaped by these considerations of audience. (Booth, 1995: 140).

Therefore, the importance of biographical works in the early 20th century in Egypt is related to the pioneering work of women writers who sought to write about women for an audience that was not limited to women, thus contributing to the visibility of these personalities.

In addition to biographies, autobiographies in 20th-century Arabic literature are also noteworthy. A prominent name in this regard is that of the Egyptian Nabawiyya Musa

(1886–1951)[5]. In her autobiography "My Story by My Pen" (*Tarīkhī bi-qalamī*), published in 1937, she discusses her personal life, her thoughts on foreign and gender domination, in addition to her engagement in the anti-colonial struggle and her commitment to the education of girls and women.

In Nabawiyya Musa's view, the restriction on women's education was not an isolated problem, but rather part of the limitations that a colonial regime imposed on society. When it came to women, however, such situations were aggravated by their gender status (Nabawiyya Musa, 1999: 21).

The author was one of the first women to obtain a bachelor's degree in a society that restricted girls' access to education. In her autobiography, Nabawiyya Musa states how her achievement became a source of curiosity, a situation that intensified when she became the first woman to hold the position of school principal in Egypt. This fact attracted the attention of people in the community, who sought to get to know her, and motivated the enrollment of new students (Musa, 1999: 198).

In her autobiography, Nabawiyya Musa identifies another situation of gender inequality during her work as a teacher, salary inequality: "I was appointed as a teacher at Abbas Al-Amiriya School for six pounds, while the salary of male graduate teachers was twelve pounds per month" (Musa, 1999: 112. Our translation).

In addition to denouncing the difference in salaries between male and female teachers, the Egyptian author addresses the issue of the value of women in Egypt based on marriage proposals. Advocating her objection to marriage, the author expresses her indignation regarding the social convention of female seclusion after marriage. For Nabawiyya Musa, the pricing of women's bodies – represented by the dowry – and the inequality in women's salaries and prestige compared to men are some of the great challenges that must be overcome, aiming to break with power and gender relations.

The works discussed in the previous paragraphs were written by Egyptian writers or by women living in Egypt. In other countries, such as Lebanon, other authors also dedicated themselves to autobiographies. One of them is Anbara Salam al-Khalidi (1898-1986), who published several articles in which she advocated the emancipation of women and her autobiography *Jawla fi-l-dhikrayat bayn Lubnan wa Filistin*, in 1978, literally *A journey in the memories between Lebanon and Palestine*, translated into English and published under the title *Memoirs of an Early Arab Feminist: The Life and Activism of Anbara Salam Khalidi* (Anbara Salam Al-Khalidi, 2013). In addition to the chapters in which she recounts her

5. The autobiographies "My Story by My Pen" (*Tarīkhī bi-qalamī*), by Nabawiyya Musa, and "Memoirs of Huda Sha'rawi" (*Mudhakkirāt Hudá Sha'rāwī*), by Huda Sha'rawi, are the subject of study of Vitória Perpétuo Bruno's PhD's degree, currently underway in the Economic History Program at the University of São Paulo. The research addresses the construction of the Egyptian nationalist narrative in the autobiographies of the two authors, in dialogue with the anti-colonial and feminist discourse of the early 20th century.

travels and episodes of her personal life, involving themes such as childhood, family and marriage, the author also deals with the events of her time, such as wars and political movements in Lebanon.

Anbara Salam al-Khalidi's autobiography also includes an analysis of the feminist movement of that time and women's associations. The author lists some pioneers of feminism, to whom she dedicates several pages of her work, addressing their trajectories, their achievements, their publications and her personal relationship with each of them. Some names mentioned are Julia Tu'ma Dimichqiyya, whom she considers her "teacher and friend", Salma Sayigh (1889-1953), Ibtihaj Qaddura (1893-1967), Huda Sha'rawi (1879-1947), 'Adila Bayhum al-Jaza'iri (1900-1975) and Fatima al-Yashruti (1891-1978) (Anbara Salam Al-Khalidi, 1978: 155-161). She also deals with the most recent generations and the importance of the pioneers who preceded them (Al-Khalidi, 1978: 161-164). The author also lists the different forms of women's organizations of her time and highlights their pioneering role of women in uniting in associations that included members from all Arab countries. "*Thus the Arab Union of Women actually preceded the formation of the Arab League [1945]*" (Al-Khalidi, 2013: 114).

In Palestine, the poet Fadwa Tuqan (1917-2003) wrote, in addition to several collections of poetry, her autobiography divided into two parts: *Riḥlah jabalīyah, riḥlah ṣa'bah*), published in 1985, literally *Mountainous Journey, Difficult Journey*, translated into English and published under the title *A mountainous journey: an autobiography*, published in 1990; and *Al-riḥlah al-aṣ'ab*, literally *The Most Difficult Journey*, published in 1993. In the autobiography, especially in the first part, the poet recalls episodes that marked her childhood, such as the day when her family forbade her from attending school, and criticizes the situation in the family house, which she compares to a prison.

> In this house, within its high walls that shut off the harem society from the outside world, where it was buried alive, my oppressed childhood, girlhood and a great part of my youth were spent.
>
> The man dominated family life, as in all homes of our society. The woman had to forget that the word 'no' existed in the language, except when she repeated, 'There is no God but God', in her ablutions and prayers. 'Yes' was the parroted word instilled in her from infancy, to become embedded in her consciousness for the rest of her life (Fadwa Tuqan, 1990: 36).

Fadwa Tuqan describes the challenges she faced in her literary career, discusses the use of pseudonyms such as Dananir (in reference to a renowned poet of ancient Arabic literature) in the beginning of her literary production and the difficulties in becoming a recognized writer. She also mentions the importance of another poet of her time, the Iraqi Nazik al-Mala'ika (1923–2007), a pioneer of Arabic free verse.

Fadwa Tuqan is currently considered one of the leading names in Palestinian poetry. In her poems, the themes related to nationalism and Palestinian liberation are closely linked

to her own personal liberation. The poet reports having left the "harem" in the first half of the 1950s. She also states that, in the same period, the "fall" of Palestine, in reference to the Nakba, which occurred in 1948, coincided with the removal of the *hijab* from the faces of the women of Nablus, who had fought in previous years against the use of the black cloak (Tuqan, 1985: 138).

Thus, autobiographies by women writers such as the Egyptian Nabawiyya Musa, the Lebanese Anbara Salam al-Khalidi and the Palestinian Fadwa Tuqan do not focus only on their personal lives, but also address political and social issues of their time and historical events. The three autobiographies demonstrate the leading role of women in history, literature and the feminist movement.

Pioneering voices in Egypt

Paving the way for other writers and activists in Egypt, authors such as Aisha Taymur and Zaynab Fawwaz were followed by a generation of women who, through their texts and praxis, discussed the female role in the anti-colonial struggle, representing Egypt by simultaneously discussing the influence of Western women and the Islamic religion in society[6]. It is noteworthy that the coexistence of ideas in the sociopolitical scenario represents the fervor of the intellectual life of the Egyptian society, in which the articulations of women faced issues of foreign presence, the rise of nationalism and the strengthening of religious fundamentalism. Therefore, in addition to denouncing the oppressions of their society, these women disputed the public debate.

For traditional historiography, centered on male personalities and their achievements, the beginning of Arab feminism is attributed to the nationalist political movement and concentrates on the figure of a man the myth of pioneering: Qasim Amin (1863-1908), political activist in the Egyptian anti-colonial movement and author of the work *The Liberation of Women* (*Taḥrīr al-mar'ah*), published in 1899. Although Qasim Amin suggested the link between the ideal of national emancipation and the liberation of women, and thus became known as an advocate of freedom for women, his thinking did not suggest a rupture of power relations and gender inequality. On the contrary, the author reinforced gender expectations by attributing three responsibilities to women: "first one to herself, second to her family and third to the society she belongs to" (Muhammad Najeeb Pi, 2015: 40).

It is clear that the narrative dispute was not restricted to the beginning of the 20th century and that the reproduction of the hegemonic male discourse was successful, considering that the pioneering role of the feminist movement was attributed until recent

6. Maria Carolina Gonçalves and Vitória Perpétuo Bruno, authors of this article, offered a course on the subject of feminism and Islam focusing on Egyptian women writers in 2023, as part of an event promoted by the Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR), Brazil. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLyK3iH-7-jB_5DdogW_dBxFuZ6Csal6sG. Accessed: October 4, 2024.

years to a nationalist intellectual man, while the actions of women contemporary to him were little known and disseminated.

Among the Egyptian pioneers, Nabawiyya Musa, mentioned in the previous topic, stands out as one of the writers that was active in the feminist intellectual movement of the first half of the 20th century in Egypt, having published in the newspapers *Al-Farida* and *Al-Fatat* (Elsadda in Ashour; Ghazoul; Reda-Mekdashi, 2007: 112).

A contemporary of Nabawiyya Musa, Huda Sha'rawi (1879-1947) is known as the most influential author of the early 20th century in Egypt. Representing the intellectual and national liberation movement, Huda Sha'rawi symbolized the demand of women from the Egyptian elite for participation in public spaces, both through institutional means and through the diffusion of her ideas through women's journals of the time, such as *L'Egyptienne or Al-Misriyya* (Rula B. Quawas, 2006: 221; Margot Badran, 1988: 13), and the publication of the "Memoirs of Huda Sha'rawi" (*Mudhakkirāt Hudá Sha'rāwī*), in 1981.

Leila Ahmed, in *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate* (Leila Ahmed, 1992: 172), highlights the organizations founded under Huda Sha'rawi's leadership, discussing the several forms of feminist activism that emerged in Egypt in the first two decades of the 20th century: the Society for the Renaissance of Egyptian Women, the Society of Mothers of the Future and the Society of the New Woman, all founded around the 1920s (Ahmed, 1992: 172). In addition to meetings and organizations for women, the agenda of the support network was also one of the demands defended by Arab feminists, given that they "established dispensaries, nursery schools, and charitable associations for women, often also serving boys and men" (Ahmed, 1992: 173).

Huda Sha'rawi's ability to articulate and her political organization have allowed the women's movement in Egypt to gain space in the public debate and occupy spheres of civil society.

As a representative of the upper classes of Egyptian society and having been politically linked to the nationalist *Wafd* party, Huda Sha'rawi maintained a political activism parallel to that of Western feminists. She had contact with Western women – especially French women, such as Eugénie Le Brun and Madame Rushdi – in her visits to European women's literary salons.

In one of her reports on a meeting at the literary salon promoted by Eugénie Le Brun – known as Madame Rushdi –, she discusses the use of the veil and the criticism by French woman related to Islamic clothing:

> Despite my admiration for Egyptian clothing and the magnificence and beauty that the *hijab* brings to women, at the same time I feel sorry for them because it prevents women from progressing and deprives them of the full enjoyment of education and physical exercise, and therefore exposes them to obesity. Furthermore, in Western circles, many people think that the *hijab* is a tool to cover up what is hidden underneath, and therefore many tourists return to their countries with the wrong idea (Huda Sha'rawi, 2013: 65. Our translation).

It is possible to point out some dialogue between Huda Sha'rawi's thought and the currents of European feminism. The meetings in European literary salons and lectures by European women had a clear role in the founding of the Intellectual Association of Egyptian Women, as the author herself states in her memoirs. Moreover, there is a similarity between the agendas advocated by her and the history of the feminist struggle in Europe, such as, the defense of women's education and women's suffrage. Huda Sha'rawi's engagement in the defense of "unveiling", therefore, can be related to her proximity to Western culture and her ideas on the liberation of Egyptian women, as mentioned in her memoirs (Sha'rawi, 2013).

Presenting an alternative discourse to that of Huda Sha'rawi, Malak Hifni Nassef (1886-1918) sought to articulate women's demands with native and Islamic discourse (Ahmed, 1992: 174) in her publications in the newspaper *Al-Jarida*. Among her criticisms of the Westernization process that was taking place in Egypt, Malak Hifni Nassef argued that the advocacy of the removal of the veil represented a concern with fashion, not being associated with the desire for female freedom (Ahmed, 1992: 180). According to her point of view, the use of the veil was not a divine order or an issue of modesty, but rather an imposition by men on female bodies. According to Malak Hifni Nassef, the debate on the veil should reclaim female agency in the face of the misogynistic ideas that sought to determine women's attitudes, opinions and habits, taking the adoption of Western standards as a starting point:

> You [men] to give women a true education and raise them soundly and rectify how people are raised and improve your moral character, so that the nation as a whole is well-educated and well-mannered. Then leave it to her to choose that which is most advantageous to her and to the nation (Malak Hifni Nassef *apud* Ahmed, 1992: 180-181).

It is worth questioning, although it is not surprising, why Malak Hifni Nassef is constantly silenced by historiography. Even in the discourse of contemporary Muslim feminists, who seek to revive female activism in public debates, there are almost no references to her thoughts and publications. However, it is clear that her discourse is uncomfortable, direct and exposes the misogyny in Egyptian society:

> Which path should we take, which group follow? The majority of us women continue to be oppressed by the injustice of man, who in his despotism commands and forbids us so that now we can have no opinion even about ourselves... . If he orders us to veil, we veil, and if he now demands that we unveil, we unveil, and if he wishes us to be educated, we are educated. Is he well intentioned in all he asks of us and on our behalf, or does he wish us ill? There is no doubt that he has erred grievously against us . . . in decreeing our rights in the past and no doubt that he errs grievously... in decreeing our rights now (Nassef *apud* Ahmed, 1992: 181).

As Ahmed points out, even with the rhetoric related to the demands of the middle and upper classes, almost all feminists suffered deprivations and penalties in society, regardless of the tensions surrounding their opinions. From Malak Hifni Nassef to Huda Sha'rawi, feelings of non-belonging, psychological isolation, exclusion, internal exile, and mental breakdown were shared by women who transgressed the feminine conduct and

gender expectations of their time, making it necessary to resort to a network of women who supported not only financially and intellectually, but also physically and emotionally the women involved in the feminist movement (Ahmed, 1992: 187-188).

Feminine, feminist

When discussing feminisms in Arab countries, the complexities begin with the word "feminism" itself in Arabic. In bilingual dictionaries, the words *niswiyya* and *nisā'iyya* can be found as synonyms, referring both to feminism and something feminine, related to women in general.

It was only in the 1990s that the word *niswiyya* became established in Arabic when referring to feminism, replacing the traditionally used word, *nisā'iyya* (Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, 2004: XVIII). Although this choice is not definitive, considering that there is still some ambiguity between these words and the use of the most appropriate terms to deal with feminism in the Arabic language is still being discussed, including the possibility of borrowing words such as "gender" from English and using them in Arabic, the choice of the word *niswiyya* from that decade onwards indicates that the topic was a focus of debate in Arab countries.

It was also in the 1990s that the expression "Islamic feminism" was consolidated in Arab countries (Badran and Cooke, 2004: XVIII). Based on religious texts, mainly the Quran, this discourse called for gender equality and social justice. Badran and Cooke emphasize that the discourse of the Islamic feminist movement of the 1990s did not conflict with secular feminism, but rather established a dialogue.

According to the authors (Badran and Cooke, 2004: XVIII), Arab writers of this period began to openly discuss feminist issues after some resistance to these debates in previous decades. One example is Latifa al-Zayyat (1923-1996), who reflects on her identity as woman, Egyptian and writer:

> As for my creative works, they have my mark as a woman and as a historical and social product of a specific society at a certain period of its evolution, and they have my mark as this individual woman that I am [...]
>
> Our creative writings, therefore, are different from the writings of the man who belongs to the same society to which I belong. They may be equivalent, superior or inferior artistically, but in all cases, they are different. So why was it difficult for us to recognize this difference? And why did I oppose and keep opposing any attempt to describe my creative works as women's literature or feminist literature? (Latifa Al-Zayyat, 1996: 18. Our translation).

Like other Arab women writers, Latifa al-Zayyat says she avoided having her work related to her gender due to the negative connotations surrounding women writing in Arab literary circles. According to Hoda Elsadda (2012: 152), several negative ideas were attributed to the word *niswiyya* or "feminist" in Arabic, such as "masculinized women,"

"cultural traitors," "agents of the West," and "man-hating" women; and to the expression "women's literature," which was used to suggest a "lesser form of literature" in opposition to mainstream literature. This perception would explain, according to the author, why women writers rejected the aforementioned terms for decades.

In Egyptian literary circles, Hoda Elsadda (2012: 145-146; 153) also points out expressions that were used in a negative way in reference to female writings by younger generations, especially from the 1990s onwards, such as "girls", "girls' writing" and "girls write their bodies", expressions that circulated widely in the media and in literary magazines.

Given these criticisms, it is not surprising that some Arab women writers have refused to label their ideas and works as feminist. This rejection is also related to the way these writers are presented, translated, studied and published in other countries, often stressing preconceived ideas about their writing as women from the Arab world and the Islamic world.

Reception of Arabic literature written by women

Regarding the publication of Arabic literature written by women and translated in the West, Amal Amireh (1996) argues that the reception of these books has historically been marked by previously established conceptions about the Arab world and Islam. The publication of these texts often highlights themes and stereotypes that are not central to the works but have the potential to attract the attention of the readers, such as the veil, the "harem" and other elements related to Muslim women.

A relevant example is that of the Egyptian writer Nawal El-Saadawi (1931-2021), considered today one of the most distinguished and prominent Arab feminist writers. The author published short stories, novels, articles, essays and memoirs and dealt with themes such as sexuality, oppression and psychology involving Arab women. Due to her political opinions, she was arrested in 1981 during the government of Anwar al-Sadat, along with other Egyptian intellectuals, and was threatened by Islamic fundamentalist groups (Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W. Sunderman and Therese Saliba, 2002: 33). In general, the reception of her work in Arab countries stimulated debates, but also controversies.

When addressing these controversies, it is important to consider the way in which Nawal El-Saadawi's work was translated and published in other countries until recently, often emphasizing stereotypes related to Islam. One example is the work *Al-wajh al-ʿārī lilmarʾat al-ʿarabiyya*, literally *The Naked Face of the Arab Woman*, published in Arabic 1977. The translation of the title into English, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, does not correspond literally to the title mentioned above. Although Eve is a figure discussed by Nawal El-Saadawi in the book, the author also deals with other female figures in history and mythology, such as Isis, one of the deities of Ancient Egypt. Therefore, we argue that the emphasis on the image of Eve in the title is not justified in terms of literary translation.

Furthermore, it is noticeable that entire chapters were deleted or modified in the English translation, changing greatly the content of the original work. As for the cover, in the 2007 edition by Zed Books (Nawal El-Saadawi, 2007), it is possible to observe the emphasis given to the image of the Muslim woman with the veil, revealing only her eyes, an issue that is not central to the work. The covers of the Arabic editions, on the other hand, have illustrations of women who do not have features that identify them as Muslim, and one of the covers has a picture of the author.

It is noteworthy about the translation into English mentioned above (the first edition was published in 1980) that it was used by other translators around the world. The translation into Portuguese published in Brazil (Nawal El-Saadawi, 2002), *A face oculta de Eva: as mulheres do mundo árabe*, translates the title from English, not from Arabic. The Brazilian translation also follows the translation into English regarding the content, deleting and changing entire chapters, as mentioned above, and regarding the cover, which has a Muslim woman with the veil over her entire face, with the exception of her eyes.

This book is just one example among many works by Arab women that have undergone significant changes in translation and have been published in a way that highlights stereotypes attributed to Islam and the Arab world in general. These publications greatly influence the reception of these books and their authors.

The representation of Muslim women in Western media

In addition to the examples that can be pointed out in the field of literature, as discussed in the previous topic, the representation of women in the media also stands out. Western media often portrays women of the Islamic context from an orientalist perspective, highlighting Western stereotypes and expectations about Muslim women.

One example is the image of Afghan Bibi Aisha, on the cover of a 2010 issue of the American magazine Time.[7] In the picture, by South African photographer Jodi Bieber, Bibi Aisha appears wearing the veil, which carries the symbolism of her religion, her nose cut off after an act of violence committed by her husband.

Lila Abu-Lughod, in her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Lila Abu-Lughod, 2013), analyzes the construction of the narrative in the cover of this magazine and, in doing so, states that the juxtaposition of the photograph and the headline – "What happens if we leave Afghanistan?" – suggests that Muslim women would always be seen as victims (Abu-Lughod, 2013: 27). The photograph taken by Jodi Bieber would then reinforce the Western idea that women who find themselves in contexts of different cultures and religions would need to be saved from oppression.

7. The image is available at: BAKER, Aryn. Afghan Women and the Return of the Taliban. 2010. https://time.com/6258565/afghan-women-taliban-return-time-cover-2010/. Accessed: October 4, 2024.

It is noticeable the role of photography in constructing and reinforcing the image of Muslim women as victims and, therefore, the image of the West as their savior. In this context, in *On Photography*, Susan Sontag (2005) pointed out the way in which the photographer, or whoever is in "another reality", projects a value of inferiority onto the other: "Social misery has inspired the comfortably-off with the urge to take pictures, the gentlest of predations, in order to document a hidden reality, that is, a reality hidden from them" (Sontag, 2005: 42).

In this regard, Abu-Lughod divides the world between Western culture and Eastern culture, recreating and reinforcing an "imaginative geography", and in this scenario, the Western media assumes the role of reinforcing the idea that Muslim women "shuffle around silently in burqas" (Abu-Lughod, 2013: 32).

Although Abu-Lughod's analysis focuses on the 2010 cover of Time magazine, a similar fact can be observed 25 years earlier, corroborating the author's criticism of the narrative constructed by the media. Another Afghan girl was also depicted on the cover of an American magazine: National Geographic, in the issue published in June 1985. Sharbat Gula became recognized for the picture on the cover of the magazine, in which her green eyes stand out. The image comes with words that link her look to the feeling of fear attributed to Afghan refugees[8]. The photograph was taken by Steve McCurry during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, when Sharbat Gula fled her home country and took refuge in Pakistan. It is concluded, once again, that images like this feed the idea that Muslim women need to be saved. Two decades before Lila Abu-Lughod debated the issue of the West's salvation of Muslim women, Leila Ahmed pointed out that Islamic practices towards women have always been part of the European colonizing narrative, marked by an idea of Islam's otherness and inferiority (Ahmed, 1992: 149).

In conclusion, the Western media's approach to Muslim women reinforces the idea that these women need salvation, as debated in the previous paragraphs. The orientalist point of view stands out both in the images – such as the covers of the magazines abovementioned – and in the texts, which emphasize the ideas conceived in the West about Islam and Muslim women.

Conclusion

This article discussed some specificities of feminism in the Arab context and the debates surrounding the topic, focusing on the 20th century. A series of negative ideas were attributed to the word "feminism" in Arab countries, which may explain the rejection of this term in literary circles throughout that century.

8. The image is available at: NATIONAL Geographic Magazine: 50 Years of Covers. https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/national-geographic-magazine-50-years-of-covers. Accessed: October 4, 2024.

The article addressed feminism in Arab and Islamic world, notably Egypt, and mentioned pioneers such as Aisha Taymur, Zaynab Fawwaz, Nabawiyya Musa, Huda Sha'rawi and Malak Hifni Nassef. Many other women writers in Arab countries have not enjoyed the same visibility. These authors, both the ones mentioned in studies and anthologies and the less known ones, still lack in-depth studies and publications.

Egyptian writer Nawal El-Saadawi, on the other hand, is renowned not only in Egypt and in Arab countries in general; her work is also known in several countries and has been translated into many languages. When it comes to the publication of her books, however, there are examples of translations that have significantly changed both the content and the title, in addition to the cover. These changes greatly affect the reception of her work.

Several other women writers and their works are published emphasizing orientalist stereotypes when they are translated into other languages. The covers of these books often highlight themes such as the "harem" and the veil in works that sometimes do not have these elements among the main themes. Literary criticism often reduces women writers to "oppressed" women or, on the contrary, women who "dared" to write despite the conditions in which they live, instead of discussing their works as literature.

The media also broadcasts stereotypes about Muslim women and Islam, contributing to spreading an orientalist image of these women as "victims" in need of "salvation".

Therefore, it is necessary to reflect on the contexts of reception and the interests involved in publishing these writers and their works; and on the content related to Arab and Muslim women that is disseminated by publishers and the media.

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