

Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging

Edited by RABAB ABDULHADI, EVELYN ALSULTANY, and NADINE NABER
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Feminism for Real: Deconstructing the Academic Industrial Complex of Feminism

Edited by JESSICA YEE
The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

Granta: The F Word (Issue No. 115)

Edited by JOHN FREEMAN

!Women Art Revolution

By LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON

In late 2007, the extreme right-winger David Horowitz and others of his ilk published op-eds and editorials in various media outlets contending that U.S. feminists were ignoring the issues facing women worldwide while focusing too much on concerns like domestic violence in the United States. Horowitz also organized a widely criticized “Islamofascism Awareness Week” and wrote of “Islamic misogyny” and “Islamic gynophobia.” In response, in early 2008 *The Nation* columnist Katha Pollitt published “An Open Letter from American Feminists,” which was circulated and signed by several U.S. feminists.

Pollitt strove to be supportive of women across the globe, writing that, “we support their struggle against female genital mutilation, ‘honor’ murder, forced marriage, child marriage, compulsory Islamic dress codes, the criminalization of sex outside marriage, brutal punishments like lashing and stoning,” and so on. But, as Amira Jarmakani notes in the essay “Arab American Feminisms: Mobilizing the Politics of Invisibility,” the result was to “reify the false binaries of liberation and oppression forever hovering around Arab and Muslim women” just as much as Horowitz’s text had done. Pollitt’s attempt to correct Horowitz’s rabid Islamophobia only ended up reinscribing Arab and Muslim women as creatures incapable of escaping their tyranny-saturated lives without the help of western feminists like her.

Such a politics of conspicuous condescension comes with a long history, and it has meant that Arab and Muslim women have been deprived of political agency and reduced to essentialist narratives even by those who claim to support them the most. Jarmakani’s essay appears in the anthology *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging*, a new collection of essays and poems that seeks to politicize and analyze what we mean by “Arab and Arab American feminisms” and locate it in a U.S. terrain marked, perforce, by the recent histories of 9/11 and ongoing U.S. occupations.

Several of the writers in this volume, the majority of whom are academics, begin with personal examples of how they and their work have been essentialized by their colleagues and in-

stitutions. September 11 emerges throughout as a turning point for many who had to confront a new form of stigma and paranoia in an already long history of marginalization. This anthology dares to locate even the most wrenching experiences within an explicitly political and theoretical context. In “The Political and Cultural Representations of Arabs, Arab Americans, and Arab American Feminisms after September 11, 2001,” Mervat F. Hatem provides a complex history of the range of responses to 9/11 from within Arab American communities, locating this history in questions of class and immigration as much as the historical event itself. In “History’s Traces: Personal Narrative, Diaspora, and the Arab Jewish Experience,” Kyla Wazana Tompkins writes of her experience as an Arab Jew but first theorizes the very act of revealing the personal: “I wish to be clear from the outset that in operating from a place of ambivalence about confessional writing, my own self-narration here is limited and strategic.”

Writings about Arabs/Arab Americans in English have a tendency to be solipsistic and focused on pretty stories of antique grandmothers teaching their progeny how to cook traditional dishes. *Arab and Arab American Feminisms* eschews such narratives and repoliticizes the issues. However, the handful of poems that dot the anthology could have easily been omitted since, for the most part, they employ trite narratives this anthology is otherwise so good at avoiding.

Arab and Arab American Feminisms raises the question, is there a possibility of a global feminism, that long-dreamt-of project that still emerges on occasion, even if often limited to the annals of academic-conference titles? And given that “feminism” itself is something that so many will not even identify with, is it even a useful term—and what could it possibly describe? Is there such a thing as feminism-by-the-numbers that we might all abide by?

The London-based literary magazine *Granta* acknowledges such questions with a sly wink and a nod in *The F Word*, its spring 2011 issue. The front cover features a drawing of a woman’s face that requires a reader to literally connect the numbered dots for the entire image to come into view. Even then, eyes and lips are missing; for that we have to turn to the back cover, where we might choose from three pairs each of eyes and lips to cut out and place on the face.

Granta is a rare literary magazine with a global reach. Over the course of its long history, the journal has amassed an audience that, we might surmise, is both sophisticated and well versed in international affairs. So it comes as a surprise to find this latest issue so filled with reductively essentialist ethnic and racial stereotypes. Or perhaps, really, this should be no surprise at all—perhaps *The F Word* simply proves that such essentialisms are in fact quite universal.

On the face of it, as it were, the volume offers great promise. Included here is Eudora Welty’s 1933 letter to the editors of *The New Yorker*, in which she audaciously and wittily suggests they should publish her. The issue also features “The Ojibwe Week,” a story by Louise Erdrich in which a man ties a woman to a bed to imprison her against her will and thinks of this as a relationship. Julie Otsuka’s “The Children” describes the hardships faced by female Japanese migrant workers and their children in the early years of Japanese immigration to the United States. And, in what is already a widely celebrated piece, provocatively titled “The Sex Lives of African Girls,” Taiye Selasi describes the unfolding life of a young girl in Nigeria who finds out, through a series of devastating betrayals, that she is being rushed headlong toward a life as the sexual plaything of the men around her. In Maja Hrgović’s “Zlatka,” Zagreb is the site of a grungy and halfhearted series of erotic plays between two women in the midst of a fatigued, neoliberal Euro-

pean Union. In "Mona's Story," Urvashi Bhatia writes about the exotic if rather sad life of a Delhi *hijra*, or eunuch.

Reading these stories and understanding that *Granta*, surely, would have received a rich crop of work, one wonders at the political choice to limit women so much to cultural stereotypes. One cannot but suspect that a Norwegian writer would have written about a woman stuck in a fjord. Or that an Arab woman would write about an honor killing. In "Aftermath," Rachel Cusk writes about the disintegration of her marriage. It is an interesting and dry piece that contemplates the nature of this thing we call love precisely and without sentiment, but it is symptomatic of the politics of *Granta's* "F Word" issue that the western woman of the "First World" is given the luxury of a secure existence where the question is not whether or not she can work—the writer makes more than her ex and must pay him alimony—but the existential conundrums that come with her freedom.

The same is true for all the pieces by women of the Global North—they are either wrestling with contemporary angst or writing about a past in which they had less freedom, as in Otsuka's story or in A.S. Byatt's "No Girls Alod. Insept Mom.," where she writes of the restrictions on female academics in the 1950s. The message is clear: western women in the developed, industrial world have a history of oppression but now are allowed the freedom of angst.

The fault here is not with the individual pieces—the writing is mostly flawless—but the politics of the larger project. According to a press release, *Granta* means to show how "the F word is about power," but power here is inscribed differently: the power resides in western feminism—or at least in editors who decide what that is—to dictate what women's experiences should look like.

Feminism for Real: Deconstructing the Academic Industrial Complex of Feminism is loaded with critique and outrage at exactly this type of feminism. It's an important book that presents a slew of voices critical of feminism with a capital F.

Academic feminism has been a problem for people of indigenous origin, whose multiple experiences at the intersections of racism, colonization, homophobia, and sexism seem much too complicated to fit into a conventional feminist ideology where gender alone is the marker of oppression. In "Maybe I'm Not Class-Mobile; Maybe I'm Class-Queer," Megan Lee writes that she spent "two years in women's studies classrooms watching the same token superficial analyses of racism and classism get regurgitated over and over again." In "A Slam on Feminism in Academia," Shaunga Tagore writes of "academics/debating about feminist organizing in high theory discourse/while barely-paid migrant workers prepare lunches/for seminars, conferences, forums/and get deported the next day."

Some of the pieces are not as successful. In "Resistance to Indigenous Feminism," by Krysta Williams and Erin Konsmo, Konsmo notes of academic research that,

One crucial element that non-Indigenous academia needs to accept is that no matter how much you read the journals of Columbus, a Native chief, or through interviews of Native people you do not have the blood memory that we have within us . . . you don't have the blood memory experiences that I do and so the internal "validity" of your research will never compare.

Such a claim to "internal validity" suggests that there is no possibility an outsider could ever understand indigenous history and culture—but it also suggests, conversely, that no indigenous person will ever be able to read, or thoroughly understand, a topic outside their domain of personal history. Yet, these same writers, and others in the volume like D. Cole Ossandon, also complain that, in feminism, "often classifications are made and lines are drawn thereby excluding any who don't fit into the prescribed parameters."

Similarly, this anthology's class analysis is of the more obvi-

ous sort that situates rich white people against poor people of color. Such a positioning assumes that it is impossible for people of color to become oppressors in a capitalist system and ultimately allows us to leave capitalism unquestioned on the premise that all we need to fix it as a tool of exploitation is to ensure its diversity.

Feminism for Real could, potentially, have been a meaningful and stinging critique of the ways in which academia replicates the very same colonialist impulses it studies, dissects, and presents for view in its learned inquiries and conversations. There's a refreshing tone of anger here, which is important because people of color (especially women) have long been implicitly and explicitly silenced into docile behavior within academia, in return for the promise of a way out of harsh economic conditions (Lee and Tagore address this explicitly). Unfortunately, the book demonstrates a disconnect between a critique of academia and that of capitalism more generally. It points out the colonialist mining of women of color by feminism, but remains problematically mired in visions of cultural authenticity.

Women Art Revolution, a film by Lynn Hershman Leeson, offers an eighty-three-minute retelling of the U.S. feminist art movement in the 1970s, which perhaps made a similar mistake. The film documents an era that saw the emergence of now-iconic figures like the artists Judy Chicago and Adrian Piper, and is a distillation of over forty years of footage shot by Leeson.

It is startling that, despite a strong feminist movement in the art world, this history remains largely untold and/or unacknowledged. *Women Art Revolution* is a suitably complex retelling of a complex movement and, as in the other texts, the issue of race comes up. Here and there, women artists of color like Judy Baca and Howardena Pindell discuss what it meant to represent their politics in an art world dominated by white men. Perhaps the most telling segment comes at the end, when younger contemporary women artists like Janine Antoni talk of having to discover the connections between their work and that of the 1970s. In her *Loving Care* (1993), Antoni dipped her hair into hair dye and used it as a paintbrush. This bears a striking resemblance to the 1976 *Up To and Including Her Limits*, by Carolee Schneemann, where the artist used her entire naked body to produce images on paper. Yet, as Antoni tells it, it was her art professor who showed her the connections, and she was unable to locate any documentation of the 1970s women's art movement at the library.

So, the question remains: did the movement radically change anything? Towards the end of the film, art historian Amelia Jones says, "I don't think feminism successfully changed the structures through which art is made, sold, displayed, and written about . . . for complex and maybe even obvious reasons, I think a lot of women just wanted to be included."

Indeed, the movement may have asked for inclusion without challenging the way art is either recognized as such or disseminated. In an interview with some of the Guerrilla Girls, it becomes obvious that the group's intention behind revealing the minuscule number of women artists hanging in major galleries like the Metropolitan Museum of Art is really to insist on inclusion, not to change the paradigms of the art world. Or, as one of them gleefully and without irony puts it, "If the collectors were really smart about it, they would purchase female artwork because it's totally undervalued . . . it's a huge investment . . . Fifty women artists you could purchase for one male artist." Asking only for inclusion leaves larger structural issues unquestioned. Inclusion can become just another way to reify the stereotypes and essentialism that leave us comfortable in our assumptions about not only who can speak, but how they might do so.

—Yasmin Nair