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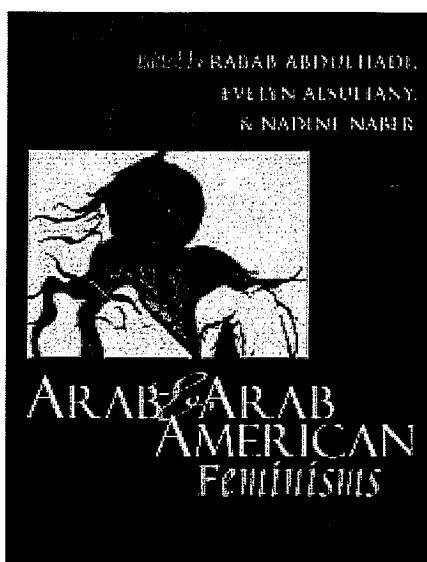
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Posted on **July 14, 2011** by **Melissa**

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



Arab and Arab American Feminisms, edited by Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber, is a book I wish every feminist/womanist would pick up. Though it is mostly academic in nature, the book is also interspersed with personal anecdotes and



poetry that revolve
around the book's focus

on Arab and Arab American feminists' experiences. The book addresses a plethora of issues regarding to Orientalism, sexism, U.S. imperialism, homophobia, and transphobia. Each of the authors illustrate the need for addressing all of these things overlapping, rather than separate, issues. More importantly, though the book embraces the important work done by radical feminists of color, it also turns the feminist "sisterhood is global" motto on its head, positing that "there is no universal woman's experience."

The book's thirty-two essays are split into five sections: Living with/in Empire: Grounded Subjectivities; Defying Categories: Thinking and Living Out of the Box; Activist Communities: Representation, Resistance, and Power; On Our Own Terms: Discourses, Politics, and Feminisms; and Home and Homelands: Memories, Exile, and Belonging. From the outset, the book's contributors illustrate the dangers of conflating experiences and identities into neat categories. The introduction alone explains just how much the dominant U.S. discourse erases the experiences of those who fall into the categories of "Arab" and "Muslim":

[This discourse] assumes that all Arabs are Muslim, all Muslims are Arab, and all Muslim Arabs are the same. It obscures the existence of Arabs who are not Muslim (including, but not limited to, Christians and Jews) and Muslims who are not Arab (including Indonesians, Malaysians, Chinese South Asians, Africans, African Americans, and Latinos/as). It also erases the historic and vast ethnic communities who are neither Arab nor Muslim but who live amid and interact with a majority of

Arabs or Muslims.

By ignoring this diversity and conflating all of these identities under the umbrella of “Arab” or “Muslim,” it becomes much easier for the mainstream U.S. discourse to espouse detrimental stereotypes. As a result, Arab and Muslim feminists find themselves always starting from scratch. They are frequently met with resistance and end up spending their time and energy on dismantling these stereotypes instead of addressing important issues affecting their communities. Many of the contributors wrote of personal experiences where they were delivering speeches or presenting papers at conferences, only to be met with silence or rude, off-topic comments—often based on stereotypes—during the Q & A session. The frequency of blatantly racist comments in an academic setting was alarming.

Several of the contributors spoke of the way that dominant U.S. discourse and its ensuing stereotypes also affected the way they presented themselves. In “Quandaries of Representation,” Mona El-Ghobashy wrote about the burden of deflecting stereotypes:

[T]here remains a fine line between harmless everyday cultural interactions and the quandary of unwittingly being made to represent and somehow stand in for all Muslim women, everywhere, at all times. The task of representation entails negating the manifold stereotypes that stubbornly cling to Muslim women, a task I am reluctant to take on...As an identifiable Muslim woman, I often feel torn between countering pernicious stereotypes and resisting the mantle of representation that battling stereotypes entails.

With regards to the stereotypes themselves, Mohja Kahf summed them up nicely in one of my favorite essays in the book, "The Pity Committee and the Careful Reader: How Not to Buy Stereotypes about Muslim Women":

All this new discourse on Muslim women, on closer glance, is no so new; much of it rehashes an old story: the Muslim woman as Victim, and its flip side, the Escaped Muslim woman. The Victim-Escapee stereotype appears at every level of culture, pop to high. It is hegemonic, which means it is not seen as a stereotype but that The Truth: that Islam is exceptionally, uniquely, ingerently evil to women seems to be one of the received truths of our era, axiomatic. It knows no bounds: left-and right-wingers, feminist and nonfeminists, religious and secular folk in the global Western conversation subscribe to it...The Pity Committee thrives in imperialist contexts, so it is riding high today with the U.S. occupying Iraq and waging war in Afghanistan, its story becoming dearer to its subscribers by the hour.

Though the essay deals mostly with Muslim stereotypes in literature (authors Jean Sasson, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Norma Khouri are taken to task for promoting with The Pity Committee's narrative), Kahf offers valuable advice that can be applied when encountering Muslim stereotypes in the media as well. She states that there are five important actions people take to keep in mind to dismantle these stereotypes: 1) think critically; 2) engage in a dual-fronted critique; 3) find cross-cutting parallels; 4) remember history; and 5) refuse to erase economics. She also makes it clear that fighting against stereotypes is an ongoing process with

a rippling effect:

*Stereotypes distort us as human beings;
they take our energy away from real
ethical development...we must not step
away from our moral obligation to change
the realities of Muslim sexism, just as we
must work against endemic sexism in
America.*

As the book is about issues important Arab and Arab American feminists, mainstream and radical U.S. feminism was often taken to task for its shortcomings, and rightfully so. I cringed as I read about some of the things famous U.S. feminists have said or written in the past. In "The Burden of Representation: When Palestinians Speak Out," Nada Elia uses an encounter at the 1985 UN International Conference on Women, which took place in Nairobi, to open her essay. Betty Friedan is quoted instructing Nawal El Saadawi, "Please do not bring up Palestine in your speech. This is a women's conference, not a political conference." The quote is a prime example of mainstream feminism's alienation of women of color—how can a woman of color possibly be expected keep gender and race separate? Elia writes:

The arrogance of an American academic presuming to tell one of the foremost internationally recognized Arab feminist activists what she should and should not talk about is exemplary of the power dynamics in [academic] settings. How would Friedan have reacted if an Arab woman had suggested she "control herself" and refrain from discussing anti-Semitism?

In her fascinating essay, "Palestinian Women's

Disappearing Act: The Suicide Bomber through Western Feminist Eyes," Amal Amireh takes Andrea Dworkin to task for her essay, "The Women Suicide Bombers." Not only does Dworkin embrace colonialist narratives, but Amireh argues that Dworkin's essay implies dangerous narratives about West as well:

The challenge is to avoid narcissistic rescue fantasies, which take us back to colonial narratives; but instead of white men rescuing brown women from brown men, it becomes white women, or even first world women of color, rescuing brown women from brown men...Implicit in this rescue narrative is the assumption that the "West" is free of gender oppression.

For a more recent example of mainstream U.S. feminism doing a disservice to Arab and Muslim women, Amira Jarmakani points to the Feminist Majority Foundation, who had been "advocating on behalf of (but not with) Afghan women since at least the early 1990s." In her essay, "Arab American Feminisms: Mobilizing the Politics of Invisibility," Jarmakani examines just what "global feminism" entailed when it came to Afghan women:

In what could be called a form of "global feminism," the Feminist Majority worked from the position of savior rather than one of solidarity with feminists in Afghanistan, and therefore developed a position easily appropriated in the service of militarism. Importantly, the military-imperialist and feminist-imperialist stances collude to reify stereotypical notions of Arab and Muslim womanhood as monolithically oppressed. They depend on a set of U.S. cultural mythologies about the Arab and Muslim

worlds, which are often promulgated through overdetermined signifiers, like the "veil" (the English term collapsing a range of cultural and religious dress expressing modesty, piety, or identity, or all three)...Arab and Muslim female subjectivity is obscured by the mythology of the veil, while the notions of oppression, tradition, and civilization become animated in the service of imperialist or nationalist agendas that render the mythology, if not the women, hypervisible.

The most enlightening aspect of the book for me was how extensively it addressed the problems that Palestinians and Palestinian activists face. The stories by and about Palestinians and their allies stayed with me long after I finished the book. I'm sorry to wave my ignorant American flag, but while I had some general knowledge about the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts and the brutal treatment suffered by the Palestinians, I don't think I realized just how clueless I was until I read this book. For instance, I was aware of how staunchly pro-Israel the U.S. is and how anti-Palestine the U.S. media is, but I was completely unaware of how any time Palestinians tried to raise objections/awareness to their struggles, they are charged with Antisemitism and effectively shut down, no matter how valid their complaints are. Therese Saliba addresses this (and much more) in her excellent essay, "'On Rachel Corrie, Palestine, and Feminist Solidarity':

While Jews have the charged claim to anti-Semitism, Palestinians and Arabs are denied a similarly charged claim to "racism" and left bereft of a charge on which to base their oppression...Moreover, the discourse of "balance" in approaching

the conflict assumes both peoples are on equal footing...and that a "balanced approach" is necessary with no critique of power relations.

In "In the Belly of the Beast: Struggling for Nonviolent Belonging," Zeina Zaatari addresses this silencing in slightly broader terms:

Arabs and Arab Americans and Muslims and Muslim Americans are discriminated against, seen as lesser humans by the dominant society, thus denying us the right to even claim victimization, discrimination, or love and care. We cannot expect things like freedom of speech to cover our speech; it covers only the speech of our offenders. While we are denied access to a platform to speak about discrimination against Arabs and Muslims, racist discourses against us are deemed "sacred" by FOX news and a variety of media outlets...We do not "belong" to this nation, but our oppressors do.

I also deeply appreciated this collection's inclusion of so many GLBTQ issues. Two of that really stood out for me were "Class Equality, Gender Justice, and Living in Harmony with Mother Earth," an interview between Nadine Naber and Arab trans activist/writer Joe Kadi, and "The Light in My House" by Imani Yatouba. In his interview, Kadi stresses the importance of intersectionality and working together. Imani's work is much more personal; she spoke of her experiences as a lesbian, her struggles with infertility, and her experiences as a survivor of sexual abuse. It's a powerful essay.

In the weeks that have passed since I finished *Arab and Arab American Feminisms*, I find myself randomly mulling over much of what was written. It's an incredibly useful resource for all feminists, and I can see it being used in various contexts (I'd love to incorporate Randa Jarrar's short personal narrative, "You Are a 14-Year-Old Arab Chick Who Just Moved to Texas," into one of my writing assignments this coming fall). The book also provided me with a list of people whose works I intend to do some further reading on (Edward Said, Caren Kaplan, Inderpal Grewal, Jacqi Alexander, Minoo Moallem, June Jordan, Vijay Prashad, and Amal Amireh, in case you're interested). Without a doubt, there is much to learn from the chorus of voices in this book.

Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging was released on March 7, 2011 by Syracuse University Press.

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