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Scheherazade as a Symbol to Arabic Feminism

Like western feminism the conceptual conscience known as \*Arabic feminism is avid with unique, separate, and controversial ideas. These ideas are the result of national, economic, religious, and ethnic borders, as well as an ancient culture contrasted with the modern Arab world constantly bombarded by foreign powers. For the last one hundred years or perhaps even longer, the unique world of Arab feminists have taken on one surprisingly unify symbol. This symbol displays empowerment and proves itself in a uniquely Arab way. It stands as a symbol of independence for Arab women as separate from their male counter parts as well as the western world. Scheherazade, the female storyteller from the frame story of “One Thousand and One Nights” stands as a perfect symbol of Arab feminism in not only fulfilling a symbolic need but also accurately displaying the method at which Arab women have worked to empower themselves.

To tackle the idea of a need for this sort of symbol I believe a certain framework of Arabic feminism needs to be established. In this sense I believe an appropriate example would be the beginnings of contemporary Egyptian Feminism. I draw on this sample out of the vast world of Arabic feminism for three reasons; its history is convenient to conceptualize, it is often seen as the first movement to draw a western eye, and it is a subject that I have some grasp over.

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Contemporary Egyptian Feminism is often said to have had a historical watershed in the French occupation of Egypt dating 1798-1801. During this time The sight of French women and their roles influenced many Egyptian women, who also wanted to associate themselves with French men for their sense of courtship. Egyptian women began to unveil as well as attend social functions, romances between French men and Egyptian women were not un-common and many notables married accordingly.

These actions were described as a social revolution for women in that they separated themselves from Egyptian men by revolting against them rather then the occupying French.

Having only lasted three years, the occupation ended, and the reaction to the women who had chosen to westernize themselves was harsh. Hawa and Zainab were both upper class women who were famously westernized during this time. Their well-recorded cases display the harshness in which the Egyptian culture responded to the westernization of women. Zeinab, disowned and un-protected by her father had her neck broken by authorities. Hawa, having left her husband for a French man, was strangled by her husband who had official permission to do so.

I believe this harsh response that many women suffered during this time was not purely an example of cultural male oppression over women. It also showed a cultural pride that was not lenient towards those who sided with foreign occupiers. This pride may have led to misguided actions in this case, but it is the same pride that truly formulates what would become Egyptian Feminism.

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After the French occupation Egypt continued on a trend that separated them from the rest of the Ottoman empire. This separation lead to a push to westernize the country by its leaders, a push that made some advances in education as well as advancements in economics and technology such as a heavy use of the printing press. Political situations as well as a time of British occupation that left Egyptians without a political forum led to a quickly growing press that flourished a culture of mass media, a culture that women asserted themselves in.

At first this women’s writing culture was filled by Libyan immigrants that concerned themselves more with the issues of western women. As the occupation of Egypt by Britain began to grow sour around the time of the First World War and nationalism in the country grew, Egyptian consumers no longer accepted western concerns. Nationalism had hit the country, and this moved Egyptian women writers to establish a powerful culture of journals that led to several things. First, an intellectual emergence of women unique to Egyptian concerns, a more accepted feminine voice in politics, a literary culture for Egyptian women was catalyzed and writings of all forms became more common, and a foundation for later feminist movements that would aid Egypt’s revolt from Britain after the great war was established.

So Egyptian Feminism had established itself as a separate entity in the context of nationalism. The women involved within this movement were just as concerned and often even more concerned with Egyptian pride in contrast to the western world then they were with their feminism. This sort of regional pride

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piercing feminism is not unique to Egypt. Arab feminism includes a great deal of women who wish to abolish a very western idea that displays Arab women as hopelessly oppressed and in need of intervention by the developed world. While it is easy to argue that western women have had a far better share of equality, it is untrue that any Arab women with the ability to call herself a feminist desires what western women call feminism. These women have a great deal of pride in their fight to establish their own cultural feminism.

Another important element to Arab feminism is of course Islam. The element of Islam in Arab feminism is insanely vast, often misunderstood, and controversial. What I believe is most important to note in this essay is that there is a prevailing belief by Arab feminist that Islam most be part of their movement. While many Arab women of course disagree with this, and those that due agree with it argue the details. It is important to understand that Arabs in general make great attempts to defend the points of Islam against the often backwards understanding westerners have towards it. Some western governments even use these bad understanding politically. Such as, when Britain claimed that the Egyptian revolution in 1919 was merely the Muslim majority oppressing the minority groups, a claim that resulted in considerable religious unity in Egypt during that time.

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Being Muslim themselves and feeling the need for it to be an element of their unique Arab feminism, Arab writers often point to what they see as more accurate interpretations of the Koran that defend their rights as a woman. In contrast with using Islam to defend feminism from what some see as Islamic tradition, Islamic

Feminists are often concerned with defending Islam from western contemporaries, and even western feminist movements.  
 I hope that I have established a few things about general Arab feminism. First of all, Arabic feminism is not westernization. It is a unique entity that believes in strong cultural, historical, or national pride. Arabic feminism has strong roots in literature and language in general. Arab feminist as a general whole believe in the inclusion of Islam, or at least respect for the faith, in their form of feminism. These elements all factor into a particular need when searching for a symbol of Arab feminism. Scheherazade, the fictional story teller from “One Thousand and One Nights” fits this role beautifully.

“One Thousand and One” nights, while drawing from many sources, is said to have been primarily created during the Islamic Golden Age, in particular during the age of the Persian style Caliphate that allowed for the type of fantastical story telling of this collection. This history allows the use of the stories character Scheherazade to symbolize several things. First of all that in its prime, and during a time where feminism as a concept had little meaning some 1200 years ago, this Islamic era still allowed, and glorified the existence of strong women character. In this way a feminist who believes in Islam can make a generalized image that shows Islam as a

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faith that can coincide with the idea of feminism, or at least that sort of woman. This figurative feminist may want to state that feminism had all ready been an element of Islamic culture for some time.

Beyond being a story that revels in it’s Islamic, Arab, and Persian culture. The frame story itself that includes Scheherazade can symbolize a great deal for an Arab feminist.

The frame story for “One thousand and One Nights” is that the Scheherazade is the daughter of the Vizier to the king, Shahrayar. The king having been sexually betrayed by his first queen began taking on a new virgin every night only to have her executed the following morning. Scheherazade informs her father that she wishes to be the next virgin to spend the night with the king. Yet, she does not fall victim to the king’s violence, but instead subdues him completely by using her incredibly intellect and education to spend one thousand and one nights weaving stories for him.

There are some great Islamic symbols here. Firstly, by choosing to spend the night with the king she is committing a sort of Jihad, putting herself at a nearly sacrificial risk of death. This is a great example for a feminist to use in defense of her movement to other Muslims. Secondly as a well educated women, with a great deal of knowledge of cultural background she is able to stifle the foolishness of her male counterpart. This not only points to the literary background and the often storytelling style of rebellion of Arabic feminism, or the need for women’s

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education, but also points to Arab feminist using their own culture, their own backgrounds to win their fight rather then drawing from foreign ideas.

To return to history I would like to note another symbol of Arabic Feminism. During Egyptian’s revolution from Britain a prominent feminine figure arose that not only worked diligently to aid Egyptian feminism but greatly added Egypt as a whole during that time of revolution.

Huda Shaawari was a tactful, intelligent, and educated woman. In the same regard as the fictional character Scheherazade she used these things and her language to commit great deeds. In fact I could note several political situations in which she used her intellect to delay or completely prevent wrong moves by her male counterparts for the greater good of her people, while putting herself at risk, actions very much in line with Scheherazade.

What I find most interesting though, in comparing Huda Shaawari to this image of Scheherazade. Is that Huda Shaawari wrote an autobiography. This was unique for her time for several reasons. Firstly half of the autobiography is about the very private harem life of her time. This harem life had never been truthfully written on before, and had often been fantasized about by westerners. Shaawari though, opened this world up and explained the reality of the life-style, of its struggle, and its inclusion of intelligent, strong women.

Secondly, even though Huda Shaawari entered the public scene during a time when a public literary block of women was accepted, these writers very seldom

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admitted to even writing their own work. By writing a full on autobiography Shaawari not only laid claim to he work but also made it incredibly private.

This idea represented by Shaawari to turn of attention unto the woman as not just a storyteller but as a character seems to go well with the idea that Scheherazade has been taken on as a symbol of Arab feminism. That now the focus is not on the stories she tells, but the story that she is. The idea may be that the Arab world has all ready had strong women as an irremovable part of its culture, but the time to acknowledge this element has come. This concept not only defends feminism against the culture of the Middle East, but also defends Arab culture in the eyes of westerners. In essence Arab women are neither helplessly oppressed nor the members of fantastical harems. They are real struggling women with powerful minds and that their identity of strength is older then most prevailing western cultures.

The incredibly vast concept of Arab feminism can be difficult if not impossible to summarize. Like our own understanding of western feminism this unique movement has a vast arsenal of differing ideas and backgrounds. Yet among all of this, a symbol almost as old as Islam itself has proven to be a powerful and an incredibly appropriate symbol to what Arabic feminism is. Scheherazade represents Arabic feminism as a separate entity from western ideas as well as a part of both Arabic and Islamic culture that promotes the idea of strong women using their intellect and their language for the greater good.

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\*I use the term Arabic Feminism to encompass Islamic feminism as well as the feminist movements taking place in Persian areas such as Iran.