

Writing a Her-story of Egypt

An Illustration of Islamic Women's Movement in Post-colonial Egypt

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1. Abstract

The following article illustrates Muslim women's movement in post-colonial Egypt, whose identity and interests have largely been marginalized in the socio-political transition to modernity; which result in both a distorted image embedded in a Western-oriented conceptualization of Muslim femininity and a vulnerable position that is re-/produced by patriarchal injustice, which pervades the nationalist/fundamentalist discourse of post-colonial politics. The article focuses on the transformation of a female-Muslim identity in the transition from coloniality to postcoloniality, where a subalternized position of women remains out of representation. In order to tackle a Western-oriented framework of understanding the boundaries between the household and workplace, the second body of this article stresses the need to employ a new method that reconstructs such traditional bifurcation, which has overlooked the transgressing identity that transcends the supposed binaries. The last two chapters, furthermore, aim to investigate Islamic women's movement in Egypt from 1919 to present; a 'her-story' of post-colonial Egypt.

2. Introduction

*What you've seen and what you've been told, it's not real Islam...What Prophet Muhammad had really said, has been mutilated in this society*¹ - a 30-year-old female, a doctor, in an interview on contemporary Islam

Coloniality that once pervaded nations and communities across the Middle East and Northern Africa, MENA, still lingers in this region. Here the Arabs, regardless of their genders or nationalities, have been subjected to such unjust socio-political discourse, by which a repressive reality continuously jeopardizes their socio-political security; an increasingly vulnerable position that their Muslim identity is subjugated to in the transition to modernity, in which a unique identity that regards religious, historical and cultural heritage is stripped off from all domains of their lives. Mothers and daughters of Muslim communities, whose voices

¹ Interview by author, Heliopolis, Cairo, March 05, 2014.

have been marginalized by the colonial discourse that had propagated Euro-/androcentric gender ideals, are now subjected to the project of Westernization, as well as post-colonial nationalist movements, which subsequently resulted in an installation of authoritative/fundamentalist governance in contemporary Middle Eastern and Northern African states. During the course of the research, a number of Muslim women were interviewed, including activists who are involved in both secularist and Muslim organizations. This research, although remains largely based on qualitative research methods and literature surveys, intended to include the voice of the average Muslim women in Egyptian society, whose image and identity are often gazed through a falsified conceptualization of Euro-/androcentricism. Muslim women and their social mobilization have been subjected to a West-oriented framework that generates a biased understanding that disregards the reality experienced by women of post-colonial Egyptian society. In an interview, a 38-year-old-female, a teacher at a preparatory school, stated:

“The way others see us and our religion has nothing to do with the way we ourselves perceive and practice our social identity/religious. It’s us who decide what to do with (our) religion...and what to do with (our) identity. How have they become so (arrogant) to believe that we should follow their (norms) and regulations? We decide what we are and how we act. We have devoted ourselves to Islam and this does not mean our (rights) are (violated)”²

The maternal voice among many of the states in this region, as well as established Muslim minority communities in other parts of the world, thereby, has been increasingly subalternized in Western-oriented bifurcation that demarcates anti-Islamic and imperialist binaries, while, at the same time, remains largely neglected by incompetent authoritative regimes that predominate post-colonial politics in the region. In the recent decades, however, social mobilizations to tackle the deteriorating situation for women and to secure their position in socio-political relations have been witnessed; Islamic women’s movement to de-/reconstructs the hitherto conceptualization of Muslim women’s femininity and to bring their silenced

² Interview by author, Heliopolis, Cairo, March 05, 2014.

identity into visibility and potential hegemony. In what follows, this article investigates the subalternized maternal position in the transition between colonial and post-colonial Egypt and, furthermore, illustrates a collective action of Muslim women in the country, whose interests have previously remained in a depoliticized domain of private relations.

3. Conceptualizing a Post-colonialist Framework

3.1. Representation of Femininity in the Colonial Discourse

... when Kuchuk undressed to dance, a fold of their turbans was lowered over their eyes, to prevent their seeing anything...When it came time to leave, I didn't...Maxime stayed alone on the divan and I went downstairs with Kuchuk to her room. We lay down on her bed, made of palm branches...I sucked her furiously, her body was covered with sweat, she was tired after dancing, she was cold...That was why I stayed. Watching that beautiful creature asleep...I thought of my nights in Paris brothels³ - an excerpt from a letter of Gustave Flaubert, a French novelist, to Louis Boulhet, Cairo, January 15, 1850

The subordinative nature of relations between the colonized and the colonizer in MENA, alongside with their integration to the oversized economy of imperialism, had resulted in radical changes in its social/economic/political infrastructure, through which systemized exploitation of the colonial subjects was institutionalized; the politics of colonialism, in which the individuals are subjected to such discourse that mummifies both cultural and social characteristics of the colonized. Here two different strategies of the colonial politics are to be observed, namely; the politics of subjugation and that of assimilation⁴. Through the politics of subjugation, the supposed cultural negativities are gazed through a racist regime of representation that mirrors the cultural inferiority, by which the subjugation of the Orient legitimized as an inevitable reality to be faced by the colonized. Fabricated knowledge and facts

³ Gustave Flaubert, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert, 1830-1857, Volume 1* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1980), 116.

⁴ Maisa Khali, *"Sttatsfeminismus in Ägypten-Perspektiven zur Manifestierung und Implementierung von Geschlechterpolitik oder Instrumentalisierung frauenbewegungsorientierter Anliegen?"* (Doctoral diss., University of Vienna, 2009), 77.

of Orientalist discourse, as Edward Said states in his book *Orientalism*, becomes increasingly didactic, by which the annotation, codification and arrangement of Orientalist knowledge canonize the once-resplendent Orient to be restored under the name of 'Mission of Civilization'⁵. The latter strategy of the colonial politics, the politics of assimilation, indicates the de-culturation of the Oriental internal structure, which allows the colonizer to monopolize the process of 'communitarization' of the locals; the economic and cultural embedment of the colonized resources in imperialism and world economy⁶. Such colonial discourse is derived from binary representation between the colonized and the colonizer that mirrors a glorified self-image of the Western imperialism, which only becomes realized through a reflection of the Oriental degeneracy barbarism. Here, the image of the Orient is often sexualized and feminized, as the Orient becomes a personal territory of the colonizer, in which their private desires are to be fulfilled. The journey to the land of the Orient was no more an expedition to its physical land, but a voyage to a place, in which its sexual deviancy is to be consumed by colonial aesthetes. The image of the seductive and alluring Orient that frequently appears in colonial writings is a clear indication of the Western-oriented knowledge order in the colonial discourse, in which the cultural backwardness and femininity of the colonized subjects are cemented in codified grammars⁷. In order to assert the scientific progress of the Occidental culture, the cultural elements of the Orient must associate with restrictive sexualized degeneracy, since the European-led scientific progress order, then, is able to domesticate the irrational colonized into its sub-category within the knowledge hierarchies⁸.

The dichotomous representation between the colonized and the colonizer remain as a repetitious product of colonialism that is bequeathed to neo-colonialism, whose legacy still pervades the economy and politics of the region in its contemporary state. Post-colonial scholarship, here, does not only play a role in a critical understanding of the history of colonial

⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978), 129.

⁶ Khali, Op. Cit., 77.

⁷ Christina von Braun and Bettina Mathes, *Verschleierte Wirklichkeit* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlagsgruppe GmbH, 2007), 254.

⁸ Ibid., 254.

relations, but, furthermore, focuses on investigating the decentralization of colonialism, as well as the rise of neo-colonial elites in newly established post-colonial states⁹. Post-colonial scholarship is, therefore, ‘an eclectic mix of post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, feminism, Marxism and postmodernism itself’¹⁰; an endeavor to de-/reconstruct the Euro-/androcentric binaries and the violated femininity of Muslim women that are erected by the colonial discourse. Nadja Al-Ali, in her book *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women’s Movement* states:

“Rather than downplaying the destructive role of the colonizers and neo-colonial powers, post-colonial scholarship intends to subvert the old colonizing-colonized binary and the clearly demarcated inside-outside of the colonial system by directing attention to ‘the many ways in which colonization was never simply external to the societies of the imperial metropolis’”¹¹

The nation-building process of the Middle East/Northern Africa in the post-war era is also one of the vital elements in understanding the socio-political characteristics of postcoloniality. As mentioned previously, the vulnerable position of the colonial individuals had been neglected by the hitherto Western discourse, as the subjugative reality that women in the post-colonial transformation process may experience has largely been overlooked. Inherent in contemporary Eurocentric state-theories, such ‘Third World’ interests remain to be silenced and unseen. Socio-political activities that are carried out by individuals, ‘Third World’ interests, are sets of disparate and conflicting interests that are not to be understood in neither universal nor conventional frame. As seen in a large number of cases, the mobilization of the underrepresented has experienced a major difficulty in advocating its visibility, due to socio-political instability, impoverishment, repression and traditional patriarchy that pervade post-colonial nation states. Gender-arrangements upon traditional patriarchy, here, are intentionally shaped by institutionalized state policies to exclude the interests of the socially/politically

⁹ Khali, Op. Cit., 79.

¹⁰ Ali Rattansi, “Postcolonialism and its discontents”, in *Economy and Society*, vol. 24, no. 10, (1997), quoted in Nadja Al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women’s Movement*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000a), 20.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 21.

marginalized actors, but to include that of newly appeared neo-colonial upper/upper-middle class in affiliation with repressive military elites¹².

3.2. Construction of a Post-colonial Gender Identity

Post-coloniality in many of Middle Eastern and Northern African states has provided the marginalized with a whole new 'terrain of experience that used to be closed' to them¹³. Western-/male-oriented interpretations of religion, society and politics have now faced various challenges from the rise of a new identity that was previously neglected by the colonial discourse. Although the political instability of post-colonial nation states tends to overlook the voice of the newly emerged social actors, Muslim women of contemporary post-colonial societies have made their interests and positions into visibility through a collective social mobilization. A social mobilization of Muslim women to voice their unique position, which was, till then, largely silenced by Euro-/androcentric discourse, is an endeavor to secure their interests in such a transformative process, where the previously existed colonial gender discourse is replaced by that of an authoritarian post-colonial regime; an introduction of an image of 'sub-national' womanhood that is to be subjugated to a broader state-framework¹⁴. In the process of transforming a political entity, once subordinated to colonial powers, the hegemonic power of post-colonial nation states (re)produces administrative identities for social actors, in which categorized individuals are entitled to their given identities, whose social abilities are demarcated by institutionalized instruments.¹⁵

A female identity, here, becomes highly embedded in a project of nationalization, whose roles as social actors are assigned to limited aspects; that are, as Yuval Davis and Floya Anthias suggest, first, biological reproducers of an ethnic collectivity; second, reproducers of the boundaries between ethnic/national groups; third, conductors of ideological reproduction;

¹² Khali, Op. Cit., 84.

¹³ Miriam Cooke, Feminist Transgressions in the Postcolonial Arab World, *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 8, no. 14, (2007), 93.

¹⁴ Khali, Op. Cit., 108.

¹⁵ Ibid., 114.

fourth, symbols of the ideological discourses to strengthen ethnic/national differences; and lastly, participants in national, economic, political and military struggles¹⁶. The feminization of a nationhood, thereby, constructs a gendered socio-political norm, by which the role of women in society is limited to 'bearers of cultural values, carriers of traditions and symbols of community', who are 'often excluded from the collective "we" of the body politics, and retain an object rather than a subject position'¹⁷.

3.3. Representation of Women in Post-colonial Egypt

As mentioned above, a construction of a female Muslim identity in Middle East and Northern Africa is entangled with the nation-building process of the region, in which the socio-political position and collective interests of women are often subalternized by a state-led project of nationalization. The representation of women in post-colonial Muslim societies, where traditional gender roles are conceptualized by patriarchal, often misogynic, values, associates with dichotomous gender-arrangements, in which the locus of power and the production of social constraints lie at the center of the male-predominated public sphere¹⁸. As Fatima Sadiqi and Moha Ennaji write in an introduction to 'Women in the Middle East and North Africa':

"Private space is culturally associated with powerless people (women and children) and is subordinated to the public space, where men dictate the law, lead business, manage the state, and control the economy, both national and domestic/ Thus, although women have power in the private space (older women, for example, often decide on the economy of the household and on who marries whom), they lack authority (that is, power sanctioned by society)"¹⁹

¹⁶ Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, *Woman-Nation-State*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 7, quoted in Nadja Al-Ali, Op. Cit., 44.

¹⁷ Ibid., 45.

¹⁸ Fatima Sadiqi and Moha Ennaji, "Contextualizing women's agency in the MENA region", in *Women in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Fatima Sadiqi and Moha Ennaji, (Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., 3.

One of the significant characteristics of a vindication of women's rights in Egyptian politics in the Twentieth century has been the convergence between various legislative reforms that concern the traditional legal norms and the maintenance of an authoritarian/fundamentalist framework, gradual legal changes, while remaining within the broader hitherto socio-religious outline²⁰. As the first president of the republic, Gamal Abdel Nasser, pursued much of his socialist ideology upon the constitution of 1956, the newly designed legal system of post-colonial Egypt guaranteed the women's suffrage; as appears in Rule 31, which declared 'that there would be no discrimination on account of gender, origin, language or creed'²¹. Legal reforms in Egypt throughout the late Twentieth century coincided with the strong presence of Islamic political organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which has exercised a great influence over both official/unofficial socio-political arenas, although they have frequently been in and out of politics in the last decades. The general notion of Islamic religiosity among the public had seen a significant increase, after the Nasser regime had failed to seize the victory over Israel in the Six-Day War, through which Islamic organizations, *Jamaat*, have proliferated 'first within and then beyond national universities'²². The discord between the religious sector and the Sadat regime, the successor of Gamal Nasser, however, was followed by the event of a failed coup attempt by dissenting officers in 1974 and a killing of a former minister carried out by *Jamaat El-Muslimin*, also known as *El-Takfir Wal-Hijra*, in 1977²³. The feud between the *Jamaat* and the Sadat regime, once reinstated Islamic organizations in politics, Hoda Ragheb Awad recognizes as a vital turning point, in which Islamic religiosity became a connotation of personal/spiritual resistance towards the oppressive regime that carried out anti-religious acts in the past decades. She states:

²⁰ Hoda R. Awad, "The Legal Status of Women in Egypt: Reform and Social Inertia", in *Women in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Fatima Sadiqi and Moha Ennaji, (Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 131.

²¹ Khali, *Op. Cit.*, 119.

²² Awad, *Op. Cit.*, 132.

²³ *Ibid.*, 132.

“...The state began to curtail their activities and disallow the wearing of female *niqab*, which had begun to spread in Egypt. Although the general trend is towards women’s liberalization and greater equality between men and women, many active educated young women are putting on the veil again, of their free will. Visitors to Cairo are usually intrigued by this curious phenomenon. In fact, this new behavior, which might be called ‘anti-feminist’, may well turn out to be a sort of feminism in reverse”²⁴

Although secularist constitutional reforms had brought gradual improvements on gender issues, the presence of Islamic guidance in the private sphere remains strong in Egyptian society. The margin between secularist implementations in the public sphere and a fundamentalist framework in the private sphere derives from constitutional incompetency that failed to deal with the contradicting reality of postcoloniality; for instance, Personal status law, Law 25, which recognizes women as ‘the part of the regulation of the organization of the family’, rather than an individual with equal political rights²⁵. As said, a fundamentalist framework, together with authoritarian politics that fails to advocate the rights of the marginalized in a liberating language, (re)produces an inferior personal status of female members, which results in an inevitable conflict with legal amendments on the supposed gender equality implemented by the state. Law 25, introduced in 1925 and amended in 1929, 1979, 1985²⁶, concerning marriage/divorce/inheritance issues, only recognizes a woman as mere part of the regulation, whose legal incompetency is to be guarded by her male counterpart. Law 25, regardless of the minor changes in the public sphere in the past decades, had failed to tackle the macrosocietal problems of postcoloniality, where the conflicting interests between different social actors are ignored and their disparate identities are conventionalized by such norms that promulgate falsified understandings of the unique femininity shared by women of Egyptian society. As appears in the following descriptions of Law 25 from UNESCO, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization:

²⁴ Saad Ibrahim and Nicholas Hopkins, *Arab Society: Class, Gender, Power, and Development* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 1996), 178, quoted in *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁶ Awad, *Op. Cit.*, 134.

- The "*esma*", or right of divorce, is automatically vested in the husband, who may exercise his right without being required to prove fault or ground for divorce simply by reciting the following formula to his wife, privately and without witnesses: "*Go; you are divorced*". To make it official, the husband must then register the divorce with the Ma'azoun. Giving the "*esma*" to the wife does not derogate from the husband's right to divorce his wife whenever he wishes. Rather, it is an affirmation of the consensual nature of the marriage contract which, having been entered into by the free will of its parties, should also continue to exist by their mutual accord
- Law No. 1 00/1 985 requires the husband who divorces his wife to notarize the divorce before the "*Mazoun*" within 30 days from the date of the divorce. To guarantee that the wife does not remain ignorant of the divorce, the law requires the "*Ma'zoun*" to notify her through a process-server and to deliver a copy of the divorce instrument to her or her attorney. To protect the wife in case the husband keeps the divorce secret from her, her right to inherit and other pecuniary rights are not affected until the date she learns of the divorce... "*El idda*" financial support for - one year.
- Experience has shown that women who invoke prejudice in general and psychological prejudice in particular as ground for divorce are rarely successful in proving their case to the satisfaction of the court...(and)...that the unilateral right of divorce given to the husband is often abused. Such abuse may occur in cases where the husband divorces his wife without any justified cause and without proper compensation. Alternatively, such abuse may occur in cases where the husband imposes a price in order to give the wife a divorce and save her the cost of lengthy court proceedings that may end up without any satisfactory result.²⁷

²⁷ "Chapter Five: The Personal Status Laws" United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), accessed February 18, 2014, http://www.unesco.org/webworld/peace_library/EGYPT/WOMEN/105.HTM.

Although the constitution of 1956 sought to guarantee the equal political representation of women, politics in post-colonial Egypt has largely been a male-predominant arena, in which a platform to realize women's suffrage was restricted to a limited space in its authoritarian political system; the compulsory registration of women in the voter lists, for instance, was introduced in 1977, but remained 'purely formal'²⁸. In its autocratic political culture, the civic engagement in politics had been predominantly restricted to a male-political elite class of the ruling party, National Democratic Party; coercive top-down 'controlled pluralism', in which political alternatives had failed to form a strong opposition and had subsequently resulted in ever growing social constraints and political weakness²⁹. The vulnerability of Egyptian multi-party system associates with the ambivalent nature of quasi secularist state policy that contradicts a religious identity of other political entities, which has resulted in such a confusion within Egyptian political spectrum; the outward guidelines of political parties are to explicitly take secularist stances, whereas fundamentalist ideas strongly pervade their internal frameworks. Here, the representation of women, in both in political parties and legislative branches remains to be limited, as inner structures of political parties remain highly patriarchal, regardless of outward legal changes. The female presence in political parties varies from 0.02% to 5.6%, circa 2% in average, which barely meet the quotas from each party guaranteed for women. The secular-leftist National Progressive Unionist Party, *al-Tagammu*, for instance, guarantees 10 seats for female members in their central committee, although, in reality, only 4 women are present³⁰. The underrepresentation of women in Egyptian politics associates rather with the vulnerability of its autocratic system, in which the inclusion of the marginalized is largely dependent on the decision of the ruling party; thus limiting options of unilateral dialogs to endorse a healthy political platform for multiple parties. As seen here, the reality of the marginalized women's position in Egyptian politics does not only result from misogynic ideologies inherent in the socio-political relation of society itself, but rather a legacy of its

²⁸ Majed Ziad, "Introduction and Executive Summary", in *Building Democracy in Egypt: Women's Political Party Life and Democratic Elections*, ed. Hala Mustafa, Abd al-Ghaffar Shukor and Amre H. Rabi', (Stockholm: Trydells Tryckeri AB, 2005), 16.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁰ Khali, *Op. Cit.*, 192.

authoritarian structure, where constitutional efforts for women's suffrage became a rhetoric of slogans of one-party politics.

As seen in the recent turmoil, the downfall of Mubarak regime and the ouster of Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood intensified political instability, in which women of Egypt suffer from the continuous socio-political marginalization and segregation. The changes that were witnessed in post-revolution Egypt do not differ much from that of Mubarak era, as the quotas for female representatives in parliament have been disregarded both by Morsi regime and the interim government; the participation of women in post-revolutionary parliament reaches barely 2% of the entire parliamentarians³¹. The failure of controlled pluralism, in which different voices of other interests become increasingly suppressed by authoritarian measures, (re)produces the marginalized position of women, whose vulnerability remains largely neglected, regardless of repetitive formal reforms that are said to secure their interests in socio-political relations.

4. Transformation of Muslim Women's Identity between Household and Workplace in Egypt

*If we do not promote working for women, are we simply conceding to cultural constructs which advocate an inferior, or at least circumscribed role?*³² – A. E. MacLeod in her article 'Transforming Women's Identity: The Intersection of Household and Workplace in Cairo'

Much of the contemporary studies on the representation of Egyptian women in the workplace have concentrated on the bifurcation between public and private spheres that centers on Eurocentric interpretations, in which the female identity of post-colonial Egypt is restricted to a limited framework of universal binaries. Such a failure to recognize the unique reality that women find themselves in a post-colonial society results in a production of

³¹ Isobel Coleman, "Insight: Quota and Women in Egyptian Politics", *Middle East Voices*, July 10, 2013, accessed February 24, 2014, <http://middleeastvoices.voanews.com/2013/10/insight-quotas-and-women-in-egyptian-politics-84510/>.

³² Arlene E. MacLeod, "Transforming Women's Identity: The Intersection of Household and Workplace in Cairo", in *Development, Change and Gender in Cairo: A View from the Household*, ed. Diane Singerman and Homa Hoodfar, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 47.

generalized understandings, in which the female contribution in both informal and formal economic/political activities becomes relegated to a reductive definition. The conceptualization of female involvement in economic activities upon an Eurocentric framework overlooks the characteristics of the private domain in post-colonial Egyptian society, where informal networks of a private space does not necessarily denote an exclusion of women from making important decisions that affect both the private and public domains. The universal bifurcation between remunerated economic activities and that of informal 'non-wage' labor³³, thus, reduces the contribution of the informal space to the public domain, which, furthermore, undermines the role of the income-generating intra-household activities that women of a post-colonial society are entitled to. Here, the involvement of low/lower middle-class women in informal economic activities has been largely unrecognized, as such Eurocentric interpretations are only to regard the representation of a selective number of upper-class women in the labor market, which, subsequently, obscures the intersection of a female identity that transcends the boundary between the public and private paradigms. In the lower layer of Egyptian society that makes up to approximately 80%, the middle class 12.4% and the lower class 69.1%³⁴, in addition to low/low-middle-class temporary workers that are accounted for 70% of the total employment rate³⁵, women have become the key unit of economic activities, in which intra-household relations are embedded in informal networks of larger economic, social and political import³⁶. The following paragraphs illustrate economic activities of low/lower-middle-class women both in the public and private paradigms, which, otherwise, can easily be neglected by a modernist construct that conceptualizes informal networks of the private sphere as an arena where no important financial activities are to be taken place.

³³ Soheir A. Morsy, "Rural Women, Work and Gender Ideology: A Study in Egyptian Political Economic Transformation", in *Women in Arab Society: Work Patterns and Gender Relations in Egypt, Jordan and Sudan*, Seteney Shami, et al., (Providence: Berg, 1990), 90.

³⁴ Dai Xiaoqi, "Political Changes and the Middle Class in Egypt", *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, vol. 6, No. 2, (2012), 69.

³⁵ Ibid., 74.

³⁶ MacLeod, Op. Cit., 39.

4.1. Experiences of Low/Lower-Middle Class Women in the Transition to Modernity

You know when you have a job, it gives you certain privileges, but, at the same time, you are questioned about your responsibilities. I often ask myself, 'do I live up to my duties?, do I use my responsibilities properly?'. (Intra-household) responsibilities that we are entitled to do not mean we don't have rights in making important decisions at home. Our duties are as important as (that of) men³⁷

As previously stated, the tensions that Egyptian women of low/lower-middle class experience in their daily lives, is a major constraint that they are subjected to in the transition to modernity; a vulnerable position between the household and the workplace that Eurocentric bifurcation of public and private life often fails to recognize. The unique experiences in such social transition, on which everyday lives of post-colonial women circulate, have largely been undermined by the conventional conceptualization that constructs universal binaries between the household and the workplace. In a post-colonial society, women in the household who are involved in informal economic activities are not necessarily entitled to a limited position in an excluded private space, since important decisions are negotiated through informal networks; the household, therefore, is 'the key economic unit and often the (socio)political arena'³⁸. The stereotypical portrayal of women in the household with a restrictive image of submissiveness limits the role of women within this informal nexus of politics and economy, where a family remains a microcosm institution of society. Inherent in the transformation of family structure, mothers and daughters of post-colonial Egypt, whose husbands and fathers often work as unskilled workers in the oil-rich Arab states, have become the major economic unit that bring resources to the household. This male labor migration transforms the model of the traditional family structure into that of a nuclear family, where women who are left behind become the de-facto leaders of feminized families³⁹. Through the departure of husbands that leads to de-

³⁷ Interview by author, Cairo, Egypt, March 5, 2014.

³⁸ Ibid., 28.

³⁹ Homa Hoodfar, 'Egyptian Male Migration and Urban Families Left Behind: "Feminization of the Egyptian Family" or a Reaffirmation of Traditional Gender Roles?', in *Development, Change*

facto female-headed households, the wives of low-income households become closely engaged in cash-earning activities, which subsequently generate changes in the hitherto gender roles and, furthermore, power relations within the household⁴⁰. Women, whose ability to engage in such activities beyond 'the domestic boundaries' was previously neglected, are now entitled to new duties and responsibilities that transcend the traditional binaries between a public and private world. Income-generating activities, therefore, give women with financial security that provides basic necessities, since the husbands' remittances seldom enough to cover their household budget.

In securing their position in the intersection between the workplace and household, however, women are often confronted with a contradicting reality, in which their newly acquired status as breadwinners give them an ambivalent feeling towards social progresses; such changes in gender roles and power relations also indicate a loss of prestige and informal power in the household that were previously entitled to women. While enjoying the status that was limited to men in the past, the double load of duties as a paid worker and wife/mother results in a dilemma, which contradicts a common conception that such status would provide them with a social achievement⁴¹. In the transition from a homogeneous family-oriented neighborhood to a heterogeneous workplace, women often find themselves in an ambivalent situation, where the reality does not necessarily meet with their expectations. Many of low/lower middle class women enter the job market with the hope that it would guarantee them 'financial security, challenging tasks, new social contacts and firm middle class status'⁴², which, however, are often hindered by unsatisfying positions they occupy in the workplace. Arlene Elowe MacLeod states in her article, '*Transforming Women's Identity: The Intersection of Household and Workplace in Cairo*':

and Gender in Cairo: A View from the Household, ed. Diane Singerman and Homa Hoodfar, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 51.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 66.

⁴¹ MacLeod, Op. Cit., 39.

⁴² Ibid., 35.

“One point they (women of low/lower-middle class) make centers on the unfortunate reality that many find the jobs themselves quite disappointing...besides being underemployed, they seldom learn new skills at the office, where the work is usually repetitive and boring...it is also clear to women that they are not doing truly necessary labor...”⁴³

In contradicting ideals that occur in the intersection between the household and workplace, the position of low/lower-middle class women yet remain vulnerable; ‘trade-offs’ between working women with ideals that suit the contemporary economic ideology and wife/mother to pursue traditional gender ideals within intra-household relations. The limited tasks and duties they are entitled to in their workplace hardly satisfy their expectations, which coincides with the loss of the previously held intra-household responsibilities in informal networks of politics and economy. In contrast to relatively strong influence, over which women exercise in such networks, namely planning of the household budget, nursing children, organizing both formal and informal engagements and etcetera, the benefits that women enjoy from their involvement in the ‘legalistic space and bureaucratic atmosphere’⁴⁴ remain seemingly insufficient to replace the traditional gender roles. As MacLeod describes such contradiction as ‘complex trade-offs rather than a clear path of progressive change’⁴⁵, drawing universal boundaries between paid- and household-labor of low/lower-middle class women in Egypt seldom acknowledges the dilemma that they find themselves in; such understandings, which derive from Eurocentric binaries neglect cross-cultural elements that are unique to the post-colonial reality experienced by Egyptian women. An endeavor to secure traditional responsibilities of women within the household in balance with their economic activities in the public sphere is a finding of a female-Muslim position in the transition between tradition and modernity that enables the representation of their unique interests. The conventionalized assumption that emancipation of women is to be followed by their visibility in the workplace largely neglects the cross-cultural differences and, furthermore, what average women of a

⁴³ Ibid., 33.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 45.

post-colonial society truly feels about their personal experiences; '(such) assertion that women could leave the traditional household...and enter the modern workplace, gaining power and prestige, while naïve, remains compelling in part because it avoids some of the troubling implications of these questions'⁴⁶.

5. Writing Her-story of Egypt: An Illustration of Islamic Women's Movement in Post-colonial Egypt

*I swear that modesty will be my crown, and virtue my light, and I shall live purely: a useful and devout wife, whose hand in child-raising is superior. I shall fulfill my rightful and correct duty, toward God, the homeland, the family*⁴⁷ – the oath of the Society of Egyptian Ladies' Awakening

Bringing the interests of the marginalized into visibility in post-colonial Egypt has strongly associated with the emergence of Islamic traditionalism in the beginning of the Twentieth century, which had coincided with independence movements against colonial rulers; a combination of external nationalist and internal religious struggles. As mentioned previously, such socio-political struggles have often been neglected in the process of post-colonial nationalization, in which the marginalized, especially women, remain underrepresented and, furthermore, are assigned to limited roles in a depoliticized spectrum. A collective action of Muslim women, therefore, is a construction of a common narrative for a socio-political struggle, in which women themselves constitute a platform of social mobilization to articulate their voice that, otherwise, remain silenced. Womanhood in a nationalist project, as an image of a nation is allegorized as feminine, become increasingly embedded in a sub-category of such a framework, where female individuals, once again, are entitled to passive roles in a limited space. Beth Baron, in her book *Egypt as a Woman*, stresses the paradox that women experience in such a contradictory condition of this framework:

⁴⁶ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁷ Hassan Al-Bana, *Al-Nahda al-Nisa'iyya*, vol. 1, no. 1, (1921) 3, quoted in Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 2005) 196.

“Mahmud Mukhtar sculpted a work called *Nahdat Misr* (The Awakening of Egypt)...juxtaposing Egypt’s ancient pharaonic glory with her modern awakening...thus depicts modern Egypt as a woman...the government planned a big ceremony for the unveiling of the statue in 1928, to which foreign dignitaries and local notables were invited...but (King Fu’ad’s) explicit orders...Egyptian women were barred from the ceremony. The almost complete absence of women from a national ceremony celebrating a sculpture in which a woman represents the nation epitomizes the paradox faced by women nationalists. Scholars have noted ‘the inverse relationship between the prominence of female figures in the allegorization of nation and the degree of access granted women to the political apparatus of the state’⁴⁸

A recognition of the marginalized reality of women in gendered nationalism that is overlooked by male-dominated society gives an epistemological access to a social mobilization, in which women themselves can pave a socio-political platform to resist patriarchal injustice that pervade contemporary society. In what follows, a ‘her-story’ of women’s struggles in post-colonial Egypt is to be illustrated, in regards to Islamic women’s movement that challenges both traditional patriarchy and West-/elite-oriented feminist discourse.

5.1. Constructing A Collective Action Frame

The search for a unique female Muslim identity and that of an inclusive political arena to represent their unique interests are to be understood as a collective expression of a social movement; an activism to result in practices that affect social actors both collectively and individually. In a frame of an Islamic women’s movement, till-then silenced voices of female individuals are to be re-located, perceived, identified and labeled⁴⁹. The interests of a collective group, where female Muslims are located, are, then, vocalized and, furthermore, organized as a collective action that ‘inspires and legitimates the activities and campaigns of a social

⁴⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁹ Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment”, *The Annual Review*, (2010): 614, accessed February 11, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/223459..>

movement organization'⁵⁰. As seen in a Muslim women's resistance against patriarchal injustice, there is recognition of a problem that a collective group faces provides the individuals with a platform to articulate their interests; a collective recognition of an unjust reality and a base for a counter-mobilization are, thereby, conceptualized and generated. Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow refer such procedure as 'prefatory to collective noncompliance, protects, and/or rebellion'⁵¹, through which the belligerents of a resistance come to a consensual agreement of identifications, aims, solutions and etcetera. Whether Islamic women's movement is compatible with the above mentioned social movement theory is largely debated by scholars, due to the complexity of social movements that are observed in post-colonial Muslim societies⁵². Such social movement theories to conceptualize a collective action tend to depend on false understandings of structures of Muslim societies that exhibit disparate characteristics, in comparison to that of Western societies; a society constructed upon rigid religiosity and socio political heterogeneity, whose motive towards a social mobilization may differ distinctively from that of Eurocentric orientations. Social movements of post-colonial societies, in which actors with a unique identity and a collective mind are to be represented and identified, regard a socio political diversity that a universalized narrative often fails to understand. Framing Islamic women's movement, thus, opposes a conventional norm to perceive such a collective action, whose extraordinary characteristics cannot easily be interpreted through the lenses of 'Westocentric'⁵³ scholarship. Asef Bayat characterizes the extraordinary element of an Islamic movement as pious religiosity that is, at the same time, an active piety, which a social action of pious individuals centers on 'individual self-enhancement' and 'identity'⁵⁴. The rigid religiosity among Muslim social actors within an instable socio-political structure of post-colonial society may result in fragmented perspectives on interpretations of Islamic ideologies. Inherent in the ideological conflict between

⁵⁰ Ibid., 614.

⁵¹ Ibid., 616.

⁵² Asef Bayat, "Islamism and Social Movement Theory", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 6, (2005), 892.

⁵³ Ibid., 893.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 894.

internationalism and a post-colonial identity, Islam, here, becomes a driving force of anti-Western modernity both regressively and progressively; the former denotes regressive anti-movement in a religious-revivalist frame, while the latter indicates a progressive activism of an authentic Muslim identity against the universalized secular modernity⁵⁵. A quest for a unique identity of social actors, thus, aims to deconstruct a conventional norm of Western modernity, in which undeliberate secularism and neo-liberalism manipulate the disparate reality of individuals in post-colonial societies; a return to the self⁵⁶.

5.2. A Her-story of Islamic Women's Movement

*An Umma, an Islamic community, is made up of families...Whoever does not have a home does not have an Umma*⁵⁷ – Muhammad 'Imara on the family as the political unit of an Islamic community

The earliest record of women's resistance in modern day Egypt dates back to 1919. The 1919 Egyptian Revolution against the British colonial rule, in which a form of women's political struggle was first to be seen in the country⁵⁸. As the first memory of a women-led action for a collective political cause, the event served as a term of a mutual identity, by which women demonstrators across Egypt were to secure their unique socio political position. Collective female interests, here, become a vehicle that generates the maternal voice of the nation that was, till then, largely overlooked and neglected by the colonial injustice; a female Muslim identity that was hitherto only to be asserted through the gaze of Euro-/androcentric gender ideals. The role of women on the center stage of this event coincided with the political background of Egypt in the First World War, in which a large number of its male population was drafted to provide labor in the battlefields across the Middle East. With an absence of male

⁵⁵ Ibid., 894.

⁵⁶ Ali Shariati, "Return to the Self", in *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives*, ed. John Donohue and John Esposito (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 1982), 305, quoted in Ibid., 894.

⁵⁷ Muhammad 'Imara, *Woman and Islam in the Opinion of the Imam Muhammad 'Abduh*, (Cairo: al-Qahira lil-Thaqafa al-'Arabiya, 1975), 6.

⁵⁸ Baron, Op. Cit., 107.

family members, women of rural areas were forced to labor in the fields and that of elite class had subjected to political/economic restrictions, who had already been active in a wide range of social affairs.⁵⁹ Although the participation of the Khedive of Egypt and Sudan in the First World War, as a protectorate of British Empire, was thought to guarantee a full independence of the country, the request of the termination of the British rule, led by the Wafd party, was revoked by Reginald Wingate, High Commissioner of Egypt, and was subsequently overlooked by the winners at Paris Peace Conference of 1919⁶⁰. The vulnerable position of women in the manipulative colonial discourse, together with the letdown of Wafidist nationalist movement provided a common ground for a collective mobilization of hundreds of women, mainly that of upper/elite class led by Huda Sha'rawi and Safiyya Zaghlul, who marched through the streets of Cairo with banners and flags in March 1919⁶¹. As previously stated, a female voice of 1919 demonstrators became an iconic symbol of a national unity, in which such a women's movement was to be seen for the first time in Egyptian history, and that of a new politics for women, whose legacy constructed a collective memory of a female identity for women of today. Such an elite-oriented movement, however, soon became subjected to criticism by Islamic activists, as the demonstration of 'the undersigned Egyptian ladies' had largely centered on secularist ideas and was, therefore, seen as an exclusive mobilization whose motive and political agenda remained strongly exclusive to average women, as Baron states:

"They wore the garb of privileged, secluded women who didn't work in fields, factories, or other peoples' homes...The evidence belies the myth that the 'lady demonstrators' expressed social solidarity and unity across class boundaries. Rather, their actions reinforced a hierarchical class vision of society"⁶²

Nationalism of 1919 Revolution and the Wafdist movement was perceived as a production of Western-oriented political discourse that neglected the authenticity of Egyptian society; a

⁵⁹ Ibid., 108.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 109.

⁶¹ Ibid., 110.

⁶² Ibid., 112.

secularist movement whose rhetorical contradictions conflicted with the anti-colonial fervor of traditionalist nationalism. In contrast, the Watani party, together with the Muslim Brotherhood, *Al-Ikhwān al-Muṣlīmīn*⁶³, concentrated on paving an Islamist socio-political platform that aimed to endorse a vindication of marginalized individuals in traditional terms, namely, women of low/lower-middle class, whose interests were largely undermined by the previous elitist mobilization. The Society of Egyptian Ladies' Awakening, founded in either late 1920 or early 1921 by Labiba Ahmed, is the first appearance of an Islamic women's organization, which opposed the Women's Wafd, an affiliated organization of the Wafd subsequent to 1919 Revolution⁶⁴. The Society of Egyptian Ladies' Awakening and the Muslim Brotherhood, including other affiliated societies' sought to strike for the reestablishment of Islamic morality and traditional values that had been subverted by the colonial discourse. A return to traditional Islam, here, does not simply denote a regression to the pre-colonial era, but stresses the necessity of constructing an unprecedented identity of individuals, through which correct teachings of society, religion and politics in Islamic terms can be adjusted to every household. Whereas secularist organizations that deliberately referred themselves as 'feminist', endorsed an elite-level of engagement in politics, Islam-oriented activists mainly focused on a direct interaction with the public, whom the liberal ideas of selective individuals from elite class could not easily be inculcated to. Together with corruption and decaying elitism that pervaded its socio political structure, Islam became an ideological medium of restoring social justice 'in service of religion and humanity'⁶⁵.

The dissemination of Islamic teachings against the colonial injustice among female activists subsequently resulted in a significant increase in the number of radicalized associations, whose activities centered on a more deepened fundamentalist belief that advocated the emergence of an Islamic state through 'the struggle', *Jihad*⁶⁶. A secular-oriented female identity that was

⁶³ Jeffrey R. Halverson and Amy K. Way, "Islamist Feminism: Constructing Gender Identities in Postcolonial Muslim Societies", *Politics and Religion*, vol. 4, no.1, (2011): 512.

⁶⁴ Baron, Op. Cit., 195.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 199.

⁶⁶ Halverson and Way, Op. Cit., 513.

endorsed by the hitherto anti-colonial movements was seen as a repetitious production of western influences, which had inculcated its impious culture into a Muslim society. Islam, as a driving force of anti-colonial politics, thus, was perceived as a guideline, by which every Muslim woman is to reconstruct her authentic identity and perform her duties in Islamic terms. Such an approach, whose political agenda differs greatly from previous movements, is referred by many as 'Islamist'⁶⁷. Through an Islamist conceptualization of inseparability between religion and state, several organizations that had much concentrated on charitable and educational activities were soon increasingly involved in politics; as seen in the example of Hasan Al-Bana, one of the founders of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose political affiliation with major political figures in the Middle Eastern states led the Brotherhood to one of the foundational Islamic political organizations, and Muslim Ladies Group, *Jamiyyat al-Sayyidat al-Muslimat*, formed by Zaynab al-Ghazali in 1937, who sought rigid ideological ties with Al-Bana in their fervent anti-colonial politics⁶⁸. Islamist women's movements had mainly concentrated on the installment of the Shari'a based social guideline for both men and women, in which the former are obliged to engage in public activities, whereas the latter are expected to perform their duties within the household⁶⁹. Such responsibilities that are entitled to female members of society in private space, however, do not necessarily indicate denigration of women's rights, as their intra-household capabilities are seen as an essential component of inculcating Islamic teachings. On the contrary, the representation of women in such terms depicts them as preachers of education, culture and politics of Islamic values, whose public activities are not to be hindered by their roles in a private space⁷⁰. Emancipation of women in Islamic terms, therefore, is to be pursued upon a reconstruction of traditional values and an authentic female Muslim identity that deconstruct colonial socio political culture, and furthermore, the previous elite-centered movements that reeked of Western influences.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 512.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 513.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 513.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 514.

Followed by the centuries-long political subjugation of Egypt to the British colonial empire, together with the fervent detestation towards the highly corrupted royal family who was seen as marionettes of the foreign occupiers, Kingdom of Egypt collapsed in 1952, whose sovereignty was passed onto the Free Officers, *Harakat ad-Dubbat al-Ahrar*⁷¹. The transition between a de facto independent monarchy to a military-elite-oriented authoritarian regime had taken a toll on both Islamic/Islamist and elite-oriented secular women's movements, as any kind of autonomous political activities was discouraged by the regime's autocratic policies. An increasingly vulnerable position in such period, regardless of their religious/political orientations, was paralleled by the regime's repressive attitude towards autonomous women's movements; a contradicting reality between progressive reforms on women's representation in a public space and the preservation of regressive status of women in intra-household relations⁷². 'State Feminism' of the Nasser regime sought to guarantee women with an equal representation of their rights in social, economic and political relations, but its endeavor to establish a modern and secular nation-state upon a highly centralized political/economic structure did not result in a change of traditional patriarchy in Egyptian society. Although women under Nasser regime might have seen formal developments in the workplace, education, politics and etcetera, the intra-household relations remained strongly hierarchical. Many of the policies towards gender equality taken by Nasser regime were abandoned under Anwar Sadat, whose orientation centered on amending the personal status law, which Nasser had failed to deal with⁷³. Despite promoting gender issues both in public and private spheres, it is important to note that women's movements in both eras had seen a gradual decline, as autonomous organizations to represent liberating languages for women were discouraged.

Personal state law, once again, has been a core of political debates among women activists under Mubarak regime in the 1980s, and women's movements, which were, till then,

⁷¹ Khali, Op. Cit., 135.

⁷² Nadja Al-Ali, *Women's Movements in the Middle East: Case Studies of Egypt and Turkey*, (Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2008b) 8.

⁷³ Ibid., 10.

concentrated in centralized institutions, re-emerged into the political scene⁷⁴. The regime's inadequate handling on gender issues and its oscillating position between domestic and international affairs constituted an increasing dissatisfaction among both secularist and Islamic women's movements. Under Mubarak's administration, who failed to balance between the confrontations of Islamic activists over the personal state law and the effort to meet the demands of international organizations, women's movements, once again, emerged as a driving force of female voices. A traditional cleavage between two 'camps', that of Islamic and secular-left, however, was still inherent in gender politics, as conflicting interests among disparate women's movements remained unchanged; the former led by the Arab Women's Solidarity Association and the latter by the Progressive Women's Union⁷⁵. Ragda D., a female member of a women's rights organization affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, said in an interview:

"Whatever you wish to label women's movements in our (contemporary) society, what really important is that we have a consensual understanding of the current social/political problem...and that we establish a common goal, (regardless of) our ideological difference...I do not think that drawing boundaries between different women's movements would help us...in achieving a positive outcome for women's rights...All people should come together to claim our stolen rights...the methods and ideologies can vary...But it's fine, as long as our goal remains the same"⁷⁶

In comparison to the conflict seen in the previous bifurcation between secular- and Islam-oriented camps, the characteristics of modern-day women's movements have witnessed gradual changes in their frameworks. As their ideologies on religion and politics have evolved to a different level in the course of post-colonial political transitions, the traditional guidelines of secularism and Islamism anchored in monolithic ontologies were now subjected to more loosened interpretations. Such tendency is also to be witnessed amongst secular-oriented

⁷⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁶ Ragda D., Interview by author, Cairo, Egypt, April 10, 2014.

women's organizations, as Amal E., a female activist from Nazra: Feminist Studies, a secular-oriented women's rights group based in Cairo, stated:

“Although we endorse international feminist (guidelines) and (secular-oriented) initiatives, we have already worked with a number of Islamic women's rights groups and are keen on cooperating with such organizations, as long as they do not violate fundamental human rights...Different goals and tools don't matter, as long as we work for a common cause...(that is) to raise awareness among all Egyptian women”⁷⁷

In the reemergence of a women's movement in post-colonial Muslim societies, Islamic/Islamist female activists maintain the core component of an Islam-oriented framework, however, also tend to stress the ambiguous boundary between women's representation in public and private spaces, which the hitherto movements were reluctant to deal with⁷⁸. While preserving its ontological approach to Islamic gender ideals, a new generation of Islamic women's movements questions the heretofore patriarchal interpretation of Islam that had restricted women's representation to a limited space. A revision of the radical elements that had pervaded the previous Islamic women's movement, here, becomes a medium of reshaping the traditional dichotomy between the concepts of 'state' and 'family'. A course of re-visioning the hitherto interpretations of Islam, *Ijtihad*, is employed as an epistemological access to an establishment of an Islamic state, a caliphate, where the patriarchal readings of the Qur'anic verses are not to contradict the political authority of women that transcends the public and private boundaries⁷⁹. Here, a family, when politicized, is seen as the most essential element of constructing an Islamic community, *Umma*, which, in result, enables a de-/reconstruction of the hitherto binaries that had divided social units⁸⁰. A re-assertion of political authority of women, in the authoritarian crackdown on Islamic institutions of the past regimes, seeks to revive the libertarian understandings of Islam that centers on its civil characteristics. While the previous

⁷⁷ Amal, Interview by author, Garden City, Cairo, April 13, 2014.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸⁰ Ellen McLarney, “The Private is Political: Women and Family in Intellectual Islam”, in *Feminist Theory*, vol. 11, no. 2, (2010): 130.

gender discourse had stressed an incompatibility between a vindication of women's rights and the rigid religiosity of Egyptian society, the new generation of Islamic women's movements conceptualizes Islam as 'the cure for...problems of injustice in the family...fighting oppression and restoring the balance of justice'⁸¹. The major contradiction that the previous secular movements had failed to stress is a refutation of a secularist framework that separates, not only religion and states, but also family and government, private and public, personal and political⁸². As *tawhid*, the theological concept of Islamic monotheism that now connotes the unity between a politicized family and state, is challenged by Western-oriented secularism, a gendered politics that deteriorates the mutual instinct between men and women, *firtra*, bisects the 'human into body and soul, and the material world into religion and state'⁸³. A de-/reconstruction of secular binaries is, therefore, followed by moral politics of an Islamic ethos that fosters women's authority within the politicized household. The microcosmic units of *Umma*, then, connect female members in private space together to exercise their political rights in Islamic values, which, otherwise, remain silenced in a framework of the 'civil'; 'the sphere of secular, Western and modern sociability'⁸⁴. Hiba Ra'uf, one of the most prominent figures of contemporary Islamic women's movements in the region, stresses how the importance of a politicized family unit has largely been overlooked in a secularist framework, in which the inter-household relations become increasingly cemented in public institutions and, furthermore, 'consigned to an artificially depoliticized domain of private relations'⁸⁵. As stated above, a cleavage between an Islamic framework and that of secularism results from disparate understandings of state-society relations, in which an Islamic notion of governance conflicts with what is seen as Western-oriented secularist authoritarianism. Any political action taken by a politicized unit derives from private relations between a female Muslim identity and socio political surroundings and, therefore, the sphere of personal faith cannot be represented in the

⁸¹ Ibid., 135.

⁸² Ibid., 136.

⁸³ Hiba Ra'uf, *Woman and Political Work: An Islamic Perspective*, (Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1995), 48, cited in Ibid., 136.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 137.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 137.

binaries coined by secular understandings that disregard the role of the feminized household as the microcosm of political Islam. Islamic women's movements, thus, stress the need of governance of political Islam, *Shura*⁸⁶, which advocates an Islamic purview of democracy, an alternative template of Islamic politics that vindicates equality, fairness and unity.

5.3. Islamic Hermeneutics: Deconstructing Patriarchy and Reconstructing Gender

*(God)...created you from a single Nafs, created, of like nature, (its) Zawj (mate) and from them twain scatter (like seeds) countless men and women...It is He who hath produced you from a single person...It is He who created you from a single person, and made (its) mate of like nature, in order that he might dwell with her (in love)...God has made for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquility with them...(and)...ye may know each other (not ye may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is... the most righteous of you*⁸⁷ - The Qur'anic verses on gender, 4:1, 6:98, 7:189, 16:72, 40:21, 49:13.

The emergence of political Islam and its affiliation with women's movements paved such political environment, in which the interests of female individuals are to be rightly articulated and their Muslim identity can properly be engaged in post-colonial conflicts between traditionalism and globalism. The vulnerable position of post-colonial Muslim women coincides with 'local national liberation and religious reform movements'⁸⁸, in which the visibility of female interests is largely veiled by patriarchal injustice that pervades socio political culture of post-colonial Egypt. Furthermore, the presence of misogynic interpretations of Islam associates with detestation towards Western influence that rebukes women's movements as a product of Western secularism, thereby, promoting a 'rigid conservative social platform'⁸⁹. In such

⁸⁶ Ibid., 138.

⁸⁷ Abdullah Y. Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 1988), 1407, quoted in Asma Barlas, *The Qur'an and Hermeneutics: Reading the Qur'an's Opposition to Patriarchy*, (New York: Ithaca College, 2001) 25.

⁸⁸ Margot Badran, "Islamic Feminism: What's in a name?", *Al Ahran Weekly Online*, (2002), accessed on February 11, 2014, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/569/cu1.htm>.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 508.

circumstance, Islamic women's movements engage in revising a male-oriented interpretation of the *Qur'an* and articulate the need of gender-free evaluation of its verses; as the *Qur'an*, which indeed advocates the equality between men and women, has been falsely interpreted by patriarchal understandings of *Hadith* that are ossified in an androcentric scholarship of 'traditional male exegetes'⁹⁰. The quest of Islamic women's movements is, thus, a construction of a female-Muslim identity that was previously considered to be voiced solely by a paternal position. A unique identity that represents female-Muslim interests is to be produced upon the emergence of new hermeneutic knowledge, which de-/reconstructs prevalent religious-misogyny embedded in the hitherto conservative-Islamist epistemology.

As previously stated, an Islamic hermeneutics endorses gender equality based on an Islam-oriented methodology; thereby, opposing a conservative-Islamist hermeneutics that associates with religious fundamentalism and misogynic practices. An Islamic women's movement, thus, aims to deconstruct the falsification of *Hadith* and to reconstruct the authenticity of Islam, by which its ontic principles of justice can be restored. Redefining the *Qur'an* as a social movement, here, requires a new form of methodology that enables a vindication of women's rights in Islamic terms. Islam, as a main source, redesigns the rigid platform of androcentric fundamentalism and reconstructs an institutionalized hierarchy in 'liberatory modes'⁹¹. Margot Badran in her article, *Islamic Feminism: What's in a Name?*, distinguishes such hermeneutics, as referred 'feminist', into three different categories, namely, *revision* to indicate an androcentric falsification; *citation* to enunciate gender equality in the Holy *Qur'an*; and lastly, *deconstruction* to reformulate gendered-interpretations of its verses⁹². The ambiguity of the vocabulary used in the *Qur'anic* verses has given androcentric exegetes a possibility to mutilate its ontic meanings and to place arbitrary interpretations that are to secure the prerogative male position, a product of an androcentric scholarship. The marginalized position of women that is

⁹⁰ Halverson and Way, Op. Cit., 507.

⁹¹ Barlas, Op. Cit., 15.

⁹² Badran, Op. Cit., 12.

articulated through the supposed gender differentiation of *Hadith* is a mere creation of an androcentric falsification, as cited in such reading of the Qur'anic verses:

“Men are the protectors and maintainers, *quwwamun ala*, of women, because God has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, *qanitat*, and guard in (the husband's) absence what God would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye hear disloyalty and ill-conduct, *nushuz*, admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds, (and last) beat them (lightly), *daraba*. But if they return to obedience, seek not against them means (of annoyance)”⁹³

The above excerpt of the Qur'an, 4:34, however, has been completely taken out of the social/historical contexts and, thus, implements a patriarchal hierarchy over an inferior sex/gender, in which the equivocal gender inequality is seen as the inherency of human nature. Islamic hermeneutics of women's movements, thereby, notes the need of revising such misogynic vocabulary; *quwwamun ala*, for instance, denotes financial obligations of male members within the household, rather than a duty as a ruler/guardian/manager with inviolable superiority⁹⁴. The gendered understanding of the Qur'anic vocabulary, moreover, falsifies a specification of different sexes/genders as a symbolical differentiation of conflicting capabilities, in which masculinity and femininity are embedded in a vertical axis of gender hierarchies. Through the patriarchal gaze of an androcentric scholarship, *qanitat*, duties entitled to both men and women, and *daraba*, a legal action at the community level, become gendered symbols, by which the specific context that associates with biased male-experiences remains largely neglected; a his-story of the Qur'an. Asma Barlas, in '*The Qur'an and Hermeneutics: Reading the Qur'an's Opposition to Patriarchy*', suggests three essential elements of constructing an anti-patriarchal hermeneutics that are to deconstruct the falsified discourse of misogynic fundamentalism; the principles of divine unity, *tawhid*, incomparability between men and God

⁹³ Barlas, Op. Cit., 17.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 18.

and divine justice of the rights of others⁹⁵. *Tawhid*, referring the inviolable sovereignty of God, is an indication of divine unity that 'cannot be extended' to others, which contradicts a *Hadith* notion of conceiving 'males as God's surrogates'⁹⁶; a symbolization of male authority over women as the extension of divine rule, thus, conflicts with divine justice, in which rights of both men and women are to be equality represented.

6. Muslim Women's Struggles as a Transnational Collectivity

The vulnerable position that average women of post-colonial Egypt occupy is not only characteristics limited to the case of Egypt, but are the reality that many of Muslim women around the world face; a global phenomenon that women of post-colonial societies experience on daily bases, including countries with established Muslim minority communities. Understanding the struggle of Muslim women against patriarchal injustice and social/political instability that jeopardize a female Muslim identity of circa 450 million women both in Muslim countries or communities⁹⁷. Neo-colonial/Western-oriented and patriarchal/fundamentalist discourses have failed to provide a liberating socio-political platform, in which women's rights can be rightly exercised. The position of a female Muslim identity in postcoloniality finds itself in a constant struggle between religious fundamentalism and a secular-oriented framework of universalism, which subsequently (re)produce a repressive reality that threatens religious integrity; colonial injustice that indoctrinated a deculturated womanhood, as well as nationalist/communist discourses that instilled 'nothing more than state collusion with Western imperialism'⁹⁸. A conceptualization of socio-political problems in its contemporary state as a transnational phenomenon, thus, becomes essential, as their shared knowledge is central to constructing a collective recognition of the current situation, which, then, produces a

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹⁷ Marie-Aimee Helie-Lucas, "Women's Struggles and Strategies in the Rise of Fundamentalism in the Muslim World: From Entryism to Internationalism", in *Women in the Middle East: Perceptions, Realities and Struggle for Liberation*, ed. Haleh Afshar, (London: Macmillan, 1993), 206.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 211.

broad framework of understanding varied experiences of a common injustice for all Muslim women, regardless of clans, tribes, communities, states or nations, to which they belong. Islamic women's struggle, therefore, should be dealt in a framework of a transnational action, in which their collective identity upon shared experiences and knowledge become a driving force of a social mobilization against both external perpetrators and internal dominant groups. Nawal El-Saadawi, a prominent Egyptian feminist writer notes the repressive reality of postcoloniality that women in this region collectively experience, as she states:

“The women's liberation movement in Egypt and Arab countries is aware of the link between international and national forces of exploitation and oppression. These neo-colonial powers have developed an arsenal of divisive weapons which can be directed against the forces of resistance in this region...They propagate notions of modernization and liberalization linked to consumerism, sex tourism, pornography, naked bodies of women in advertisements and so on, as this encourages commercial activities and increases the profits of multinationals. But at the same time they provide encouragement and assistance to fundamentalist movements...Women in this region are the first victims of such a double game. As consumers and sex objects they are called upon to become more liberal and more modern...The end result is to divide women on a class basis, isolating the elites and subjugating them to the world market, while turning the majority into the instrument of reactionary forces and a non-productive force...”⁹⁹¹⁰⁰

Apart from a conceptualization of a common ontological understanding, a transnational collectivity among average Muslim women raises a question of 'multiple critique', in which an inclusive/flexible discourse authorizes not only an exclusive position that de-authorizes 'the language of those not thus placed', but 'multiple consciousness of others'; the concept of 'multiple critique' distances itself from the previous identity politics that focuses on an

⁹⁹ Nawal El-Saadawi, "Women's Resistance in the Arab World and in Egypt", in *Women in the Middle East: Perceptions, Realities and Struggle for Liberation*, ed. Haleh Afshar, (London: Macmillan, 1993), 144.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 144.

'essentialized subject position' and, furthermore, employs a 'fluid discursive strategy' that creates a new and highly contingent subject position'¹⁰¹. An establishment a common ground for a collective action to secure Muslim women's identity in the transition to modernity, therefore, is to construct viable identities that transcend traditional boundaries between communities and nations; consequently, increasing the interconnectivity between female Muslim individuals 'to establish networks of solidarity'¹⁰², which transforms the hitherto binaries that reek of Western universalism to a network of 'alternative communities', where metanarratives write a her-story of transnational Islamic women's movement.

7. Conclusion

We must not neglect that women in a Muslim society are entitled to the specific duties and responsibilities in the household. Such duties...nursing the upcoming generation who are the key political unit of our society, for example, is one of the most important roles that women play in intra-household relations. The accusation that women at home do not play any significant role (in making important decisions)...is untrue in our society, because...we (women) are a role model for the next generation. Working in the home is as important as working (outside). It (working in informal networks) does not mean that we are less intelligent or literate than men are. We are capable of engaging in all domains of our society¹⁰³ - Raghda D., a female member of a women's rights organization affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood

Understanding the voice of average Muslim women in a post-colonial society is followed by de-/reconstructing the hitherto binaries, in which the uniqueness of their identity had largely been subalternized in the transition to modernity. The universal norms that had been employed to investigate Islamic women's movement have centered on a falsified consciousness of a fixed identity, which, in result, disseminated a homogenized interpretation of such a collective action. Their motives and strategies have been overlooked, which are, then, replaced with simplistic

¹⁰¹ Cooke, Op. Cit., 96.

¹⁰² Ibid., 103.

¹⁰³ Raghda, Ibid..

and conventional gender arrangements that neglect the articulation of self-interests by Muslim women themselves. The way that Muslim women respond to their unjust situation has been disregarded by neo-colonial academic arrogance that postulates Islam as incompatible with the supposed liberating languages they pursue. The legacy of neo-/colonial discourse that indoctrinates Western acculturation, of course, is not the only injustice that women of post-colonial societies struggle with. The post-colonial women's liberation movement in this region has been a double-game, in which the aforementioned political/economic/cultural exploitation by foreign forces remains closely entangled with patriarchal indoctrination of post-colonial politics and religion in their society. In spite of numerous constitutional reforms in the last half of the Twentieth century, post-colonial gender relations have been deteriorated by institutionalized state policies, where a female identity became largely embedded in a project of nationalization, by which their duties as social actors were assigned to limited roles of, for instance, biological reproduction in private space.

This article, in terms of the socio political vulnerability that women of post-colonial Egyptian society face, has investigated Muslim women's movement in a way that regards the contradicting socio political condition of postcoloniality. It, furthermore, illustrated an Islamic hermeneutics as a new epistemological approach to tackle the extremes of modernization and fundamentalist religiosity, which fail to recognize a new identity of women in post-colonial Egyptian society; a resistant identity that distances from both Euro-/androcentric and patriarchal religious discourses. In the previous paragraphs of the first chapter, a reality that mothers and daughters of post-colonial Egypt experience in their everyday lives has been discussed. A distorted image of Muslim women, whose deviant sexuality had been both physically and psychologically exploited by the colonial discourse, have, once again, seen a gradual subjugation to repressive post-colonial politics. A Muslim identity of women as social actors and their mobilization against social political injustice have remained largely neglected in oppressive circumstances that authoritative state-policies re-/generate. The second body of the article, in relation to the aforementioned reality of Egyptian women, has illustrated the transformation of their identity between the household and workplace in the transition to

modernity. The hitherto Eurocentric conceptualization that bifurcates the boundaries between the household and workplace has falsified the political atmosphere of post-colonial Egypt, where Muslim women's intersection between public and private spaces distinctively differ from that of Western women. As discussed in the previous chapters, informal/formal representations of women in these spheres transcend Western binaries of public and private worlds, where only the former is thought to associate with decision-making authority and financial independence, while the latter does with limited representation and economic subjugation. The transforming identity of low-/lower middle class women in post-colonial Egypt between these traditional boundaries, therefore, has been seldom acknowledged by such universal norms that neglect unique experiences of these women. An interpretation of women's movement for liberation from 1919, The Egyptian Revolution of 1919, to present has been analyzed in the third body of the article in a style that illustrates a 'her-story' of post-colonial Egypt, where a social mobilization of Muslim women centers on an Islamic action frame; a framework to elevate unique interests of average Muslim women, which the previous Western-/elite-oriented movements had failed to deal with. An articulation of Muslim women's voice that highlights a moral politics of an Islamic ethos to foster women's authority within a politicized family unit, here, coincides with an establishment of an Islamic epistemology that de-/reconstructs the previous patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'anic verses; a vindication of women's rights in liberatory Islamic terms.

In the recent years, Egyptian women have entered a completely new terrain of social/political/economic relations. They have now come to assert their own interests, whose voice had only been articulated by narratives of modernity that conceptualize Egyptian women's movement through the gaze of the neo-/colonial discourse. A gender ideology of Muslim women's movement for liberation in post-colonial Egypt is predicated upon an indigenous channel that visualize their self-articulated voice, whose legitimacy has previously been undermined by universal norms of feminism. Egyptian women, including those in other post-colonial Arab states and communities, are now in search for a common ground, in which their collective mobilization is to secure such a position that opposes both the legacy of neo-

/colonialism and the fundamentalist doctrines of post-colonial circumstances. A manifestation of a self-claimed identity for Muslim women, therefore, becomes a means of writing a 'her-story' of a post-colonial society, which, otherwise, remains forever silenced. A female member of the Muslim Brotherhood, named Mona G., stated in an email interview:

"A (Western-oriented) framework of understanding gender-relations (parallels) miniskirts with women's emancipation. But how does such (conceptualization) represent the interests of women in contemporary Egyptian society? Our unique identity as Egyptian women and, furthermore, as Muslim women, has regressed to the age of ignorance. Could our duties and roles as Muslim women be rightly explained by such a framework?...Of course, (such indoctrination that reeks of Western colonialism) is not only the cause of the current reality that women of Egypt experience...The political elite of our society has also failed to represent our interests. Therefore, our Islamic identity becomes a driving force of our collective action against such injustice that we now suffer...(Western-oriented) Feminism and (authoritative/patriarchal) politics manipulate our rights given by Islam...Whatever the external and internal forces are willing to label us, our main goal is to write our (own) story...to secure our position in (postcoloniality)...Our belief is (our) rights. Our unity is (our) power..."¹⁰⁴

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¹⁰⁴ Mona G., Interview by author, Cairo, Egypt, March 30, 2014.

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