

Fall 1996

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Recommended Citation

Malti-Douglas, Fedwa (1996) "As the World (or Dare I say Globe?) Turns: Feminism and Transnationalism," *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <http://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/ijgls/vol4/iss1/8>

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As the World (or Dare I Say the Globe?) Turns: Feminism and Transnationalism

FEDWA MALTI-DOUGLAS*

I should like us to embark on a gender voyage that will transport us across continents and lead us along thorny pathways that will hopefully engage us in questions about global feminism(s). Our companions will be various sorts of protagonists, each in his or her own way involved in the transnational circulation of a complex system of signs on gender and feminism. As we travel this road, we shall find that some of Professor Aihwa Ong's extremely provocative observations will beckon to us and demand that we examine them.

Three anecdotes:

Anecdote number one: The anecdote is related to me by a highly-placed government official in a Middle Eastern/African country--a man who is an old and dear friend. Both his name and that of his country are occulted to protect the ignorant. He (for my friend is a "he"), heads a council in charge of cultural and social matters because of his government position. He was attending one of those ubiquitous United Nations meetings at which globe-trotting intellectuals from Third World countries gather (another global phenomenon with its own rules and regulations worth investigating--a phenomenon whose artificiality is difficult to appreciate if one has not been involved in it directly--but that is another story). As my friend tells it, a collection of high government officials was discussing the implications of the recently established international statement on women's rights which their country was being called upon to adopt. They ran into the problem of a condemnation of discrimination on the basis of gender. "What was gender?" someone asked. But before my friend (who knew the answer) could speak, a high-ranking female official explained that what this really meant was that one should treat women correctly. And who could be against that? Properly reassured, the group went on to approve the entire document. The happy ending of this story--if there is one--is that my friend related it to me out of frustration. Frustration on the one hand because he himself, as a prominent cultural critic, knew the complexities of the issue. And frustration on the other hand because

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he could not correct the misconceptions propagated by his female colleague since she was his hierarchical superior. (This last point will be worth returning to as we think about global feminisms.)

Anecdote number two: An American anthropologist (also a friend of long standing) trained in Middle Eastern studies tells me that her career has suddenly taken a turn for the better. True, she is at this time still without a tenure-track position, her career having been complicated by a long-standing relationship with a same-sex partner and by the fact that she was well-known as a political militant. After extensive field work in the Middle East, my friend was now involved in anthropology of a different sort. She has become the star of courtrooms in which she is asked to testify for the defense in cases involving immigrants to the West from Middle Eastern countries. Delightful subjects come under her purview: wife beating, murder of young girls, clitoridectomy, to name but three. The questions I debated with my friend were relatively simple and based on a widespread principle: cultural relativism.¹ Did one have the right to criticize--and legally punish--perpetrators of customs that might seem barbaric in one cultural context on the grounds that these customs (I prefer "crimes" here) are part and parcel of a cultural system that has to be understood on its own and without any encumbrance from non-native (read Western) observers? Since many of these customs (if not all of them) concern women, they willy-nilly force the observer to deal with issues that have deep feminist implications on a worldwide scale.

Anecdote number three: This story is a bit closer to home, both geographically and personally. As part of the compulsory *rite de passage* for my eventual move to Indiana University, I had to deliver a lecture. My topic involved an analysis of a complex and highly sophisticated novel by the Arab world's most well-known feminist, the Egyptian physician-writer Dr. Nawal El Saadawi. I tried to show in this lecture that a particular novel by El Saadawi was a rewriting of theological and literary patriarchal structures from the centuries-old Arabo-Islamic textual tradition.² Following the lecture, an Arab-American woman (and a Ph.D.) came up to tell me how much she had enjoyed my lecture but that "I still say she's a Western feminist." End of conversation--and of my three anecdotes.

1. I am aware of the complexities and pitfalls inherent in the use of such a principle. I evoke it here for lack of better terminology. For some of these pitfalls, see Micaela di Leonardo, *Patterns of Culture Wars*, THE NATION, Apr. 8, 1996, at 25.

2. This novel is NAWAL EL SAADAWI, SUQÛT AL-IMÂM (1987). For a translation, see SHERIF HETATA, THE FALL OF THE IMAM (1988).

Three different stories that reveal, each in its own way, the dangers and pitfalls that confront many of us involved in a feminist project that attempts to go beyond a specific time and place. My three anecdotes have a geography of their own: the first is globally most distant, setting itself on another continent; the second locates itself in an unspecified America, among immigrant communities embroiled in the American legal system; and the third positions itself in Bloomington, Indiana.

Let us begin in reverse. "I still say she's a Western feminist." Luckily for my Bloomingtonian speaker, she is not an isolated phenomenon. Little did she realize when she uttered the phrase that variants of it existed, all uttered by Arab women: "I still think she's a Western feminist" (an East coast variant); "It will take a lot more to convert me, because as far as I'm concerned, she's still a Western feminist" (another East coast variant). And on and on: I do not need to belabor the obvious. Nor do I intend to explore here the underlying and unspoken attempt at censorship inherent in these types of dismissals.³

Let us stop for a moment at the most important common element in all these locutions: the entire notion of Western feminism. What does it mean in such a context (or in any other context) to say that someone is a Western feminist? The first implication of such a statement is negative: that someone's ideology is from the outside and not internal to the society in question. Secondly, and more importantly, this assessment cuts off the possible existence of a non-Western feminism by inscribing the discourse of a non-Western feminist (it could be El Saadawi or anyone else for that matter) in a geographically alien environment, safely outside the confines of the feminist's original homeland. This siting of a non-Western feminist as Western has the additional advantage for the detractors of feminism by eliminating it as a Western import, not to be taken seriously in indigenous discussions of class and gender.⁴

I found in this context Professor Ong's discussion of the Sisters in Islam to be extremely provocative, partly because this movement of redefinition of a patriarchal religious system is interpreted in relationship to Western feminism. The ultimate fate of the Sisters in Islam project remains to be seen. I myself am not nearly as optimistic as Professor Ong. First, I wonder if it is

3. For such an exploration, see Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Dangerous Crossings: Gender and Criticism in Arabic Literary Studies*, in BORDERWORK 224 (Margaret R. Higonnet ed., 1994).

4. I have explored this issue in greater detail in FEDWA MALTI-DOUGLAS, MEN, WOMEN, AND GOD(S): NAWAL EL SAADAWI AND ARAB FEMINIST POETICS 9-19 (1995).

possible to profitably establish a dichotomy in the ideological universe in which we all operate between Western and non-Western. All non-Western intellectuals are now perhaps more versed in Western ideologies than their counterparts in the West. More importantly, the discourses on women and gender, at least in the Middle East and North Africa, are not so unidirectional. A walk along the street in any city in the region or a visit to a bookstore in the same region are enough to demonstrate the complexities of these issues.

On my most recent trip to Morocco (March 1996), I had the privilege of meeting with women faculty and intellectuals both in that nation's capital and elsewhere. Their dilemmas and aspirations are not dissimilar from those of many of my colleagues here. Simply, their discourses are moderated by the presence of a religious system whose influence one cannot escape.

A recent conference on polygamy, organized by Dr. Fawziyya al-Ghisasi, at the University Muhammad V in Rabat is a case in point. (Professor Ong mentioned polygamy in her discussion, noting that its prescription was a way "to ensure that socio-justice be done to orphans.") Morocco is a country where polygamy is not illegal and a married woman must deal with the reality that her husband might one day take a second wife. Pamphlets on the "multiplicity of wives" and its advantages flood the Moroccan book market (as they do in the Middle East and in European cities with large Muslim populations). Oddly enough, the majority of these pamphlets are penned by males even though female writers form a very visible part of the contemporary cultural scene in the Middle East and North Africa.⁵

Dr. Al-Ghisasi herself mentioned to me that this custom is still quite prevalent in Moroccan society today. Women there, however, are not as sanguine about it as their Malaysian colleagues might be. One of the most popular Moroccan techniques a woman uses to ensure that she is not involved in a polygamous situation is to stipulate in her marriage contract that should her husband wed another woman, she is entitled to divorce.⁶

The entire debate surrounding polygamy is certainly not new and many anecdotes in the medieval Arabo-Islamic corpus illustrate women's ambivalence towards this institution. One will suffice: A certain Mazîd asked

5. These pamphlets are limitless. One example will suffice: HÂSHIM IBN HÂMID AL-RIFÂ'Î, *AL-KALIMÂT FÎ BAYÂN MAHÂSIN TA'ADDUD AL-ZAWJÂT* (1987). I purchased this pamphlet in an area of Fez known for its Islamist bookstores, and only after paying for it did I discover that the work was to be distributed free of charge!

6. Interview with Fawziyya al-Ghisasi, in Rabat, Morocco (Mar. 18, 1996); *see also* ABDELHAMID TEMSAMANI CHEBAGOUDA, *MARLAGE MIXTE: UN BONHEUR À HAUT RISQUE* 73 (1995).

his wife to allow him to have anal intercourse with her. She replied that she did not wish to turn her anus into a second wife to her vagina, and this despite their closeness.⁷ The wife in this popular story has merged various discourses: the legal, the sexual, and the corporal. I have discussed the implications of these discourses elsewhere.⁸ What the story illustrates is the complexity of any dialogue on polygamy. Perhaps it is possible for the Sisters in Islam today to redefine the notion of polygamy, but Malaysia is a long distance from other parts of the Muslim world. One will simply need to monitor the situation to see whether optimism is indeed the order of the day.

My anthropologist friend--introduced in the second anecdote--might not agree with me, but I am not the optimist she or Professor Ong might be. Her saga of testifying in American courts over whether one has the right to beat one's wife because this might be a culturally or religiously sanctioned act is something that ultimately leads, willy-nilly, to the global abuse of women.

A recent Arabic publication on women's rights (from an Islamist perspective) authored by a woman argues that the wife has the right not to have her husband beat her except in certain circumstances, in the same way that she has the right to demand that her husband not practice anal intercourse with her (these two "rights" are placed together).⁹ The contemporary female who is the target of these "rights" may be chronologically far from her medieval colleague, but the issues plaguing them are not too dissimilar. Both are united, in an odd way, by the thorny issue of anal intercourse. To dwell on this, however, would distract us from our other concerns.¹⁰ What is noteworthy is that the issue of sexuality ties up those of polygamy and beating.

The plight of the American anthropologist as he or she encounters the American lawyer, as both encounter a non-Western culture, can lead to issues that transcend both encounters. The case in St. Louis of the Palestinian father who murdered his daughter because of her social improprieties became famous in the circles in which I travel, partly because the U.S. government had taped the entire incident as the family had been suspected of political activism.

The Palestinian Muslim, Zein Isa, and his originally Brazilian and still Christian wife, Maria Isa, were accused of stabbing to death their sixteen-year

7. See, e.g., AL-RĀGHIB AL-ISFAHĀNĪ, MUHĀDARĀT AL-UDABĀ' WA-MUHĀWARĀT AL-SHU'ARĀ' WAL-BULAGHĀ' (Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Hayāt, n.d.), vol. 2, p. 267.

8. FEDWA MALTI-DOUGLAS, WOMAN'S BODY, WOMAN'S WORD: GENDER AND DISCOURSE IN ARABO-ISLAMIC WRITING 40-41 (1991).

9. 'A'IDA AHMAD [AL-]SILĀL, MĀ YUHIBBUHU AL-RJĀL FĪ AL-NISĀ' 6 (n.d.).

10. For further reference see the discussion and notes in MALTI-DOUGLAS, *supra* note 8.

old daughter, Tina (short for Palestina) Isa. Zein Isa was an active member of the Abu Nidal Organization, a group accused of perpetrating terrorist acts. It was in this capacity that Isa and his “business” colleagues had the honor of being taped by the United States government. Tina’s screams and stabbing became immortalized on what came to be known as “the murder tape.”¹¹

The complex events that led to the homicide had all the makings of an “honor killing”: an Arab daughter, whose acts of “shame” included dating an African-American and a family, including sisters, for whom this shame had to be washed out. Ellen Harris, who has produced the most detailed study to date of the Tina Isa case, documents other contemporary “honor killings,” each more gruesome than the next.¹²

A case such as this is bound to rally voices on both sides of the politico-cultural divide. But my friend the anthropologist was probably less surprised than I by one of the witnesses paraded out by the defense. An anthropology professor from the State University of New York, “born and raised in Jerusalem, testified that the way Tina lived had offended her father’s sense of honor.” So far so good. But here is his punchline: “Everyone growing up in the Middle East knows being killed is a possible consequence of dishonoring the family.”¹³ Missing from the equation is the gender dimension. Women are those most often (if not at all times) capable of “dishonoring the family.” Honor killing becomes a culturally acceptable form of genocide. The fact that Zein Isa was polygamous is an anecdotal tidbit that simply helps to bring us full circle.

But of all topics, it is without a doubt female genital mutilation that takes the limelight in any discussions of cultural relativism. As the World Turns. When Nawal El Saadawi discusses this topic (she herself underwent a clitoridectomy as a child),¹⁴ she is branded as a Western feminist for discussing it at all. Does this mean that silence is the order of the day? My anthropologist friend felt it was perhaps not her purview to pass judgment on such a culturally explosive topic. After all, it might be a sign of cultural arrogance for a Western feminist to delegate to herself the right to discuss

11. For an interesting work that details the case, see ELLEN HARRIS, *GUARDING THE SECRETS: PALESTINIAN TERRORISM AND A FATHER'S MURDER OF HIS TOO-AMERICAN DAUGHTER* (1995). Joan Ullman reviewed the book and cites phone conversations with Harris that add another dimension to the work. Joan Ullman, Book Review, *N.Y.L.J.*, Oct. 11, 1995, at 2 (1995).

12. See, e.g., HARRIS, *supra* note 11, at 50-51, 327.

13. *Die, My Daughter, Die!* PEOPLE, Jan. 20, 1992, at 71, 75.

14. Telephone interview with Nawal El Saadawi, *The Question No One Would Answer*, MS., Mar. 1980, at 68, 68-69.

issues facing women from another culture. I am uncomfortable with this notion, since for me it englobes (if the word be excused) a great deal of methodological baggage which I feel is better left discarded. Yet, once again, I recognize that, like the issue of cultural relativism, the positionality of a speaker and the right to speak is a political landmine.

As American television viewers watched Zein Isa, the St. Louis father, speaking in Arabic (he was uncomfortable expressing himself in English), they could well say that this murder of a young girl was part of a battle being fought in another time and place. Even as one reads the newspaper accounts, the invariable “in Arabic” is placed after the father’s words, providing the same verdict of otherness. This was (is?) the “old country.” I put that in quotes because the entire discourse of the “old country” serves to counter another and more important discourse for feminism, the transnational discourse.

My first anecdote told of a UN meeting, something Professor Ong also opened with. But, once again, I find myself much less optimistic than she. The story my government friend related to me is not unfamiliar. It voices the occultation of global feminism. In his telling of the story, he was also maintaining the social and political hierarchy in his own culture which dictates that he not correct a higher official. Nawal El Saadawi would understand this very well. For her, it would be but the manifestation of structures that maintain the status quo, albeit here the imbrication of gender gives the status quo an odd twist.

As the World Turns. If my contribution has the flavor of a soap-opera, perhaps it should. But I do not believe that the female heroes involved in the transnational questions related to global feminism will walk off into the sunset. In fact, if recent events in the Middle East and North Africa are any indication, these female heroes may well have to watch precisely where they walk. The person referred to in the “she is still a Western feminist” refrain has her name on a death list along with that of her Algerian colleague, the leading feminist Khalida Messaoudi. Messaoudi’s testimony has been recently published in France in *Une Algérienne Debout*.¹⁵ Once again, as with Zein Isa, the language issue rears its ugly head. How much more eloquent is Messaoudi’s testimony in French when followed by her death sentence ordered by the Algerian Movement for an Islamic State in Arabic.¹⁶

15. KHALIDA MESSAOUZI, *UNE ALGÉRIENNE DEBOUT: ENTRETIENS AVEC ELISABETH SCHEMLA* (1995).

16. *Id.* at 213-214 (a French translation follows the Arabic document).

But one can turn the globe a bit and out will pop Taslima Nasrin's face. The fate of the Bangladeshi dissident is not unlike that of her colleagues Nawal El Saadawi and Khalida Messaoudi: she is also the proud owner of a *fatwā* calling for her execution. Despite the geographical distance separating them, Taslima Nasrin is, in an odd way, very close to Nawal El Saadawi. They are both physicians and both carry out their feminist call to arms through fiction and non-fiction.¹⁷ This similarity has not gone unnoticed. In an impassioned epistolary involving an impressive group of international writers, from Salman Rushdie to Nadine Gordimer, two of the writers, Susan Sontag and Amitav Ghosh, link Dr. Taslima Nasrin to Dr. Nawal El Saadawi.¹⁸

Is there a UN meeting that will turn the globe in a different direction and allow different discourses of transnational feminism to dominate? As with soap operas, the audience will need to keep watching.

17. El Saadawi is too well-known in the West to need additional references. Compare FEDWA MALTI-DOUGLAS, *supra* note 4 (a study dedicated entirely to Dr. El Saadawi); with TASLIMA NASRIN, *FEMMES, MANIFESTEZ-VOUS* (Shishir Bhattacharja & Thérèse Réveillé trans., 1994) and TASLIMA NASRIN, *LAJJA* (C. B. Sultan trans., 1994).

18. *CHÈRE TASLIMA NASREEN...* 61, 86 (Stock Reporters sans frontières, 1994).