"Teaching Silences: Women as Change Makers in the Middle East."

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Historically women of the Middle East appear in Western narratives as subjects of great curiosity and fantasy in accounts of the mysterious harem, the lavish Bedouin tent, the seductive belly dancer. Here the woman is represented as secluded, helpless, object of male desire. This ancient and robust myth has and still continues to perpetrate a silence surrounding Middle Eastern women as historical agents and change-makers.

The western image of the Oriental woman, and in particular the Muslim woman, as powerless object of desire dates back to the late 18th and 19th when an a sudden interest in the Orient rose amongst European scholars, particularly in France, Germany, and Britain. This coinciding with European expansionism and competition over colonial possessions that marked the Long Nineteenth Century. Scholarly journals about the Orient flourished, and if women were discussed the focus would be placed on polygyny and seclusion. Oiental women as a category became represented as a helpless woman at the hands of a perverse Muslim man, in need of rescue. The harem in particular became the obsession of Orientalist artists such as Dominique Ingres. (see his 1862 painting *The Turkish Bath* or *The Odalisque*). Since Western men had no access into the private quarters of Muslim families their paintings were based on fantasies, rather than realities. In the nineteenth century a new media, photography, increasingly makes use of the image of the Oriental woman. While photography was valued above all for its truthfulness, even when consumers and photographers knew firsthand about the constructed or staged nature of the photographic image. The photographs were produced in studios in Britain and France and often photographers hired prostitutes to pose for these photos. The photographs in essence depicted "all that was wrong with the non-Christian Orient." But here we are studying what men thought about women, rather than studying women themselves.

Over the course of the twentieth century, historiography has changed tremendously. We see the emergence of social and more recently cultural history of the Middle East, using interdisciplinary methodologies that challenge previous myths and stereotypes. The most important difference from the earlier Orientalist traditions, that based its historical inquiry on Philology, is the new and creative use of primary sources by social and cultural historians of the Middle East. Historians now use the press, public and private correspondence, diplomatic records, memoirs, literature, police records, and court records, all of which give us a different picture in particular when it comes to women in the Middle East. In the last thirty years , historians have increasingly studied women as historical subjects and agents. But the Orientalist trope that reduces Middle East women to be passive victims of culture, religion, and Islam is robust and has left a lasting legacy in the mind of the western public. When images of the Arab Spring where screened in the western media the highly visible women in the streets were omitted. Given western ideas, the fact that Middle Eastern women were protesting should have been news unto itself.

Yet female activism should not surprise a historian of the twentieth-century Middle East, where women as political actors were forming women's societies, associations, and unions throughout much of the century. Generally these nascent women's movements have been linked to national crisis. In Iran in 1906 and in Turkey in 1908, women marched in streets for a constitution. In Egypt, women were instrumental in the revolution against British occupation in 1919. Female activists marched along men and organized successful protests and boycotts of British goods. The protests led to Egypt's nominal independence, a shift from a colonial occupying state with a corrupt monarchy, to something resembling a democratic society. A new era of female political activists began with the 1923 foundation of the Egyptian Feminist Union advocating for women's education, access to public works, right to vote, and for a reform of personal law and divorce. In the early twentieth century, Egyptian feminist Huda Shaarawi, a prolific writer and activist, led multiple protests, including a public unveiling upon return from a European tour, Her union picketed the Egyptian Parliament in protest of inequlaity. In 1945 Shaarawi was awarded highest state decoration in Egypt, marked a great turning point. Upper-class women increasingly became visible and active in the public domain and in politics. Huda Shaarawi has often been called the pioneer of Egyptian feminism.

Under Jamal Abdel Nasser (1950s – 1970s) who was seen as liberator of the poor, but also oppressive of political activism, we see Doria Shafiq and the Daughters of the Nile pushing for rights, using hunger strikes, and forcing women in the Assembly to discuss the new republican order. The new regime granted women the right to vote and representation in parliament in 1956. In addition, women's education and increased literacy became a measurement of state performance in this post-colonial era. While under Nasser women were given political rights within the state sturcture, he outlawed all political activism in fear of opposition. Women's organizations became social, charitable organizations as did labor unions and professional organizations, without political stake.

After Nasser's death in the 1970s, Anwar Sadat had a different agenda. Instead of adhering to the notion of an Arab Socialist State wherein education of women was a state project, Sadat opened Egypt to Western capitalism. State programs shrunk; women's unemployment and poverty rates rose. It is at this point that women's organizations enjoyed a new wave of political activism led by Egyptian feminist Nawal al-Sadawi whose opposition to the regime led to prison and a revoked medical license. She led the Arab Women Solidarity Association (AWSA), published feminist journals, and helped women in villages with income-generating projects promoting human rights and legal literacy. In 1987 the Alliance of Arab Women, staffed by doctors and lawyers and still active today, organized programs for basic human rights, literacy, and education in the interstices where the state failed. Women's organization in 1980s and 1990s were dispersed throughout society, in an attempt to better the lives of all Egyptian women. Looking at the great number of organizations and activists, the participation of Egyptian women in the uprising in 2011 should be of no surprise. But women's participation in this revolution was also different from women's activism in the century leading up to it: now, women from all social classes and all walks of life participated.

The most recent history of public protest in Egypt against Mubarak, who had come to power by accident, stayed 30 years, and constantly renewed his term, occurred despite commonly occurring police brutality and the Emergency Law that had been evoked in 1967. The law greatly extended police power and Egyptians could be arrested without reason and could be "disappeared" for a while. While young Egyptian activists organized large protests in 2005 against Mubarak, who was imposing himself for a fifth term, women participated in small numbers. Women comprised about 10% of this protest, mainly because Mubarak's propaganda machine had successfully intimidated women. Egyptian state television reported that women were being raped and molested in the streets by protesters. In reality, women being arrested and raped, not by protesters but by Mubarak's plainclothes thugs.

Even so, women's participation in economic protests increased between 2005 and 2011. Women were at the forefront of labor strikes that have been overlooked by Western media. The 3000+ protests between 2004 and 2011 contained significant female participation. Strikes at textile factories in Mahalla in 2006 and 2008 featured female workers from the spinning department . In Mansourah, 300 workers went on strike, 75% of whom were female, and gained significant demands. In addition to poverty, discontent, and police brutality, these earlier labor strikes laid the groundwork for female participation in the 2011 uprising.

In 2010, a young man, named Khaled Said was arrested by Egyptian police tortured and killed; Photos of his mutulated corpse circulated on the internet raised anger and inspired young activists to rally against the brutal Egyptian regime.When Asmaa Mafouz posted on the internet a video blog urging a walk down to Tahrir square on January 25, 2011 to demand fundamental human rights, stating that the entire government was corrupt, this struck a chord, and circulated like wildfire among Egyptian youth.

Women now participated in greater numbers (about 20%) in the January uprising. Photographs and video show that women were in the front lines, not shy about mixing with men: women of various ages, crossing religious lines, Christians walking hand in hand with conservative Muslims, alongside jeans-wearing leftist activists. State television no longer intimidated women. Instead women protected and prepared themselves via discussion groups and websites giving tips as to how protect oneself from being sexually harassed during protests. This gave women a sense of solidarity and agency. In these photographs, women look far from intimidated. Women participated in the revolution in various forms, some cooked for the activists, aided the wounded, chanted and threw stones.

While no women are on the Board to Rewrite the Constitution, activist women and progressives still wonder how to maintain and expand women's rights. Buhaina Kamel's candidacy for President was unthinkable a short while ago. Other Egyptian women are hoping that the constitution will be rewritten, and that 64 seats, occupied by women before the revolution, will be at least retained. Al-Sadawi thinks that unification of women's groups will protect women's rights more than a female president will, and that women should be in the streets in the millions, and remind men of their role in the

overthrowing of the regime. And we, as scholars and teachers, must remind ourselves and others that after all it was a young 26 year old woman's video blog that contributed to sparking a revolution.