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Crystallization of the Islamic Feminist Fatema Mernissi in Maruf Al Rusafi's Poetry

A B S T R A C T

Islamic feminism tackles Eastern women who are often viewed as shackled by social oppression, religious manacles, and domestic confinement in various literary works. They often suffer exclusion from the public life in an age afflicted by extremity and heretical exercises. The notion that women are shame and a likely reason of dishonor seems to appeal to some Muslim communities; a notion that was bitterly widespread in communities before Islam whereas baby girls were buried alive so that their fathers could dispense with their shame. The paper reveals a clear affinity between the theoretical views of the Moroccan feminist, Fatema Mernissi and some enthusiastic feminist poems of the Iraqi poet Marruf Al Rusafi. It highlights the woman's position and rights in Islamic communities and how a woman practices a life within these norms. Mernissi, on the one hand, is one of the precursors of Islamic feminists who published many books and articles trying to unveil and uplift at the same time the Muslim woman's status. Her publications got wide responses, sometimes abhorring and other times hailing. Marruf Al Rusafi, on the other hand, is an Iraqi nation bard whose ideas align with Fatema's in fighting dogmatic ills and to arouse social conscience. For him, the absence of the woman's role in life causes absence of tolerance, mercy, and advancement.

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تبلور المناصرة النسوية الإسلامية فاطمة ميرنيسي في شعر معروف عبد الغني الرصافي

جاسم محمد جاسم الرفيعي/ وزارة التربية/ المديرية العامة لتربية صلاح الدين

الخلاصة:

تتناول الحركة النسوية الإسلامية النساء الشرقيات عادة ما يعرضن مقيدات بالاضطهاد المجتمعي والقيود الدينية والحجر المنزلي في اعمال أدبية متنوعة حيث انهن عادة ما يعانين من المنع والحرمان من المشاركة في الحياة العامة في زمن ابتلي بالتطرف والممارسات الابتداعية ويبدو ان التصور بان المرأة عار وسبب محتمل للخزي قد تروق لبعض المجتمعات الإسلامية؛ التصور الذي كان سائدا بمرارة في مجتمعات ما قبل الإسلام حيث تدفن الاناث الصغيرات وهن احياء لكيلا يمس ابائهن خزي محتمل عندما يكبرن.

يناقش البحث الانصهار الواضح بين الآراء النظرية للمناصرة النسوية فاطمة ميرنسي وبعض القصائد النسوية الحماسية للشاعر العراقي معروف الرصافي حيث ان البحث يسلط الضوء على مكانة وحقوق المرأة في المجتمعات الإسلامية من ممارسة المرأة لحياتها تحت معايير الإسلام تكون فاطمة ميرنسي المناصرة للنسوية واحدة من رائدات النسوية الإسلامية التي تحاول رفع مكانة المرأة المسلمة من خلال نظرياتها واستقصائها التاريخي والحضاري في مؤلفاتها العديدة التي نالت استجابة واسعة، استجابة أحياناً ماقته وأحياناً هاتفة وفي الضفة الآخر يعزز الموقف شاعر الحضارة العراقية الحديثة معروف عبد الغني الرصافي التي تتسجم أفكاره مع ميرنسي في مكافحة الأمراض المنزلية واثارة الضمير المجتمعي من اجل المرأة والذي يرى ان غياب دورها الحياتي أدى الى غياب التسامح والرحمة والرقى.

الخلاصة

الكلمات المفتاحية: الشعر الشرقي، النسوية الإسلامية، فاطمة ميرنسي، معروف الرصافي

I- Introduction

Historically speaking, Islam emerged to balance society by raising the position of woman and by equaling her with man in rights and duties with a nuance according to the nature of either of them. Women, hence, enjoyed respected and valuable social position. Nevertheless, through the passage of time, impure foreign traditions and inappropriate conventions, some of them are because of wars others because of internal disputes, enforced themselves on Islamic nation, threatened woman's position and defied the principles of equation. As a result, men, obsessed by intolerance and indistinctness, cracked down on the Muslim women, confined them, narrowed their freedom, veiled their souls, and prevented them from enjoying any color of life. (Mernissi, 19). Subsequently female generations appeared feeble and underwent an ignorant naiveté because a considerable number of women were illiterate and few of them got learning at the hand of elderly religious tutors (called Sheikhs) who taught reading only in ages when scarcely there were books. (Muthher, 1949, p. 141).

Woman's entity was violated during the periods of colonization noticeably the Ottoman epoch, a period stricken by extreme patriarchy where woman's status was fatally deteriorated. The misinterpretation of religion in the light of subjective means and patriarchal biased fantasies cast more constraints and darkness upon women's private life. Her rights were taken away and she was belittled to be a mere housekeeper and a machine to produce children. Although the Ottoman occupation founded some schools within the Ottoman's empire, these schools were managed by Ottomans as a kind of monopoly the matter that discouraged fathers to send their children especially girls. Hence,

ignorance was widespread and darkness covered woman's sphere. (Abu Amsha, 1987, p. 155). Men asked freedom for themselves and left women enslaved, asked knowledge for themselves and kept women faltering in their ignorance. Hence, half of the nation remained crippled.

As a result of the regional consciousness and the public awakening, the 20th century was a transitional phase in the East; new states erected on the ruins of others, new governments formed in opposition to others, and new lifestyles and cultures were set in. Complaints against colonization, corrupt and backwardness were aroused, claiming liberty, reform, justice and advancement. New dawn penetrated the darkness of eastern woman's world. A group of clergymen and thinkers (Btres Al-Bustani, Ahmed Al- Shadiaq, Refaat Al-Tahtawy) raced to take woman out of traditional and outdated shackles announcing her role in society being an essential pillar of life, relying on some tolerant Islamic teachings. During this phase, the ideas of Qassim Ameen raised loudly in his book: *The New Woman* in 1911, urging men to pay back women's rights, teach them, and unveil their freedom for a new life. (Efrati, 2004, p. 155).

Feminine trends began crystalizing in the Arabic poetry among them were Jameel Sudqi Al-Zahawy, Hafiz Ibrahim and Marruf Al Rusafi. Al-Zahawy's poetry was instigative and not wise enough to persuade the male-dominated world to reconsider woman's rights and freedom. Hafiz Ibrahim's calls were shy and timid believing it was hopeless to break in such controversial affairs. Retreated, he dispensed with woman's arena. Al Rusafi's calls were, as those of Langston Hughes, influential and effective in defending the woman's status amid a patriarchal mentality and society. (Tabaan, 1948, pp. 146-147). The subsequent discussion proves Al- Rusafi's historical role in doing justice to and defending eastern Muslim woman.

II- Islamic Feminism and Fatima Mernissi

A wide gap has been imposed on the western and eastern civilizations because of dogmatic and ideological differences and the widespread apathy for real communication. Women in both spheres have their hindrances and suffering. Feminism which is produced in certain places, confined to its surrounding milieu. Islam is one of the milieus the soil of which is fertile enough for feminism to grow. The Islamic feminism is a very tangled controversy. The combination of feminism and Islam seems oxymoron by most of the west who have doubted that Muslims were incapable of producing feminism and that Islam itself would not allow it. On the contrary, one of Islam basic messages is to liberate women who, before Islam, were belittled and disfranchised from many colors of life. Islam is literally synonymous to Qur'an (the Holy Book) and *Hadith* (sayings and doings of the prophet Mohammed peace be upon him) that both of them highlight the importance of gender

equality and social justice. Later on, patriarchal traditions institute themselves to put woman's status at stake due to the interpretations of the texts not the texts themselves. Islamic feminists historically argue that Islamic texts, taken from Qur'an and Hadith, have been construed in patriarchal and at times misogynistic ways.

Fatema Mernissi (1940-2015) presented her treatises and observations launching from her Moroccan Muslim society and whirling around to encompass the Islamic nation. Furthermore, she went down in history to reconsider the woman's status through ages. She critically argues the "the muzzled, censored, obedient, and grateful" woman is totally framed far away from the authentic teachings of Islam. Rather, the message was manipulated and distorted to sustain the patriarchal system (Mernissi, 1991, p. 4). In 1991, Mernissi published *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* where she tries to recapture and document egalitarian practices at the time of the prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him):

Ample historical evidence portrays women in the Prophet's Medina raising their heads from slavery and violence to claim their right to join, as equal participants, in the making of their Arab history. Women fled aristocratic tribal Mecca by the thousands to enter Medina, the Prophet's city in the seventh century, because Islam promised equality and dignity for all, for men and women, masters and servants. Every woman who came to Medina when the Prophet was the political leader of Muslims could gain access to full citizenship, the status of *sahabi*, Companion of the Prophet. Muslims can take pride that in their language they have the feminine of that word, *sahabiyat*, women who enjoyed the right to enter into the councils of the Muslim *umma*, to speak freely to its Prophet-leader, to dispute with the men, to fight for their happiness, and to be involved in the management of military and political affairs. The evidence is there in the works of religious history, in the biographical details of *sahabiyat* by the thousand who built Muslim society side by side with their male counterparts. (Mernissi, 1991, p. viii)

In her book, *Forgotten Queens of Islam* (1993), Mernissi goes further more to delve into the Islamic history and excavate for those women who challenged the patriarchal hegemony and who led Muslim states but have been rubbed out of official history. She wages against the ideological and political systems that muted the Muslim woman and dimmed her role. "Not only have the sacred texts always been manipulated, but manipulation of them is a structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies," Mernissi argues, "Since all power, from the seventh century on, was only legitimated by religion, political forces and economic interests pushed for the fabrication of false traditions" (Mernissi, 1991, pp. 8-9). She concludes that it is political Islam not Islam *Resala* or spiritual Islam that has abused the Muslim woman:

every time I speak of Islam without any other qualification, I am referring to political Islam, to Islam as the practice of power, to the acts of people animated by passions and motivated by interest, which is different from *Islam Risala*, the divine message, the ideal recorded in the Koran, the holy book. (Mernissi, 1993, p. 5)

In her book, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*, Miriam Cooke (2001) comments on Mernissi saying that "throughout, Mernissi frames her arguments and criticisms of Islamic authorities within a context of belief in the Prophet as an inspired revolutionary, a man who was opposed to violence and who envisioned a community of equals united by their spiritual bond, and not bound by tribal hierarchies" (p. 73). In the wake of Mernissi, Maruf Al-Rusafi's poetry can perfectly align with her treatise in reflecting a real image of the eastern woman.

III- Maruf Al-Rusafi.

Maruf Abd Al-Ghani Al-Rusafi (1875-1945), born in Baghdad of Kurdish parents: his father was a policeman who kept frequently absent from home the reason that made him strongly attach to his mother. He studied in a Baghdad Koranic School then after three years of training he resigned fruitlessly from the military school to join later religious school in Baghdad. Putting on religious uniform (abaya and turban with a beard), he was appointed a teacher at government school in Baghdad, In 1908 he travelled to work as editor in the newspaper *Sabil al- Rashdd* (the path of wisdom). In Istanbul he got another chance as teacher of Arabic. He loved Istanbul so much where "he received recognition, lived in comparative ease, and married a Turkish woman." (Badawi, 1975, p. 56). After the First World War, he departed Istanbul to temporarily lodge in Damascus. Unwilling to get back to Baghdad because of his disappointment towards al-Sharif Husain government which declared war on Ottomans. Rusafi then went to Jerusalem to teach Arabic literature in the Teachers' Training College. In 1921, in Baghdad, he held different jobs and posts in education, politics and journalism. He resigned his last job as teacher as early as 1928 because he was incapable of getting senior office in the government when Faisal became King of Iraq. Depending on a meagre pension which he supplemented for a while by keeping a small tobacconist shop. He withdrew from Baghdad, and chose to lead a kind of Bohemian life. Poetry, according to one of his poems, "is my comforter in my loneliness,' adding that 'my soul is melancholy, and inclined to melancholy verse". He died a poor man. (Badawi, 1975, p. 56).

Al Rusafi was a poet, critic and a man of letters whose travel away from his regional impacts to Istanbul widened his experiences and varied his visions; the thing that let him appreciate the core not the peel. After his returning back replete with pioneering thoughts, Al-Rusafi sought a medium to widespread his

ideas. Thus, he worked in press and was appointed an editor of *Baghdad Newspaper*; the time in which he took off the religious uniform and converted civilian believing that faith is in deeds not in dress. (Tabaan, 1948, pp. 26, 44).

Social reform was his main concern. He is the most conspicuous and is ahead of the reformists in Iraq (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2009, p. 40). After his experience abroad, he realized one of the basic gaps between the western advancement and eastern reluctance that was the role of woman. As for life, she is the sun-like element that shines brightly over society. Still she was unfortunately in darkness seeks to be shined. Hence, Al-Rusafi confronted the commonplace mentality bravely with his revolutionary calls, dedicating an independent section for women in his collection of poetry: *Dewan Marruf Al-Rusafi*¹. He highlighted many grounds and issues for eastern woman as fighting ignorance, women education, the issue of hijab, marriage and divorce, and the suffering of widowhood and poverty.

Ignorance seems to Al-Rusafi like a pestilence that has stricken multitudes and fighting it is the key issue for the East. The poet opens his section for women with the poem "Woman in the East" and justifies the suffering of the East to the suffering of their women:

Strange to find the people of the East agonizing in
humiliation and misery.
Traditions have ruled them as manacles tying captives in a
cell.
Their life has deviated from the trajectory of the wise and
the happy.
Because they have kept woman caged for so long and
violated her sanctity. (*Dewan*, 2014, p. 517). My
Translation.²

Al- Rusafi announces that the Muslim woman is enchained and enslaved by the Eastern man who left her deprived of any sense of action or imagination. This severe offence and serious guiltiness lead men to live a humiliated and enslaved life because they have been brought up by enslaved mothers' embraces. The consequence of accepting such life for their women, causes them to be subjected to their abusive rulers and conquerors:

If dignity is bestowed upon their mothers, they would be
themselves dignified.
There is no happiness for a man who lives with a sad woman;
earth can not be happy without the sky.
(*Dewan*, p, 518)

¹ Abbreviated to *Dewan* hereafter.

All the subsequent citations from *Dewan Marruf Al-Rusafi* (2014) that appear in this paper are my own translation. ²

The revolutionary calls he provoked of equipping Muslim women with knowledge equal to men, echo loudly in his poetry and he attributes the man's refusal to allow woman to quench herself from the seas of knowledge to his implied ignorance:

The spiders of ignorance have knitted webs of superstitions.
Man have banned and legitimized according to his will
and thus deformed the teachings of the tolerant religions.
He sees knowledge a defect for woman and thus he still
Confines her, fearing shame. he knows not that the shame lies in
ignorance.

(*Dewan*, p, 168)

He goes further arguing symbolically Sharia (the body of Islamic law) refuting that woman's confinement and consequently her compulsory ignorance are utterly distant from Islamic teachings:

Is it in Sharia that a pigeon is skinned or silenced from chanting on
branches!
And God sets its wings to fly high singing and for feeding it lands and
quenches.
If the lofty palm tree went without fruit
We do not blame dates but the root.

(*Dewan*, p, 520)

Al Rusafi as a reformer sees education as the main trait for empowering and elevating woman's status in family and society alike. He relies in his contention on Islamic principles which urge seeking knowledge as a duty that every Muslim man and woman have to do. His calls for releasing woman out of the claws of ignorance stems from his belief that a decent nation grows from an educated, self-confident, conscious generation who emerges only from an educated liberated mother. Noga Efrati (2004) elaborates saying that al- Rusafi "he linked the status of women to the condition of his society and Eastern society as a whole, claiming that the progress of the latter is dependent on the advancement and education of the former" (p. 156).

He opens his poem "Education and Mothers" (*Dewan*, p, 525) with ethics that grow up like plants if watered by noble virtues and deeds. If these noble values are implanted in mothers, the promising outcome is a mature generation who is nurtured decently. Through the principle of reward and punishment, Al Rusafi tries to stir up the eastern man to reconsider the vantage of and educated woman and the relapses of the east. In refuting that Islam is irresponsible for woman's lack of education, Al-Rusafi alludes to the Prophet Mohammed's wife who was taught perfectly and "was a sea of knowledge in solving the problems of others" (*Dewan*, p, 526). Then in the same poem the poet juxtaposes the modern woman whose "ignorance is a chastity as if it is a citadel for her!"

(*Dewan*, p, 526). The poet wittily links this blindfolded chastity with children who will be breastfed from and grow up amid ignorant embraces. (*Dewan*, p, 526).

The issue of hijab is a controversial one. It is a religious system used in the past by different nations other than Islam as a uniform of veneration and chastity. Al Rusafi criticizes not Islam for Islam does not coerce women into putting on hijab but patriarchal mentality for intensifying this issue. The revolutionary attack on the maltreatment of women caused him to be accused of heresy and labelled as infidel (Badawi, 1975, 58). In 1922, *al-Istiqlal* newspaper published one of his poems criticizing the denial of women's right and in response a fatwa (a decision or an order made under Islamic law) was issued against him, being violating Islamic teachings; a decision that might let him to be executed (Efrati, 2004, p. 156). Nothing could stop him in his defense. He poetizes:

Derelict and choked, she has been left and without going out but in veil.
They feel jealous to let air and light accompany her. The space is so
narrow in her eyes, which melt like hail.
Alleged that she, as malady, is invalid to be out of houses, they isolated
her away from their company.
So as any ordinary object she turned to be.

(*Dewan*, p. 517)

The poet contends that "the tan woman's honor is to be educated and her veil among people is to be virtuous. If modesty covers the tan woman's face, no need to be veiled." (*Dewan*, p. 522). Here the poet stresses the cores not the wrappings; he sees that veils and covers may be deceptive drawing upon the cover of the night when crimes befall easier than the day. In his view, hijab is but costume and no more than a nation custom; a means not an end. The end is to uncover the potentialities and virtues of the Muslim women for serving humanity and building generations as long as she is half of society and no society can rise up with its half disabled (*Dewan*, p. 522).

Al- Rusafi's voice has its own uniqueness and sharpness; it was on the whole direct and impassioned. The music of his verse attained a big degree of sincerity and candour. His adherence to traditional form of monometer and monorhyme helps "create a feeling of inevitability, of mechanical and almost imbecile repetition to accord with the idea of the completely dehumanized automaton to which the individual is reduced under a system that robs him of all dignity" (Badawi, 1975, p. 59).

One of the phenomena that has been customary and indicative of the East backwardness is the art of acting. Acting, which is the school of communities as it is said, and a medium of teaching virtues and fighting vices, is accomplished by roles of men and women. If one gender is discriminated then the goal will be deformed and the message unclear. Man has acted the role of woman and begun

to dress her costumes and imitate her feminine nature. The poet here attacks men who abnegate their manliness and deprive women of their role:

No shame in allowing the woman to act her role full of pride and esteem.
But shame all the shame on the men who underestimate
their manliness in women's costumes.

(*Dewan*, p. 518)

These lines remind us of Shakespearean times where female roles were done by male actors; a huge gap between the 16th century and the twentieth! The absence of the woman's role on the stage of the theatre is an indication of her absence on the stage of life. Noga Efrati, referring to one of a rusafi's lines, sums up that "he linked the status of women to the condition of his society and Eastern society as a whole, claiming that the progress of the latter is dependent on the advancement and education of the former" (Efrati, 2004, p. 156).

The poet's philanthropic ideal exceeds the borders and encompasses hither and thither feminist poems on poor widows, orphans and wretched divorced women. In order not to discriminate women in other sections, it is fair enough to refer to poems such as "The Orphan's Mother" (*Dewan*, p. 71), "The Orphan on the Feast Day" (*Dewan*, p. 71), "The Orphanage" (*Dewan*, p. 141), "The Divorced Woman" (*Dewan*, p. 93), and "The Breastfeeding Widow" (*Dewan*, p. 303). The latter acquired a wide empathy and turned to be an iconic poem where the poet present a very sorrowful description of a shabby woman who suffers malnutrition and her baby too. These philanthropic or radical manifestations are quick to generate a new thematic focus in the field of solidarity with the poor and the oppressed (Somekh, 1992, p. 59).

IV- Conclusion

The end of Islamic feminism is to protest against subordination and violence which are an anti-Islamic traditional exercise; an exercise that cost Muslim women and Muslim communities a lot through ages.

According to Fatima Mernissi, Islamic teachings present women as potent, sexual beings. Female inferiority has been imposed on Muslim women due to heretical exercises. Islam, therefore, realizes the latent equality between men and women, though, for feminist believers, that equality has not been realized. Gender difference that belongs to the realm of nature is innate to human existence and Islam does not ignore this nuance. Islam opposes gender difference which is not innate, but a result of the socialization process.

The woman for Marruf Al Rusafi is a life dynamic symbol: her weakness symbolizes a defeated nation, her sickness symbolizes death, and her suffering symbolizes backwardness and agony. His poetry is an outrageous call to

unshackle Eastern Muslim woman for an unshackled nation. He discusses that the weakness and backwardness of the Islamic nation and its weak stance in facing the outward challenges of colonization, social shift, and extremity are due to the extreme, religious, social and domestic shackles imposed on woman. Most importantly, her enslavement, in his view, ushers in an enslaved nation.

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