Race & Class
http://rac.sagepub.com/

Arab and Arab-American Feminisms: gender, violence, and belonging

Rosemary Sayigh

Race Class 2012 54: 108
DOI: 10.1177/0306396812455587

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://rac.sagepub.com/content/54/2/108

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
INSTITUTE OF RACE RELATIONS
Institute of Race Relations

Additional services and information for *Race & Class* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://rac.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://rac.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> Version of Record - Sep 18, 2012

What is This?

Downloaded from rac.sagepub.com at Univ of Illinois at Chicago Library on December 6, 2014

Reviews

RACE & CLASS
SAGE
Los Angeles,
London,
New Delhi,
Singapore,
Washington DC

Arab and Arab-American Feminisms: gender, violence, and belonging
Edited by RABAB ABDULHADI, EVELYN ALSULTANY and NADINE NABER (Syracuse, CA, Syracuse University Press, 2011), 408 pp. £40.50.

Arab and Arab-American Feminisms is an explosively oppositional book that crosses sanctified boundaries of nationality, religion, sect, ethnicity, class and sexuality to challenge America's 'war on terror' in both its external and internal forms. The book was conceived in the aftermath of 9/11, when American hostility towards Arabs and Muslims was being made manifest in actions as weird as a school principal stripping a 16-year-old schoolgirl of her 'Free Palestine' t-shirt and as crude as the message 'Get the f*** out of the USA … NOW!!!!', sent to scholars who denounced the Israeli war on Gaza. The editors have brought together a cross-section of articulate women – academics, poets, community activists, performance artists, fiction writers – to tell their experiences of silencing and 'speaking back'. These personal narratives are held together by a cogent historical critique of American racism and a structure that highlights themes such as 'Living with/in empire', 'Activist communities' and 'Home and homelands'.

The larger political and cultural framework is set by the editors in their introduction and by Mervat Hatem, a Harvard scholar, who traces historic changes in Arab and Muslim organising in the US, especially the impact of 9/11 and the Patriot Act. She points to the growing alliance, after Bandung, between Arab and African Americans as 'advocates of anti-colonialism and a new world order that challenged white supremacy'. Up to the rise of the Nation of Islam, African Americans had mainly supported Israel, but this changed with Arab Americans campaigning for Jesse Jackson in 1984. As a result of 9/11, Arab Americans paid more attention to African and Latino communities who, like them, were subject to racial profiling. Arab feminists' participation in these historic moments made them increasingly aware of the racism in American perceptions of their 'homelands', their local communities and ultimately

Race & Class
Copyright © 2012 Institute of Race Relations, Vol. 54(2): 108–118
10.1177/0306396812455587 http://rac.sagepub.com

Downloaded from rac.sagepub.com at Univ of Illinois at Chicago Library on December 6, 2014

themselves. The editors pay homage to the 'cumulative contributions' of their predecessors, yet this book marks a sea change in Arab women's reactions to the US. They have moved from defensiveness to analysis, irony, community action and alliance building. From being mired in the apparent contradiction between feminism and 'belonging' that Leila Ahmed expressed in her famous 1982 essay, 'Western ethnocentrism and perceptions of the harem', they are connecting the two through oppositional critique and action.

The editors affirm that American Arabo- and Islamophobia is not gender specific and that the women of black, Native American and Latino minorities have been similarly silenced. Yet, there is a sense in which, historically, Arab and Muslim women have, within the western imaginary, come to signify passive victims of Arab/Muslim patriarchy, justifying colonialism and military aggression. Mohja Kahf mocks the 'victim' stereotype, recently repackaged by neo-Orientalists: 'In the Victim stereotype, the Muslim woman is chained to a harem lattice being beaten, raped, murdered for honor, or fill in your choice of oppression here, by the Muslim father, husband, imam or fill in your choice of harem master, while Islam, the tribe, her society, and so on look on approvingly: "the West" rides up on a white horse and rescues her; fade to The End.' While 'real' Arab/Muslim women are rendered invisible through stereotyping, symbolically they are also 'hypervisible' as the 'face' of their communities, proclaiming their resistance to 'rescue' through their dress, speech and activism.

Many of the contributors to *Arab and Arab-American Feminisms* are established names in Arab American literature, while others (no less interesting) are still relatively unknown. The book's inclusions point to groups and categories resistant to state or community pressures to 'box' them in. A Just Peace Seder in Toronto brings Jews and Palestinians together in condemning violence; a Moroccan Jewish woman writes of identifying with 'other Jews, with other Arabs, with African, with Mediterranean peoples'. Traditional Arab feminist attachment to normative sexuality is challenged by inclusions such as Happy Hyder, a performance artist and dyke of Arab descent. A working-class, lesbian Palestinian woman writes of sex, exile and motherhood. Such diversity proclaims an advance from the earlier response of 'showcasing', when Arab women invested energy in arguing Americans out of their stereotypes, or in living them down, to the more robust methods of cultural critique, activism and alliance building.

A common assumption by Americans, especially American feminists, is that Arab women have found liberation, in the US, from 'patriarchal' communities at home. Yet, for most, exile in the 'land of the free' has brought pain, frustration and insecurity rather than liberation. Rabab Abdulhadi finds 'home' in New York on the day of 9/11 as insecure as 'home' in West Bank Nablus. The lesbian Palestinian mother is greeted by a message on her doorstep: 'arab dyke go back to the desert where you come from you whore'. Deena al-Adib's home in San

Downloaded from rac.sagepub.com at Univ of Illinois at Chicago Library on December 6, 2014

Francisco is searched by local vigilantes. Zeina Zaateri finds the only space of security from pervasive American violence in anti-war and feminist movements. American wars in areas that are home for Arab and Muslim women provoke a continual bleeding: the poet Dunya Mikhail writes of watching the war on Iraq: 'I search you on the Internet / I distinguish you / Grave by grave / Skull by skull / Bone by bone.' And Palestinian poet Suheir Hammad expresses her inability to write about Abu Ghraib: 'Desperate for words I can write / So I can keep from becoming something hard and unforgiving.'

The contributors to this volume accumulate evidence of the victim stereotype's pervasiveness in the American public at large and in universities. Noura Erakat is mistaken for a Latina by a fellow Columbia law student because she has 'attitude' and, thus, contradicts the passive Arab woman image. A bar tender in Atlanta tells Amira Jarmakani that 'Arab feminism' is an oxymoron. Mona El-Ghobashy's headscarf exposes her to comments from strangers, including assumptions that she cannot read. The publishers of Susan Darraj's book about Arab American women writers impose a cover design in which 'a woman's eyes gaze out at the viewer from between the narrow slits of her black face veil'. Nada Elia recalls that the first edition of *This Bridge Called My Back* didn't contain a single Arab woman's voice and how the organisers of a conference on collective traumas excluded her because she criticised their refusal to look beyond Europe and the Nazi Holocaust. The editors protest the absence of Arab American voices from academic conferences: 'Not only were our voices rarely heard at these academic gatherings but our collective perspectives were virtually absent from the very intellectual fields and their intersections such as American studies, Middle East studies, US ethnic studies, and gender studies', adding that: 'We were repeatedly forced to fit the varied, rich, and complex lives of Arab and Muslim women into limited stereotypical boxes' (p. xxviii). Zeina Zaateri finds bias within the university worse than outside it: 'No matter what events we are organizing as Arab feminists, we can always count on an audience that would ask us questions about female genital mutilation and honor killings' (p. 72).

Palestine is central to Arab women's alienation – and activism – in the US. The editors note 'the targeting and smearing of Arab and Arab American feminists … who publicly support justice for Palestine'. Noura Erakat recalls how effectively the smear of anti-Semitism was used to shackle activism around Palestine at Berkeley Law School. Therese Saliba explains vicious American reactions to Rachel Corrie's murder in Gaza as the sign that, for them, 'She has become Palestinian'. Rabab Abdulhadi and Sherene Seikaly, both Palestinian, write about the impossibility of finding a place where they are 'homed'. Zeina Zaateri describes how pro-Palestinian activism was repressed across the board, in her university, by an administration that claimed it would have 'no problems welcoming … a member of the Ku Klux Klan'. The poet Suheir Hammad asks: 'Aaaaggh, ya Phalesteen / What is it about us that they hate so much? / This face? These eyes? This obstinate refusal to die?' (p. 5).

Downloaded from rac.sagepub.com at Univ of Illinois at Chicago Library on December 6, 2014

But it is in three books about Palestinian women 'suicide bombers', reviewed here by Amal Amireh, that we meet American anti-Arabism and anti-Muslimism in its form as 'feminist' scholarship. Rather than attempting a serious study of the motivations of the *ishtishhadeyat* (women martyrs), these writers (Andrea Dworkin, Robin Morgan and Barbara Victor) air pseudo-theories about Arab Palestinian society: 'death by culture', 'the demon lover', 'the sexuality of terrorism', 'victim of patriarchal society'. All three authors claim to have visited Palestine, yet their lack of professionalism is shown up by mistranslation, hypothetical evidence and barely disguised racism. Dworkin claims, without evidence, that the suicide bombers are victims of rape or that they are 'the best and brightest', for whom suicide is the only way 'to rise up in a land where women are lower than animals'. Morgan expresses a quasi-racist horror of the body of the Palestinian mother: 'This specter has a protruding belly … smaller forms cling leechlike to every limb like growths on flesh.' Victor's book is a pure example of anti-Arab 'faction', 'full of egregious factual errors, unsubstantiated claims, distortions, and suspicious evidence'. Although the *ishtishhadeyat* explode the myth of Arab/Muslim women as 'docile bodies', these self-styled feminist authors preserve the myth, stripping Arab women of political consciousness, altruism and agency. Yet, Janaan Attia (self-defined as woman, Copt, African, Arab, queer), who works as a youth organiser and artist, notes that 'the growing awareness about Palestine in youth communities has been a successful tool in building the connectedness of oppressions – as in the similarities between the police in Oakland and IDF … in Palestine'.

Betty Friedan's directive to Nawal Saadawi, 'Please don't bring up Palestine here. This is a woman's conference', is part of the story of mainstream American feminism and its buying into 'imperialist feminism'. The feminist majority's support for America's war against Afghanistan forms another chapter. As Amira Jarmakani points out, 'the military-imperialist and feminist-imperialist stances collude to reify stereotypical notions of Arab and Muslim womanhood as monolithically oppressed', adding that, 'this common discursive framework does violence to the very women it purports to represent'. It not only obscures the work that Arab and Muslim women are doing to advance women's rights in their own communities, it also makes this work harder by offering arguments to conservatives who identify campaigns for gender change with imperialist strategies to undermine the Islamic order.

The imperialist politics that connect women of colour and offer a basis for alliance between them is a central theme of this book. Radical feminist analysis bypasses cultural 'difference' as an explanation of American racism by underlining the intersection between racism, sexism and imperialism. In their introduction, the editors quote Andrea Smith in the *INCITE Anthology*, who analyses differences in the oppression of women of Native American, black and coloured immigrant origin as part of a 'racial logic' that 'accommodates imperialist power in different temporal and spatial contexts'. Thus, current American anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism is specific only as part of 'US-led military, political, and

Downloaded from rac.sagepub.com at Univ of Illinois at Chicago Library on December 6, 2014

economic expansion in the Arab world and other Muslim-majority countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran'. Breaking out of the racial/ethnic 'boxes' that American categories set them in, and evolving a politics of oppositional activism, has proved to be a liberating moment for Arab American feminists.

Several contributors are community activists, and it is here that one sees most clearly the kinds of border crossing that challenge American categories, on the one hand, and local community control of women, on the other. Building alliances between Muslim and Christian Arabs, between Arab and East Asian Muslims, between feminists, queers and transgendered people, sharpens awareness of the connections between imperialism's internal and external violence and reinforces anti-war voices. Some, like Anan Amery, use museum work to build bridges between Arab Americans, Latino/as, African Americans and other minorities. Janaan Attia works with 'minority' youth on Boalian theatre and helps them to organise. Deena al-Adeeb (an installation artist and Shi'ite of Iranian descent from Iraq) has worked against sanctions, the war against Iraq, Zionism and with the Women of Colour Resource Center, work that has made her realise the need 'to radically shift the existing framework in order to center all marginalized narratives and peoples'. For the contributors to *Arab and Arab-American Feminisms*, activism and analysis feed into and enrich each other.

Divisions between Arab feminists are not overlooked. The post-9/11 targeting of women in Muslim dress was one cause of the rise of a specifically Muslim feminism, expressed, for example, in Hijab Days on university campuses. This reversed a long-term hegemony of secularism and Arab nationalism over Arab American feminism. The *muhajibat* were opposed not only by secular feminists, but also by conservatives in their own communities, hostile to the politicisation of Islamic dress. Hatem's reflections on how the struggle between a secular and Islamic feminism affected her personally, when hair loss forced her to wear a head scarf to a World Bank conference, remind us once more of the intense focus on dress that makes Arab and Muslim women both hypervisible and invisible, as well as dividing them along complex dress-code lines.

It is indicative of a new trend in US politics that, in June 2011, soon after the publication of *Arab and Arab-American Feminisms*, a delegation of American women of colour – scholars, activists and artists – made their first visit to Occupied Palestine. On their return, they issued a call to action for Palestine: 'As indigenous and women of color feminists involved in multiple social justice struggles, we sought to affirm our association with the growing international movement for a free Palestine.' Although Zionists in America are counter-attacking with sponsored visits to Israel for black and Hispanic youth, the selling out of the first issue of *Arab and Arab-American Feminisms* within six months of publication suggests that it has hit a vein of interest in 'outsider' politics in a large sector of the American reading public.

Beirut ROSEMARY SAYIGH

Downloaded from rac.sagepub.com at Univ of Illinois at Chicago Library on December 6, 2014