

***Arab Feminism: It's Not an Oxymoron
What (Arab) Women Really Want***

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Introduction

My talk is focused on the perception of Arab women in the United States and Europe, as well as the reality. I'm going to start by saying that I'm not a sociologist, a legal scholar, or a political scientist. I'm an English professor and a fiction writer, I'm the daughter of Arab immigrants to the US, and I'm a person who's been consistently puzzled by the way in which my own life experiences as an Arab American woman is so vastly different from the perception other Americans have about Arab and Arab American women.

I've had people assume that my father must be really strict and abusive; that my marriage was arranged; etc. Maybe many of you have come face to face with these stereotypes. So I'm going to talk today about women in Arab speaking countries, about the history of their feminist movement, about the problems everyone thinks Arab women face, and then about the problems they actually do face. I'm

also going to talk a little bit about the lives of Arab American women and their experiences.

I will begin by sharing a personal experience with you. In 2003, I crafted a proposal for a book on Arab and Arab American women's literature. I approached several well-known as well as emerging writers and asked them to contribute an essay and sample of their creative writing to the book: Naomi Shihab Nye, Ghada Samaan, Nathalie Handal, Dima Halal, Diana Abu-Jaber, and many others agreed to be represented in the book. The collected voices addressed major themes within Arab and Arab American literature: the crisis of a dual ethnic identity, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, discrimination against Arabs in the United States, a lack of general understanding of Islam, and related issues. Another topic that several writers addressed was the fundamental misunderstanding of the role of Arab women in the Arab world and in the Arab community in the United States.

My publisher proved to be very supportive of the project and enthusiastic about the potential contribution the book could make to the field of ethnic American literary studies. I signed the contract, worked on the book for a year and a half, and finally submitted the manuscript. As the book went into production, I felt very positive and upbeat about the entire project. However, the design for the book's cover nearly knocked me off my chair when I first saw it as a PDF file opening on my computer screen. [SLIDE] The title of the book, *Scheherazade's Legacy*, had been my suggestion, a way of reclaiming the stereotype of one of literature's greatest storytellers – a female character who is a heroine in Arab and Persian literature but who has

become nothing more than a harem sex kitten in colonialist European versions of the Arabian Nights tales. Therefore my use of Scheherazade was in a positive place of empowerment, but I was dismayed by the image that accompanied it: as you can see, toward the bottom of the book cover, a woman's blue eyes gaze out at the viewer from between the narrow slits of her black niqab. Behind and above her, minarets loom in the dusky blue background. It is an exotic and thoroughly Orientalist design, something completely anathema to the book's message.

When I expressed my concern to my editor, I was simply told that, at such a late stage in the process of the book's publication, little could be done about the cover art. While I understood that the marketing and design departments had already invested significant time in the cover, the blatantly stereotypical image deeply disturbed me. As it turned out, it also disturbed many of the book's contributors. There is a ridiculously wide disconnect between the image on the cover and the voices within the book that struggled to articulate their disapproval of this very image of Arab women, so prevalent in our popular culture.

After all, we know this stereotype – we've all seen it before, but maybe we don't recognize it as a stereotype -- it's not as clearly offensive, maybe not in the way that portrayals of other ethnic groups have become. The question is: how many people accept it as a typical portrayal of an Arab woman? Certainly the publisher's graphic design team, who had not read the books' contents, had assumed that this was typical, that this would grab the attention of people browsing through the bookstores. Or maybe they wanted to make sure that

those shoppers would pick up the book because the picture on the cover already matched their assumptions – that that recognition of what an Arab woman looks like would encourage them to make the purchase.

For some women in the Middle East, this image of the silent, submissive, oppressed woman – imprisoned behind the veil – is accurate. We know some countries like Saudi Arabia enforce the veil. For many more women, this image is quite far removed from the truth of their everyday lives. In fact, for many, this image would be laughable were it not so dangerous. Arab women realize the harm that this image inflicts; that when another culture accepts this stereotype - of Arab women as helpless and suppressed -- without question, real, physical danger is the result. If Arab men universally suppress Arab women, then that makes it easier to invade Arab countries, to look disdainfully at Arab culture, etc.

This image doesn't allow room for other accounts of Arab life, of accounts of real relationships between Arab men and women. Their popularity and universal acceptance threatens to obscure the real history of Arab feminism, and I just want to offer you a brief history of that movement now.

Arab feminist history

Qasim Amin [SLIDE] was an Egyptian lawyer, who lived during the British colonial occupation of Egypt, in the late 1800s and early

1900s. He was troubled by the high rate of illiteracy among women in colonial Egypt and by the lack of social advances being made. Amin studied in Europe for some time, and he greatly admired the way that women had opportunities in societies that were free. Believing in the potential progress of Arab culture and the Arab people, he felt that Arabs could only advance, could only resist colonialism successfully, if 100% of the Arab population were involved in that struggle— men and women. In 1899, Amin published *The Liberation of Women*, and he argued that society's problems could be solved by improving the status of women through education, as well as reforming the legal system regarding polygamy, marriage, divorce, and other issues affecting the lives of women. He wrote: "We have narrowed the functional role of women to one of child-bearing. In doing so we have not required women to perform any other role" (Amin p. 71). You might agree that this is rather advanced, rather progressive, for 1899.

The Liberation of Women was controversial, obviously, but Amin also had a lot of support. In this book, he claimed that the equality of women was an essentially Islamic idea, rooted in the Koran and in the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. The Islamic religion, he argued, provides women with fundamental rights; it banned female infanticide, for example, and gave women the right to buy and sell property, rights that were unheard of in any other culture at the time that Muhammad was receiving his revelations, the early to mid 600s.

A related comment here: Although American popular discourse seems to automatically link Islam to the oppression of women, many Arab women today, who are Muslim, do not view a discrepancy

between their religion and their feminism, for the same reason that Amin wrote about a century ago. In fact, they find examples of women's independence and strength in the history of Islam and in the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Karen Armstrong, the noted religious scholar, says in her biography of Muhammad, that he preached a religion to the Arabs on the peninsula in the mid-600s that transcended class differences, differences in skin color, and differences in gender. For example, his first wife, Khadijah, was a successful businesswoman who was clearly his partner in every way; after her death, he married other women, many for political alliances as he tried to convert various tribes on the Saudi peninsula to Islam. He also married many women who were the widows of those men who died fighting in battle for the Prophet. But according to what we know, his wives generally served as a council of sorts; he consulted them and they advised him on many matters. His wife Aisha is often described as being one of his best friends: Armstrong writes of their life in the 600s: "With Aisha particularly he was able to unwind, challenging her to footraces and the like. She had a sharp tongue and was by no means a shy or submissive wife." (p. 127) Furthermore, the often-criticized revelation that a man could take four wives should be put into context: pre-Islamic Arabs on the peninsula often took many more than four wives and did not treat them responsibly. Marrying a woman was often an excuse for raping her legally or seizing her possessions and then abandoning her. The revelation regarding four wives comes, as Armstrong notes, at a significant moment: soon after the prophet and the small band of Muslims were defeated brutally in the battle of Uhud. Armstrong writes, "When Muhammad returned

home after the battle, sick and shaken, he heard loud lamenting outside the mosque: it was the wives of the Helpers mourning their dead.” (p. 132) “Each of the Muslim dead had left wives and daughters without protectors,” and so we have the revelation, which allows for a sort of social welfare system. In fact, early Muslim women actually enjoyed a level of freedom unknown before – they could own and sell and inherit property, initiate divorce, etc, which was unheard of in Europe until centuries later.

So there is legitimacy in Qasim Amin’s claim of an Islamic root to feminism. Many religious leaders and political leaders, alarmed by Qasim Amin’s message, criticized him. Nevertheless, many Egyptian men and women rallied behind the idea, and the women’s empowerment movement spread.

A few years later, Huda Sha’rawi, [SLIDE] the Arab world’s most famous feminist – she’s the equivalent of Susan B. Anthony to American feminists – began actively implementing Qasim Amin’s ideas. Sha’rawi established the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923, serving as its President from its inception until 1947, the year she died; she also founded the Arab Feminist Union in 1945, which answered the call elsewhere in the Middle East for women to organize.

And quite simply, Arab women have never stopped organizing, never stopped since then, working for improvement and change. I guarantee that the pro-democracy uprisings that we have seen in the past few months in Libya, Tunis, Egypt and elsewhere would not have been possible with a strong women’s movement already on the

ground. Women in the Middle East are active in challenging obstacles in their way; the problem is that you don't really hear about it.

Here is what you do hear about: veils and honor killings. These are issues on the agenda of Arab feminists, along with a host of other issues that I will discuss later, but in the Western media, they are discussed in isolation. So let's discuss them here in some depth:

Veils

The veil as an Arab or Muslim woman's issue is in the news all the time. Recently, the government of France banned women's ability to wear the full face veil in public; the claim by the Sarkozy administration is that the veil denies Muslim women their equal rights and that equality is a French value. This argument makes sense, but only if you believe that the few thousand French women who wear the full face veil are wearing it because they are forced to do so.

Writing in the Guardian, Joan Wallach Scott says, "Why has it been so easy to identify the veil as an instrument only of oppression, even when ethnographers and historians tell us it has multiple meanings, and when some women who wear it insist that they have chosen it because it positively signifies their femininity and their devotion to God?"

And let's clarify what we mean by the veil: There are many forms of the veil: **hijab** is one form of the veil. Whether your hair shows or not, whether it's tied around your neck like a scarf or just draped over your head, whether it's black or white or made of a

patterned cloth – those stylistic differences are dependent on where you live, in which country (Iraq, India, Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, Morocco), in the city or the village, what sect of Islam you belong to, even whether you work around machinery or flammable substances, etc. Another form is the **niqab**, which you can see allows only a slit for the eyes to be revealed. Women who wear the niqab usually wear a full black abaya or jilbab as well, whereas the hijab may be worn with a long, flowing dress or with a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. The burqa, which you may have heard of, is still another form of a veil, most common in Afghanistan, and in other cultures and even in other parts of the Muslim world, these forms of veiling have still more names and variations.

So, many women in the Arab world wear the veil, in one form or another. They did so before Muhammad, before Jesus and before Moses. You will often notice Christian women and Jewish women in the Middle East covering their hair – my grandmother, a Christian Palestinian, never left the house without her veil on her head. Here, for example, is a picture of Orthodox Christian nuns. **(SLIDE)** And may I point out that in the Arab world, men technically veil as well? **(SLIDE)** Some wear a headdress and loose, flowing Islamic dress – and some do not. Again, depending on where you live, your sect, your lifestyle, etc. My Christian grandfather, like my grandmother, never left the house without his keffiyeh – which is what Palestinian men call their headdress.

The head covering has a function in Middle Eastern societies – it always did. First of all, it protects your head and your skin from the

hot sun. For men and women alike, a long flowing head covering could also multi-task: it could be wrapped around one's face and cover one's nose and ears in case of sand storms, which kick up without much warning. My grandfather, when he was out working in his fields, would often take off his headdress and pitch it like a small tent and sit under it when it was time to eat his meals or rest. Women could use their head scarves as a sack to carry fruit or vegetables they had collected, or as a sling to carry a baby. Furthermore, in such a hot climate, a long flowing, loose-fitting dress – for men and women – was cooler because the cloth was light weight and did not touch the skin closely.

For women who wear the veil today – at least who do wear it willingly, for it would be untrue to insist that some are not forced to wear it or that some feel compelled by their specific society or community to veil– the veil, in any of its forms, represents many things: a mark of their religion, the way a Christian woman might wear a crucifix around her neck, or the way that Christian women used to, and some Jewish women, still do cover their hair before entering a religious place of worship. I was taught in Catholic schools, by nuns who wore a strict habit and covered their hair, as well as by lay teachers who also covered their hair before entering the church for mass.

I would argue that the veil in itself is not a problem for Arab women; the problem occurs when women are compelled to wear it– this is an intrusion into their personal choice and liberty, just as the French ban on the veil is an intrusion on their choice and liberty.

The veil comes as goes as a trend. Whether or not it is required by Islam is highly debated, because Muhammad's sayings as well as the revelations he received do not outrightly state that women should cover their hair and face in public.

Right now, you see many more women adopting it, but in the past, it was something few city women wore – it was still practical and functional for Arab women who lived in the villages to wear it, but not for those in the cities. **SLIDE** Here, for example, is a group of Palestinian women in the mid-1930s on a women's march against the division of Jerusalem. Hardly any of them are veiled, and as was typical for urban women at the time, they are wearing European-style clothes, rather than the long dresses and veils that their sisters in the Palestinian villages were wearing. Indeed, there was a time when the veil was seen as a mark of the poorer classes; also, some leaders advocated against it. Qasim Amin himself, because of his admiration of European culture and his emphasis on the need for Arab society to modernize and shake off colonialism, thought Arab women should not veil.

Right now, for whatever reason, many more Muslim women, in Arab and other countries, are veiling. I know of many women, in their 40s, 50s and 60s, who do not veil and never did, and yet their daughters and granddaughters have chosen to veil. For some younger women, wearing a veil and covering their faces or heads is a statement – a political statement, perhaps because Islam is under attack in the West. It could be a simple religious statement – maybe a renewed devotion to the faith. It could also be a feminist statement, a refusal to be evaluated for their physical appearance. They might tell

you that Western society causes women to feel obsessed with their looks and their weight, and women are made to feel that their value is dependent on their attractiveness -- this is a form of oppression, they will say. (I do have to say, having a young daughter myself, I am deeply troubled by the toys, games, movies, and shows available for young girls that focus almost exclusively and from a very young age on sexuality, makeup, and shopping. If you get a chance to read it, the book *Packaging Girlhood* by Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown is an amazing and disturbing study of this trend.)

Therefore, what we can see about the veil is that it doesn't work as a universal symbol of women's oppression, because it's a very flexible, malleable thing: In Qasim Amin's day, veiling was a sign of poor, rural women and of the seclusion of women from men; in modern days, it seems that the veil has become a way in which women can interact with men.

Honor Killings

Like the veil, the practice of honor killings is not Islamic in origin either. It even predates Christianity, if one considers the story in the New testament, in John 8, in which Jesus defends a woman who is about to be stoned to death for adultery.

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5In

the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"

In ancient pre-Islamic and even pre-Christian Middle Eastern societies, crimes of adultery were considered capital offenses because they threatened the family unit, which was at the core of the tribe, the structure around which the society was organized.

In many ways, Middle Eastern and Arab societies continue to be tribal by nature. In my own family, people associate themselves foremost with their immediate families, but also with their larger families, or tribal units – in Palestine this is called the *hamouleh*. This sense of loyalty to the tribe explains why honor killings continue to be such a problem in Arab societies today – it's not that people don't think it's wrong, it's that people are reluctant to interfere in what they consider to be "family business."

This allows for scenarios in which lawmakers are hesitant to interfere in family affairs. Every year, around the world, not just in the Arab world, about 5,000 women are killed for some sort of social or moral transgression in which the judge, jury and executioners are her own family members.

These murders are truly horrifying. Now that we have YouTube, we are also able to (unfortunately and disturbingly) view some honor killings that have taken place – there is the haunting example of the murder of **Duaa Khalil Aswad**, a 17-yr-old Iraqi Kurdish teenager. She was savagely stoned and bludgeoned to death in a public street by a crowd of men from her family. She was a member of the Yazidi sect, and had fallen in love with a Muslim boy

and wanted to marry her. Her male relatives were outraged and made threats against her life. According to Jordanian journalist Rana Husseini: “Her father, worried for her safety, took Duaa to a cleric. She should have been safe under his guardianship; a tradition supposedly respected by all tribal members. On 7 April, Duaa’s uncles arrived at the cleric’s home and told him that the family had forgiven the girl and wanted her to return. ... As the cleric became suspicious the men stormed the house and dragged Duaa outside by her ponytails to meet her fate. After just a few yards, Duaa was surrounded by thirteen cousins who started kicking her, punching her and pulling her hair before pushing her to the ground. As she shouted for help, her father heard and raced to the scene, but was forcibly and violently held back by some of the large crowd that had gathered. ... The brutal execution continued for almost thirty minutes.”

The final blow was a large rock that her cousin dropped on her forehead. Husseini goes on to describe how the young woman’s body was carried to the outskirts of the town, burned and her remains buried with those of a dog, “to show how worthless she was.” (p. 118-119) Her boyfriend went into hiding, and is still in hiding as far as we know, because of the threats against his life.

I’m not here to say that honor killings don’t happen in the Middle East; but just be aware that if you read about them in English-language media, you might mistakenly think that they are typical, everyday occurrences; that they do not cause a stir in the societies in which they happen, that the society accepts them and moves on.

Western media usually covers the crime and not the aftermath. April 7, the day Duaa was killed, is a day that many Arab women's groups have commemorated for teaching about this kind of crime.

You might also assume that honor killings are widely accepted. **Rana Husseini** in her book, "Murder in the Name of Honor," makes the interesting observation that honor killing is not really accepted because the killers are often ostracized in their own community. Many times, a younger family member – a 16 yr old boy – will be recruited to do the actual killing, because his sentence will be lighter because he is a juvenile. And yet those same young men will often have problems later finding a wife; if they try to marry a cousin, for example, even their own uncles, who may have recruited them in the first place, will not allow them to marry their daughters because they are, after all, murderers.

Is honor killing a specifically Muslim problem? Some Western scholars have insisted that they are; one scholar claims that Muslim sheikhs (forget about the sect, the denomination of Islam, as a radical sheikh with political motives will be different than a more moderate one) need to come out openly and call for an end to honor killings; this is indeed farcical, as is claiming that Warren Jeffs, the leader of the polygamist Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints holds views in line with the views of a Baptist minister who espouses family values or a Unitarian Universalist minister who supports homosexual couples. They are all Christian clerics – and yet, their beliefs and views differ tremendously. This same scholar also criticizes Islamic advocacy groups who claim that honor killing is not inherently Islamic. And yet, as you have seen in the excerpt from

John, chapter 8, honor killings are indeed, pre-Islamic. We know from that honor killings take place in Christian communities as well.

The Quran actually made advances in terms of women's abilities to defend themselves against such charges: The sura on women calls for four male witnesses to be present when there is a charge of adultery in order for that charge to be prosecuted; this was intended to make sure that women were not accused falsely by brothers, cousins or male relatives who wanted to kill them off in order to inherit their property. In fact, this revelation is made to Muhammad in the same context as inheritance laws. Rana Husseini shows, in her work, that false accusation of immoral conduct is actually the reason for many honor killings that still take place: a common case, for example, would be a young man, angry that his sister won't sign over her inheritance to him, kills her and claims later that he found her with a man and in his rage murdered her. Because of the weak laws in place, this may work.

What are Middle Eastern feminists doing about honor killing? They are setting up shelters for women who worry that their families might kill them; they are especially campaigning for stronger laws to be put into effect. Appealing to the clergy won't work, as most clergy already oppose honor killing (and in fact, many clergy will shelter a young woman who fears for her life). Muslim clergymen who don't oppose honor killings, those who are more radical and fundamentalist in their preaching, see those weak laws as a way to keep patriarchal hierarchy in place. There are also many organizations that support women who are in danger, offering legal help, shelter, identity protection, etc.

I also want to add that honor killings are just another form of domestic violence; and this is not just an Arab or Muslim problem. Look at the domestic violence rates here in the United States: “In 2005, 1,181 women were murdered by an intimate partner.¹ That's an average of three women every day. Of all the women murdered in the U.S., about one-third were killed by an intimate partner.” Other statistics show that “Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women between the ages of 15 and 44 in the United States, more than car accidents, muggings, and rapes combined.”

Miss USA

A lighter topic now: how Americans perceive Arab women. A couple of years ago, something interesting happened in America. Miss Rima Fakhri won the Miss USA competition, a pageant that is owned by Donald Trump. She was lauded as the first Arab American Miss USA.... This was a big deal. An Arab girl wins big! Until it was noted a few days later that the first Miss USA of Arab ancestry was actually Julie Hayek, who won the crown in 1983. I was fascinated. So how come nobody seemed to know or remember that Julie Hayek was Arab American?

Again the problem here is perception.

Because of the fact that in the United States, we have this perception of Arabs, esp Arab women, as looking one particular way: they are dark (and as you can see, Ms Hayek is light-skinned. Light eyes. Don't know if her hair color is real...); they are usually covered in veils; and they are Muslim. So Rima Fakhri was later re-named the

first Muslim American Miss USA (Julie Hayek is Christian). For Arab Americans, this change in status – and the status in the first place – is completely bizarre. It's almost like Americans just realized that Arabs are in our midst.

The history of Arab Americans in this country is fascinating because, as John Tehranian writes in his book, “WhiteWashed: America’s Invisible Middle Eastern Minority,” Arabs have been in this country for over a century and only recently have they been considered an enemy; while their “whiteness” was always in question (like the way in which the Irish and Italians had to initially “prove” themselves “white”), only since the 1970s have Arabs been considered dangerous and treacherous and different in the American mindset. The recent political focus on Arabs required a common image that people could easily conjure up, and despite the fact that many Arabs are light-skinned, many have olive skin and many have brown skin, the image settled upon was the darker, more mysterious and different “other.” And also with that image came common perceptions of what Arabs were like.

While Julie Hayek’s winning in 1983 didn’t make anyone bat an eyelash, because she looks white, Rima Fakhri’s winning because some kind of statement about Islam and how badly Arab women are treated in the Middle East. In fact, Rima proved to be very much in line with the tradition of Miss USA winners – a week or so after she won, some pictures of her pole dancing went viral. I started reading the internet discussion boards about this: and mind you, I know that internet boards are not a source of scholarly research, but they are pretty interesting in offering a sense of popular viewpoints. There are the

usual slimy comments about her looks and particular body parts, and there are also some very solid and intelligent critiques of the pageant (“Miss USA is nothing but a glorified high class meat market”) but there is also an underlying sense of the general understanding of Islam.

Don't they cut their women's heads off for these acts?

An Arab girl enjoying the American Dream. Imagine if she was back in her own country you know she would have been stoned to death (this is farcical when one knows she is from Lebanon, one of the most liberal of the Arab countries).

Rima Fakhri is a Shia Muslim. I would rather see a Muslim woman doing a striptease than wearing a burqa.

Listen to this earnest and detailed diatribe: What these pictures say are that despite all the propaganda, the Koran, Allah, the threats by the jihadists, and the repressive Taliban, Middle Eastern women are just as gorgeous and sexually attractive as any other. It shows they have feelings and wants just like any other woman. But the threats to them not to marry westerners is what keeps them at bay. I'm sure that if they were to overcome those threats and venture out to live with and marry westerners, they and we would find out how enriching and fulfilling our lives would be.

So Arab women are just sheltered and repressed women, who need American and Western men to protect them from the quintessential Arab male... you know, the typical depiction of the middle eastern man, right? He's a lecherous, filthy-rich billionaire who spends his time counting his money, and surrounding himself

with beautiful women. Lucky Rima Fakhri – thank goodness she was saved from the clutches of such a man.

Challenges for Arab Women in Arab World and in USA

Arab women face numerous challenges in many parts of the Arab world. One of my main points here is that the challenges they face may seem different to some people because they are in the context of a different culture, but they are not much different than the challenges women face all over the world: they face violence, often at the hands of their relatives and spouses, they are assessed based on factors unrelated to their intelligence and sense of self-worth, and other issues. But the defense you often hear is that, even though American women and European women face these challenges, they are free to speak up about them, to organize and improve the situation.

And so another point I want to make here today is to say that the current depiction of Arab women in the media and popular culture obscures the fact that Arab women are active players in their own lives and are responding to the challenges they face.

So while veils, honor killings are on the agendas of Arab feminists, there are many other challenges that they face. Here are some of them:

- 1) Poverty. Almost all countries in the Middle East grapple with economic problems, and usually these are linked to political

problems. There has been a **blockade of Gaza** by the state of Israel that has caused chaos and dire poverty; medical care is crippled, and people lack medicines, food, and everyday essentials. Several flotillas carrying humanitarian aid have tried to break the blockade and sail into the port of Gaza, even after one flotilla was attacked by Israeli forces this past May, leaving 7 activists dead. Nevertheless, there is a new effort underway, led by activist **Samar al-Hajj**. Arab women and women from around the world, including a group of American nuns, stocked up a flotilla, named the Saint Mariam (the Virgin Mary is a sacred figure to Christians and Muslims). This vessel carried fifty women on it and tried to sail into Gaza to confront the blockade and bring in humanitarian aid, including books, clothing, and medication. However, it was denied access by the Israelis, but the PR it is generating for the plight of the people of Gaza – which was part of the goal – has been tremendous.

- 2) War: The poverty and human rights crisis faced by Iraqi women has also been staggering: American feminists coined the phrase ‘the personal is political.’ I would say that for Arab feminists, the opposite is true: “the political is personal” – the invasion of Iraq has impacted Iraqi families in devastating ways, causing women to bear much of the pressure and stress. A short film, **Sari’s Mother**, directed by James Longley, recently won the Golden Gate award at the San Francisco international film festival. Faten Zegum is a mother of nine, and her young son, Sari, is HIV-positive, contracted from a blood transfusion.

Under the Hussein regime, he had monthly access to medications, checkups at an AIDS hospital, and a stipend, but the hospital was largely destroyed during the invasion and ransacked by looters, so now access to medicine is rare. The film documents Faten's steadfastness and the way she bears a tremendous burden in trying to save her young son – walking long distances to clinics, trying to conceal her son's secret from the neighborhood lest he be shunned, administering his injections, struggling to provide him with clean water, trying to alleviate the pain he often suffers – both physical, mental and emotional pain.

- 3) Political freedom: The Arab Spring – which resulted in deposing several dictatorial regimes – attracted a lot of attention. The role women played in these uprisings was tremendous. Women also suffered for it – here, is a picture that caused a big stir: this young woman was attacked, beaten and hauled off to jail. Nobody knows her name or what happened to her, but she is known as BlueBra girl. Many women during the uprising reported that the Egyptian police forces and military raped and assaulted women, performing virginity tests on many of them.
- 4) Attacks on their religion: from without (from other countries) and within (from fundamentalists). The rise of fundamentalism: this is a problem that is linked to politics as well. There is no doubt that in ME societies where fundamentalism has taken

hold, women's rights and abilities to move freely in society have been affected negatively. Fundamentalism in any religion negatively affects women's rights because it derives its authority from a literal reading of holy texts; a narrow, literal reading of the Quran can only render a view of women's social status as it existed in the 600s on the Arabian peninsula. And yet, because of political tensions between the United States/European countries and Arab countries, fundamentalists have moved closer and closer to seizing political power – and of course, some have succeeded as in Iran, or in countries like Iraq and Lebanon, where fundamentalists have seized control over certain regions, splitting the country's cultural identity into two schizophrenic halves. As I have mentioned before, many Muslim feminists find a confirmation of their ideals in the Quran and hadith, so we know that there is more than one way to interpret Islamic holy texts. But Islamic fundamentalism does negatively impact Muslim women, esp poor Muslim women, and it often will project and/or revive pre-Islamic cultural practices like honor killing under the guise of radical Islam as a way to solidify an identity.

There is also a rise in Christian fundamentalism, and I have seen, in my own personal experience, Christian Arab women also become negatively impacted. In fact, my husband and I were recently ejected from our Christian orthodox church in Maryland for opposing the views/practices of a new priest who preached, among other things, about women's roles being in the

home and insisting that a woman should be obedient to her husband. This same priest also ejected other women from the church whom he deemed to be widely respected and influential members of the parish.

- 5) Expression: Getting published is a problem. Arab women don't have access to mainstream publishing venues. This is the truth – if you want to publish a book about harems and **life as a Saudi princess**, you will quickly find an agent and have a bestseller. If you want to write a book about the real lives of Arab women, you will be much more limited because your story doesn't fit into what your readers understand and already know. This was again the reason why my own book had the cover it did – there is little attempt to challenge people's misunderstandings and misperceptions. Instead it is more profitable to continue along the same path.

So in case you need some ideas for books by and about Arab women, I have a reading list for you! I hope you find on that list some books that challenge your perceptions and perhaps also confirm some notions you already held.