Women at the Crossroads of Nationhood: Gender, Nationalism and Patriarchy in Post-colonial Algeria and Egypt

النساء عند مفترق الطرق في مسيرة الوطنية: النوع الاجتماعي، القومية والهيمنة الذكورية في الجزائر ومصر ما بعد الاستعمار

Dr Amel KHIREDDINE♣

Dr Karima BOUHARROUR ♦

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Abstract:

Throughout history, Arab male nationalists have formulated a limited gendered conception of national identity wherein women are relegated to an inferior position. This paper is an attempt to shed light on the pejorative situation of Arab women during and after Western colonisation, represented here by Algerian and Egyptian women. Algerian women, whose role proved decisive in liberating their country, found themselves victims of their former male veterans who urged them to peacefully return to the household after decolonisation. With the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the 1980s and the ensuing Black Decade, the situation of Algerian women, in a tremendously patriarchal oppressive society, further deteriorated. The situation of the

♣ **M'hamed Bougara University of Boumerdes**.
a.khireddine@univ-boumerdes.dz

♦ **M'hamed Bougara University of Boumerdes**.
k.bouharrour@univ-boumerdes.dz

Egyptian women was no better. While being fervent participants in the making of the Egyptian nation, Egyptian women fell under the subjugation of the patriarch who denied them all rights of equality both in the private and public spheres, following independence.

Keywords: Western colonisation; Arab women; patriarchy; Algeria; Egypt.

ملخص:

على مر التاريخ، صاغ القوميون العرب الذكور مفهومًا محدودًا للهوية الوطنية قائمًا على أساس جندري، يُنظر فيه إلى المرأة على أنها أدنى منزلة. تُحاول هذه الورقة تسليط الضوء على الوضع المهين للمرأة العربية خلال الاستعمار الغربي وبعده، والممثل هنا بالنساء الجزائريات والمصريات. وجد النساء الجزائريات، اللواتي كان دورهن حاسمًا في تحرير بلادهن، أنفسهن ضحايا لمحاربيهن القدامى الذين حثّوهن على العودة بسلام إلى المنزل بعد انتهاء الاستعمار. مع صعود الأصولية الإسلامية في ثمانينيات القرن الماضي وما تلاه من "العقد الأسود"، تدهور وضع المرأة الجزائرية، في مجتمع ذكوري قمعي للغاية. ولم يكن وضع المرأة المصرية أفضل حالًا. فبينما كانت المرأة المصرية مشاركةً فاعلةً في بناء الأمة المصرية، وقعت تحت نير الأب الذكوري الذي حرمها من جميع حقوق المساواة في المجالين الخاص والعام، بعد الاستقلال.

كلمات مفتاحية: الاستعمار الغربي؛ المرأة العربية؛ النظام الذكوري؛ الجزائر؛ مصر.

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Corresponding author: Amel KHIREDDINE*:* a.khireddine@univ-boumerdes.dz

1. Introduction

All over history, Arab male nationalists have stressed a homogeneous “pure” formulation of national identity which tended to revolve around Arabness and Islam with a dogged determination to exclude the Western “Other”. Such a limited

conception proves to be a gendered one since Arab women are consigned to a second-rate position. Algerian and Egyptian women are a case in point. Indeed, they endured a derogatory situation both during and after the Western colonisation of their countries.

The concept of the family as the bastion of the nation where women were assigned the role of producing the new citizens of the national community was profoundly emphasised during the colonial time by Algerian and Egyptian nationalists. The family was represented as a haven of "authentic" values and woman as the guardian of those values against colonial influences (Joseph, 2003, p. 520). Albeit assigned with the mission of producing the next generation to their nations, Algerian and Egyptian women played an indisputable role in fighting the Western intruder out of their lands. They were vehement nationalists in the public arena side by side with their male compatriots. However, in a massively post-independent patriarchal society, Algerian and Egyptian women found themselves back to their private dominion. As such, this paper discusses first the situation of Algerian women in the colonial and post-colonial eras with a close focus on their active role in the process of decolonisation as well as the frustration they felt thereafter. Second, the paper debunks the situation of Egyptian women in confronting the Western Other during the colonial time and the Eastern male "Other" (the patriarch) after colonisation.

2. Algerian Women during and after French Colonisation

In spite of the fact that many had access to the warring terrains, Algerian women were regarded by nationalists as repositories of the traditional culture and national identity within

the context of standing up to colonial dominance (Joseph, 2011, p. 28). In this sense, while a small category of women were accepted as fighters, the vast majority were encouraged to support the cause of national liberation through "patriotic motherhood": being good wives and mothers who would teach their sons to value religion and "preserve traditional moral standards" (Hélie-Lucas, 1999, p. 108). The private space then was seen as the extreme fortress of the nation's true identity. Daniele Djamila Amrane-Minne, who had interviews with women fighters in the Algerian liberation struggle in *Des Femmes dans la guerre d'Algérie* (*Algerian Women in the War*, 1991), states that 11000 Algerian women were active partakers in the revolution, and that 2000 women were in the armed wing of the Algerian resistance (Kutschera, 1996, pp.40-41). Moreover, she highlights the role of women as guardians of tradition by stating that their chief responsibility before the revolution revolved around marriage.

In 1954, when the war broke out, women were largely banned from public life. Only some were allowed to attend schools and hold jobs and they had no voting rights (Amrane-Minne, 1999, p.62). Amrane describes the crucial and perilous tasks carried out by Algerian women on a daily basis, risking torture or death if they were caught. In *A Dying Colonialism* (1994), Fanon discusses the role of Algerian women in the resistance struggle. He traces the pivotal part women played in the Revolution and the integrity with which the "committed Algerian woman learns her role [. . .] and her revolutionary mission instinctively" (50). Algerian women's role, from bomb placement to offering asylum to combatants, is probed in immense detail, with both shocking and inspiring anecdotes. Fanon attributes this role to a conscious FLN decision and an extending example of

enlistment. He maintains that even the women's "alleged confinement" in the pre-revolutionary period was in fact a chosen withdrawal into a secret realm impervious by the conqueror, "[t]he Algerian woman, in imposing such a restriction on herself, in choosing a form of existence limited in scope, was deepening her consciousness of struggle and preparing for combat" (66).

Fanon (1994) also is articulate in his awareness of how women suffered in the liberation struggle: "In Algerian society stories were told of women who in ever greater number suffered death and imprisonment in order that an independent Algeria might be born" (107-108). The Algerian women's vital roles in the war ultimately reduced the perceived gender inequality which gave them the hope that the transition to independence would bring about significant changes for their gender.

Nevertheless, in spite of their military participation during the liberation struggle and the equality of gender roles they experienced, Algerian women were expected to return to the traditional marital and maternal roles after independence. They found that their role in liberating the nation as well as their equal status in the public and political realms were largely neglected and even denied by post-independent Algerian rulers. Joanne Nagel asserts that although women do take part vigorously in nationalist struggles, they are frequently constrained back into conventional female jobs once the liberation target has been concretised (253-254). For her part, Michele Griffin in an essay entitled "As a Woman I Have No Country" (1998) highlights the fact that in spite of their investment in nationalist struggles, women most of the time wind up in places of subordination once more, after independence, with the end goal of constraining them to continue serving as the reproducers of the nation. She wraps

up: "For most women, loyalty to the nation far outweighs any putative loyalty to international sisterhood" (258).

Indeed, the active involvement of Algerian women in the War of Liberation was considered to legitimise their equal status and rights as declared officially by the FLN leaders on the eve of independence: "The participation of the Algerian woman in the liberation struggle has created favourable conditions to break the age old yoke which weighed on her and to associate her fully and completely in the management of public affairs and in the development of the country". Yet, while official documents, including the Constitution of the newly independent Algeria certified that women are granted equal rights, this was not the case for the best part of post-independent Algerian women who were urged to go back to the domestic sphere (M'Rabet, 1979). Marnia Lazreg (1990) indicates that the 1963 Charter and the 1976 National Charter in Algeria "reiterate the state's commitment to women's rights as a result of women's participation in the war. In other words, women's rights to citizenship are presented as compensation for their struggle for the independence of their country rather than as unqualified rights" (133).

The rights of Algerian women became progressively restricted with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the nation in the 1980s and the ensuing bloody decade. The 1984 Family Code curtailed the rights of women and reasserted the authority of the patriarch (Rohloff, 2012, p.14). Eventually, drawing legitimacy from the female combatants who battled for Algerian liberty, Algerian women began to press the Algerian government and society for the recognition and enforcement of their legal rights.

However, the modern battle was not that easy since Algerian women, in the wake of a predominantly post-independent androcentric society, found it difficult to unfetter themselves from their stereotypical roles as guardians of Islamic conventions and of Algerian cultural identity.

3. Egyptian Women during and after British Occupation

During the colonial era, the majority of Egyptians were eager to protect their cultural and religious norms and traditions. They feared any infiltration of those authentic norms by the Western aliens, who were considered a single, monolithic foe, plotting against their indigenous cultures. Since women are often represented as the repository of the moral values and cultural essence that distinguish the nation from other nations, and like their Algerian female counterparts in the colonial era, Egyptian women were regarded by male patriots as bearers of national identity and protectors of the authenticity of cultural traditions. They were utilised to demarcate cultural differences against Western intrusion.

Beth Baron (1993) contends that during the anti-colonial struggles, Egyptian nationalists intentionally assimilated the nation to a woman in order to instill notions of honour and the sense that the nation had to be defended, supported and protected by its sons (244-245). More significantly, "[b]y depicting the nation as a woman, nationalists hoped to stimulate love for the nation and draw male youth to the cause [. . .] The man was the actor, the speaker, the lover; the woman was acted upon, the listener, the beloved" (Baron, 1997, p. 121).Therefore, while women were used by nationalists as symbols of the nation and cultural markers of its true identity in order to forge a sense of

cohesion and bonding amongst the male citizens, who were tasked with the burden of shielding the nation, they were often not "imagined" as part of that nation (Baron, 1993, p. 245). The nationalist rhetoric deployed by the Egyptian male to spread nationalism only fortified the pre-existing convictions about gender. Ideals of family honour, sexual purity and motherhood were further stressed (Baron, 1993, p. 245). Only by secluding women in their domestic realm, those nationalists believed, could the Arab Muslim formulation of the Egyptian identity stand against the overlapping onslaughts of Western cultural influences.

Since the late nineteenth century, the "woman question" had been the central focus of Egyptian reformers who displayed a moderate stance in considering women's right to education. Ahmed Fares el-Shidyak, Rifaa Rafi el-Tahtawi and Shaikh Mohammad Abdou were the leading intellectual figures who raised public awareness to the substantiality to educate the women assigned with the role to rear the younger generation. They emphasised essential Islamic teachings, which they defended against any sorts of distortions and misinterpretations.

Little by little, the women's issue turned from the hands of religious reformers into the hands of more radical advocates for women's rights who demanded more than just education for women, the most remarkable being Qasim Amin. The latter believed that without recovering the status of women, the nation could never progress. He unambiguously set the improvement of women's position as a prerequisite for the development of the nation. Amin (1993) called for the right of women to education and work as well as other reforms to improve their status, "[o]nly then could they raise loyal sons imbued with love for the nation,

teach them patriotic songs, and instill in them national pride." Amin developed his arguments in his controversial book *Al-Mara al-Jadida* (*The New Woman,* 1899) on the ideology of natural rights and the concept of progress more than on Islamic tenets, which widely stirred up the Muslim conservatives. He criticised the traditional practices and beliefs that obstructed the advancement of women and as such the progress of the nation. Not only did Amin's ideas disrupt the Muslim conservatives, but also the nationalists, who viewed his arguments as loosening the common cause of national liberation.

Without surprise, women who rebelled against their circumstances were those who had been banished from public life. Those women, most notably from the educated upper-class, displayed their eloquence and readiness for such a struggle. One of those committed women was Huda Shaarawi. The latter, being the first Egyptian woman activist and a prominent feminist figure in 1919 Revolution, severely condemned the double standards of Egyptian masculine nationalism. Shaarawi (1986) stated, "[I]n moments of danger when women emerge by their side, men utter no protest. Yet women's great acts and endless sacrifices do not change men's views of women" (131). Nationalist leaders often voiced their discontent toward women's emancipative conduct and persistent demands for equal citizenship rights, in an attempt to exclude them from the public and political circles (Shaarawi, 1986, p. 131).

In 1919, women of all classes, led by Shaarawi, conducted decisive strikes and demonstrations in Cairo streets to support the *Wafdists* who, in 1922, were able to attain partial independence from the British occupation. Sir Valentine Chirol commented in the London Times: "In the stormy days of 1919, (the women)

descended in large bodies into the streets, those of the more respectable classes still in veil and shrouded in their loose black coats, whilst the courtesans from the lowest quarters of the city, who had also caught the contagion (of political unrest) disported themselves unveiled and arrayed in less discreet garments" (qtd. in Golley, 2010, pp. 31-32). Indeed, Egyptian women's role in changing the national and political situations of their country was undeniable. Margot Badran (1996) has indicated that the eminent appearance of women in the 1919 revolutionary demonstrations is a defining moment in Egyptian gender relations, emblematic of the women's commitment and active contributions to their national cause alongside their male compatriots, and an essential step by Egyptian feminist movements towards achieving further gains in the male-led political domain (13). In fact, Egyptian women's active involvement in the political struggle only granted them a far stronger voice to reclaim their rights.

However, and much like the case of post-independent Algeria, Egyptian male nationalists, who had been fervent participants and sponsors for the women's movement, turned their backs on their female partners once partial independence acquired. The 1922 Constitution wrote women out of the national and political agenda of the nascent nation. Baron (1993) argues that women "served a central role in the emerging national consciousness, but were by no means full partners or future citizens" (247).

After independence, Egyptian women's rights and demands were marginalised and overlooked for the urgent political and national causes. Furthermore, like Algerian women, they were consigned to their former domestic roles. Baron (1993) contends

that "in spite of the rhetoric of the 'woman question' and women's participation in the nationalist movement, reforms on many of those issues important to women's advocates proved hard to pass once the nationalists came to control the state" (252). She asserts that this apparent paradox of women's mobilisation in the national struggle and their disappointment in concretising their feminist agendas in the aftermath of independence might be better comprehended if one considers the "gendering of nationalism". In her book, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986), Kumari Jayawardena writes, "Once independence had been achieved, male politicians who had consciously mobilized women in the struggle, pushed them back into their 'accustomed place'" (259). She further asserts that with the attainment of independence and the establishment of nation-states, women's movements in most of Third World countries, either faded away or degenerated into social welfare organisations concerned with women's education, handicrafts and home care.

One cannot deny that after the 1952 Free Officers' Revolution, Egyptian women were able to experiment a breath of air in exercising some citizenship rights, including the rights to education and contribution to the workforce as stated in Article 19 in the 1956 Constitution. Yet, the same article states that women are burdened with their traditional marital and familial roles. In so doing, the post-independent Egyptian regime prioritised women's social rights as mothers, yet it certainly curtailed their political rights as equal citizens. While the revolutionary regime came with an agenda that endorsed women's emancipative rights, the imposed gender-specific roles that would cast women as good national subjects and citizens heavily curbed those rights (Allam, 2018, p. 46).

In present day Egypt, gender issues still prove polemical since women of all classes are still struggling to attain an equal status in the political and public spheres. While women have liberty with respect to work and education, they are still constrained by patriarchal marital laws and strict male guardianship. The emancipation of women entails the right to education and public participation, but not meaningful political and economic membership (Allam, 2018, p. 40). Egyptian nationalist rhetoric often renders woman "the pure and ahistorical signifier of 'interiority' by mobilizing the inner/outer distinction against the 'otherness' of the West" (Al-Ali, 2000, p. 45).

4. Conclusion

This paper has traced the twin trajectories of Algerian and Egyptian women from the colonial epoch to the post-independence period**.** Arab women, represented by Algerian and Egyptian women, were not only victims of colonial oppression but also of postcolonial state neglect**.** Despite their decisive roles in the liberation of their nations, Arab countries failed to uphold justice for women by denying them their legal rights to equality in both the private and public spheres**.** The promise of emancipation remained unfulfilled, and women continued to be marginalised in the very societies they helped to liberate.

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