ISSN 2319-5339 (P), 2583-7591 (O) IIS Univ.J.A. Vol.12 (1&2), 160-178 (2023)

Female Agency versus Loyalty to an Islamic Theocracy: A Critical Study of Manal Al Sharif's *Daring to Drive: A Saudi Woman's Awakening*

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Abstract

This article forms part of my M. Phil dissertation. It is a fact that the discriminatory, sexist policies in the Islamic theocracy of Saudi Arabia dehumanize Saudi women. If any Saudi woman attempts to assert her agency by defying the socio-cultural conventions, she is branded as anti-national and anti-Islamic. In this article, I have argued how a Saudi women's rights activist problematized her contradictory concerns of asserting her agency and maintaining loyalty to her country and culture. I have also investigated how she could adhere to her religion, Islam especially when state-administered Islamic policies are said to be at the root of the oppression faced by Saudi women.

Keywords: Agency; Islam; Repression; Theocracy; Women.

In the culture of any given society, religion(s) is a major component of that culture, influencing the lives of the people at large in that society. Moreover, if the society in question is subject to the rule of a theocracy, nearly all aspects of life of the masses in that society are governed by the dictates of the state-sponsored religion. An example of such theocracy is Saudi Arabia which employs in its governing system the strictest interpretation of Sunni Islam, the highly contentious ideology of Wahabi-Salafism which is, as agreed by most critics, especially rigid and harsh in its precepts against women. Women in Saudi Arabia are, indeed, caught in conflicts with the crippling traditional structures and values. Their aspirations and struggles for freedom from repressive age-old values and systems are often expressed in their memoirs. This paper will focus on the memoir of one such Saudi woman, Manal Al Sharif. The genre of memoir, which focuses on the amalgamation of the account of one's personal life and the

historical events coinciding with the recounted period in the writer's life, allows the memoirist to create a discursive space where s/he can treat matters of the public/political world and its impact on individual life. The genre of memoir, therefore, proved to be particularly useful to the aforementioned memoirist as her concern was to acquaint her readers with the impact public policies of the theocratic state had on the private lives of Saudi women. So, who is Manal Al Sharif? Besides being a dedicated women's rights activist, she was the first woman in the Saudi kingdom to be recruited as a cyber information security engineer at Aramco, Saudi Arabia's national oil-company. She was also one of the leading figures in the campaign that took place in the 2010s in Saudi Arabia to remove the ban on women driving. Her memoir pivoted on this campaign while addressing occasionally other issues too pertaining to women in her society. Before engaging with a detailed discussion of her memoir, a review of the research works conducted on the text, will follow.

Since the memoir has been published only a few years back in 2017, there is a dearth of research pieces on it. One of the few works that addressed the memoir is *Practices of Counter-Conduct as a Mode of Resistance in Middle East Women's Life Writings* (2020) by Moussa Pourya Asl. In his paper, the author also studied the memoirs of Jean P. Sasson (1992) and Zainab Salbi (2005) alongside that of Manal Al Sharif. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of counter-conduct, the author examined the practices that the Arab women exercised in their attempt to destabilize the patriarchal status quo. Afaf M. H. Al Humaidi also examined Sharif's memoir in his doctoral dissertation, *Expressions of Islamic Feminisms in Algeria and Saudi Arabia: Towards Intersectional and Feminist-Postcolonial Approach* (2018). Aiming to analyze Islamic Feminist practices and writings in the context of Algeria and Saudi Arabia, the researcher studied Sharif's memoir and discussed how Sharif put into praxis the theories of Islamic Feminism. Upon the publication of the memoir, a notable review of it was penned by Manjula Narayan on July 28, 2017 for the newspaper, *Hindustan Times*.

In the course of her review, Manjula Narayan lauded Sharif's activism for humanitarian causes and commented upon the ordeals the Saudi activist went through in her endeavour to bring changes in her country. Firouzeh Ameri's doctoral dissertation, *Veiled Experiences: Re-writing Women's Identities and Experiences in Contemporary Muslim Fiction in English* (2012) did not focus on Sharif's memoir in particular but I have included a short review of this work because it thoroughly scrutinized several memoirs by Middle Eastern Muslim women like the one by Manal Al Sharif. Criticizing these memoirs, Ameri argued that, Islam was vilified and the Muslim

women were exoticized and presented as in need of liberation in these memoirs. She concluded that the representation of Muslim women in these memoirs was not much different from the Orientalist discourse on Muslim women. In a similar grain, Bahramitash, in her article, *The War on Terror, feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism: Case Studies of Two North American Bestsellers* (2005) also condemned life narratives similar to the one by Manal Al Sharif, on the ground that these writings were replete with 'classic Orientalist Stereotypes' (221) which assisted Western imperial agents to bolster Islamophobia and Orientalism and thus to promote the idea that Western imperialist intervention in those countries was necessary in order to fight Islamic terrorism and to save Muslim women from their own men.

The paper shares some of the concerns of the existing research works on Sharif's memoir, its uniqueness lies in the fact that, unlike the other pieces, it has contended that Sharif's memoir delves deeper than simply Orientalizing her culture in her memoir. I have argued that, what Sharif does is that she problematizes the complex dynamics between loyalty towards her homeland and its culture on the one hand and retaining agency on her life on the other hand. I have asked the following questions: If loyalty to the homeland comes at the cost of a woman's agency and if critiquing her country becomes synonymous with Orientalizing her culture and inviting imperialist intervention from the West, how does Sharif resolve this dilemma in her memoir? Does she, following the Orientalist grain, portray Islam as a uniformly violent religion and Arab Muslim culture as cruel, primitive, barbaric in order to present Western culture as benevolent, modern and civilized? And finally, how could she reconcile herself with the religion of Islam especially when state-administered Islamic policies are said to be at the root of the oppression Saudi women are subject to?

In this paper, the researcher has studied the memoir under discussion through the theoretical framework of the postmodern notion of plurality of identity and Miriam Cooke's concept of 'multiple critique', that Cooke elaborates upon in her book, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (2000) and her article, *Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies* (2000). Postmodernists argue that identity can never be fixed and stable and that it is discursively constructed. As Stuart Hall puts it: 'identities are never unified and in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions' (4). These critics are of the view that in an ongoing process, a person's identity is continually constructed and deconstructed. Philip

M. Kayal says: 'Identity formation then, is not a singular process with a definitive end point but an evolving social-psychological experience of self-discovery that changes with events, issues and sociopolitical circumstances surrounding a person' (90). Throughout one's lifetime, one is, indeed, confronted with multiple identities, one of which takes precedence above the others as per the demand of specific moments. But what instigates this multiplicity or fragmentation of identity in the first place? People, as social creatures, are needed to adopt different community-identity according to what serves their interests at that particular time. In Spivak's words, 'there are many subject positions that one must inhabit; one is not just one thing' (qtd in Ameri 73) and this results in the fragmentation or plurality of identity.

One can be an Arab, a Muslim, an American or Australian, a woman and a feminist but which of these identities will be predominant above the others will depend on what the subject's priority is at the time. The subject's multiple identities lead her to develop multiple consciousness which enables her to practice what Miriam Cooke has termed 'multiple critique' which is in Cooke's view 'a fluid discursive strategy taken up from multiple speaking positions' (113). Exercising 'multiple critique', an Arab, observant Muslim woman such as Sharif, can, therefore, embrace her feminist identity when she wants to subvert the patriarchal values in Arab or Western cultures; she can identify with her Arab heritage when she wants to condemn the increased bigotry against Arabs and the racial profiling of Arabs in the West in the post-Gulf war and post-9/11 era; she can adopt her Muslim identity to fight Islamophobia and to enlighten Westerners and Islamic fundamentalists about the ethical and humanitarian message of Islam and she can even question her own various stances towards the social discourses in which she finds herself entangled in her life.

Cooke's study of the efficacy of multiple critique in building resistance to different forms of marginalization is grounded in the context of her discussion of the Islamic Feminists. Knowledge of the term Islamic Feminism will further shed light on the functionality of multiple critique. Islamic Feminism is a discourse which espouses that gender-equality can be achieved within an Islamic framework. According to Margot Badran, Islamic Feminism :

> is a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm, which derives its understanding and mandate from the Quran, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence…the basic argument of Islamic Fem-

> inism is that the Quran affirms the principle of equality of all human beings but that the practice of equality of women and men… has been impeded or subverted by patriarchal ideas and practices (242).

Islamic Feminists are, therefore, those practicing Muslim women who seek to achieve gender equality through an engagement with Islamic epistemology. In agreement with Badran, Cooke also calls them Islamic Feminists 'whenever Muslim women offer a critique of some aspects of Islamic history or hermeneutics, and they do so with and/or behalf of all Muslim women and their right to enjoy with men full participation in a just community' (95). With the end of fashioning that just community, some women in Muslim communities, argues Cooke, engage in multiple critique. Practice of this strategy enables them to take various subject positions, which is necessary for them as they do not have a unified feminist agenda or a unified racial agenda but they are concerned with both. They cannot side wholeheartedly with liberal universal feminism, advocated by the white feminists, because of its association with Western imperialism which long used the issue of Arab cultures' devaluation of women as a vindication of West's 'civilizing mission' in its colonization of the Arab world. Neither can they agree to the Islamists' (those radical Muslims who are dedicated to the establishment of a Sharia-based Islamic state) instrumental use of Muslim women, both in the past and the present, as symbols of resistance to Western cultural hegemony.

Muslim women have been *hypocritically* presented by the Islamists in the Arab countries as the passive keepers and bearers of Arab Muslim tradition but their political agency on par with Arab Muslim men has never been recognized by the Islamists. Cooke's observation is particularly illuminating to understand this hypocrisy: 'the growing prominence of Islam in world politics has drawn attention to the ways in which Islamist groups use women as passive cultural emblems. Women's responsibilities and images in the new Islamic systems are symbolically foregrounded and then pragmatically relegated to the political margins' (100). The strategy of multiple critique, however, capacitated the women to reject their passive status and to assert their feminist identity by allowing them to criticize the prevalent gender-discrimination in their culture without breaking away from that culture. The layered discourse of multiple critique also made it possible for them to build coalition with other feminists across the globe including the white feminists in order to facilitate their feminist agenda while making sure that their struggles were not coopted by these groups. Implementing the aforementioned rhetorical strategy, they could also

contest, in solidarity with their men, Western imperialist forces' vilification and distortion of Islamic cultures and values. In the words of Cooke, Islamic Feminists, in their use of multiple critique, can thus demonstrate how they 'can belong to a number of different communities simultaneously while retaining the rights due them in all spheres, including the right to criticize these same communities' (109). Before embarking on the study of Al Sharif's memoir through the lens of multiple critique and the postmodernist notion of identity, an exploration of the politico-cultural context in which the memoir is grounded is imperative.

Since the time Sharif was born in 1979 in Mecca, she had been surrounded by the rigid rules of her society that she simply absorbed. Her lack of awareness that she was being oppressed by the societal dictates indicated that she normalized the oppression. It can be argued that, from childhood up to her teenaged years the memoirist had been thoroughly interpellated into the subject her society wanted her to turn into. She noted in her memoir that in her zeal to follow every Salafist precept, she went to the extent of burning her brother's music cassettes, her mother's fashion magazines and the family photo-albums because according to the Salafist interpretation of Islam, listening to music and taking photos of living beings were considered forbidden. Reflecting upon her years of religious fanaticism, the author wrote in her memoir:

> This story is in no way unique to me. It is the story of an entire generation brainwashed with extremist discourse and hate speech, an entire generation who grew up being imprisoned, first by the constraints of our society and its religious leaders, and then by our own actions — by our own thoughts and minds. (98-99)

Althusser says that the process of interpellation occurs not only through the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) but also through the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). As for the memoirist, her interpellation was brought about most effectively through the medium of the Ideological State Apparatuses, which can be seen by looking at facts like the Saudi state's conducting a radical Islamization of the school-curricula whereby students were taught that 'jihad' or 'holy war' was justified and that they should hate everyone who did not follow their brand of Islam. Along with this, other religious propaganda like radical preachers broadcasting on the television and books and leaflets on Salafist ideology, that were distributed for free in common public gatherings, inculcated in the mass the belief that they should strictly follow what they were being told because the version of the religion they were being taught was the one, true Islam.

To explain the circumstance, the narrator wrote:

> There was no counternarrative. By that time the extreme Salafis controlled all media; books that did not conform with their ideology were banned. The fixation on declaring things forbidden (haram) now extended to censorship of the printed press, radio and television. They also rejected anything new that might disrupt official establishment, such as satellite channel and the Internet. (95)

Indoctrinated into the extremist Salafist ideology in this way, Sharif, like other common Saudis, strictly observed what she was taught without questioning the existing order of things.

Her transformation from a radical Islamist into a dissident started with the advent of the satellite dishes and the Internet in Saudi Arabia. Despite government attempts to ban the dishes inside the kingdom, Saudi people kept using it secretly. The narrator wrote about the dish they owned: 'It was our electronic window to the outside world' (129). Through her access to the Internet by means of the satellite dish, the memoirist learned about the counter-concepts, logic and worldviews other than the one she had been exposed to. Comparing these contrasting views, she came to see the rigidity and oppressive nature of the Salafist ideology and consequently began to be alienated from it. Meanwhile Al-Qaeda, that was inspired by the Salafist doctrine, was on the rise inside the kingdom and elsewhere. The incidents of 9/11 took place. The brutality of the various activities that Al-Qaeda carried out in the name of Wahabi-Salafi Islam, finally caused the memoirist to turn against Salafism. Besides, her experience of working and staying inside the Aramco compound further contributed to her growing awareness of the discrimination aimed at women in her country.

The oil-company, Aramco was founded by the Americans in 1933 and inside its compound, which was originally built to house expatriate American workers, women were not plagued by the laws that ruled the rest of the Saudi society. Inside the compound where people of many different cultures and nationalities lived and worked together, Saudi women enjoyed greater freedom than was possible for women outside the compound. Here men and women could mix together, women were not required to veil, they could use all the public facilities equally with men and they could drive—freedom not allowed to women in Saudi society. Due to her residence inside the Aramco compound, the memoirist could see the difference in the way women lived inside and outside the compound and this led her to develop a nascent feminist identity. Hall says that identity is

'formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us' (277). The identity of the author also went through a transformation when she found herself in a cultural set-up that permitted women to exercise greater autonomy. Moreover, surrounded by people from various cultures she also eventually developed more of a hybridized identity since, as Bhabha says, one's identity is made up of traces of all the cultures with which one has contact. When she went to work for a year in the U.S through an Aramco exchange program, this hybridization and her feminist consciousness were furthered and she began to question the indigenous culture that had circumscribed her in various ways:

When I returned to Saudi Arabia, so many of the old rules I had once slavishly followed, no longer seemed to make sense…I was no longer so fearful of what people would think or what judgements would be passed…I had never been exposed to the language of women's rights or feminism but even without the vocabulary, I discovered the concepts (206). So, it can be contended that the memoirist was no longer in the grip of any singular culture but had been placed in the contact zone of different cultures, in an interstitial space where she renegotiated her position on many societal issues affecting women in her homeland.

In her memoir, Sharif documented many of the customs that exploited women in Saudi society and in the process interrogated how she, as a woman, could remain silent as tradition expected of her, in the face of the utter injustice meted out against her and other Saudi women by her homeland. It is to be noted that the Saudi customs set down in the memoir are corroborated by historical evidence as well. There was the custom of male guardianship for women. Every woman was supposed to have a male guardian who could be her father or brother or husband or son. Women had to seek permission of their assigned male guardians for everything from having access to education, joining work or to simply go outside home. A woman could not be admitted to the hospital if not accompanied by her male guardian. Citing several real-life incidents reported in the newspapers, the memoir stated how police and firefighters would not enter a house even during an emergency if a woman was alone inside without any male guardian around. The narrator remarked: 'It is not a stretch to say that death is preferable to violating the strict code of guardianship' (7). Another strict code was that of veiling. All the women in Saudi Arabia including non-Muslims were obliged to wear the abaya/burqa while appearing in public. The morality police or the *Mutawa* monitored the Saudi streets to make sure that the veiling law was properly followed.

Commenting on the symbolic significance of the veil, Cooke observed: 'For the outsider, it is the emblem of Muslim women's oppression and marginalization. While this may be accurate in the cases where women did not choose to veil, it is not necessarily true for those who have chosen to mark themselves out religiously. For many of these women, the veil can be empowering' (103).

It is a well-known fact that the veil is invested with political significance in the global context at present. It can both liberate and confine. Donning the veil can be a voluntary religio-political decision marking defiance on the part of a Muslim woman when there is a deliberate attack on her faith from the society in which she is situated. But this same veil can be circumscribing when it is imposed on women against their choice by the authority figures as part of some regulatory process concerning the Islamization of a society. One incident in particular is worth mentioning to illustrate the extent of restriction placed on Saudi women by mandatory veiling. The incident which took place in Saudi Arabia in 2002 made global news. The memoir too documented the incident which went that a fire broke out in a girls' school and the morality police 'barred the girls from exiting through the front door because they were not wearing their abayas [burqas] and were not thus following proper Islamic dress code' (66). When the girls were finally brought out, fifteen of them turned into charred bodies. Besides, the girls' schools had no playgrounds because it was assumed that if girls ran around or jumped, they might lose their virginity. The obsession with the preservation of virginity led some Arab families to practice female circumcision on their girls.

The logic behind this custom was that, it helped protect the girl's virginity till marriage by removing her carnal desire and, thereby, preventing her from 'deviant' behaviour. Sometimes, however, the girls bled to death. The author of the memoir herself was subject to the practice of genital mutilation by her parents. Her writing in her memoir about the trauma this incident gave rise to revealed the deep psychological wound haunting the memoirist time and again. Moreover, the custom of honour-killing, if not widespread, could still be carried out by some families. In the memoir, the narrator made the compelling point that in Saudi Arabia, concern for women's 'moral purity' seemed more pressing that concern for their very lives. Another strict code that the memoirist recorded in the text was that of segregation. Apart from her closest male relatives like father, brother, husband or son, a woman was prohibited to have communication with any other male once she reached puberty. She noted that, owing to the strict segregation of the sexes, the female students at the university were

not allowed to attend the lectures of the male professors in the same classroom with the male students. They could hear the lectures only through a CCTV in a separate room.

Alongside all these, there was the ban on women driving even if a woman owned a car and knew how to drive. That woman, therefore, had to rely on hired drivers to take her from place to place. The memoirist learned driving inside the Aramco compound and during her stay in America, she also received a driver's license. She wrote in her memoir that in spite of possessing a valid driver's license, she could not drive her own car inside the Saudi kingdom and was compelled to drain her savings to pay others to get her where she needed to go. Her point was that only the wealthy could afford to hire fulltime drivers and that being alone in a car with an unknown man was more compromising than driving ever could be, especially in a culture that decreed strict segregation between men and women. Reflecting on the many hardships and indignities she and other Saudi women suffered as a result of the ban, she wrote: 'I hated the rules that caged me inside my compound, that kept women tethered to the whim of our guardians, that kept us shut inside our homes more effectively than any lock' (208). Considering the repression Saudi women undergo on a daily basis in consequence of the discriminatory laws of the state, the question regarding whether it is really possible for a woman to be a feminist and a nationalist committed to a nation which is in itself an instrument of patriarchal oppression, is jeopardized.

Through her writing about the misogynist policies and its impact upon the lives of Saudi women, the memoirist did not just problematize the issues of personal autonomy and loyalty towards the repressive homeland and its tradition, she also brought to the fore the lived experiences of Saudi women, which was lost in the mainstream discourse of the Saudi patriarchy. In any given state, history is generally the historiography of the people in power. In the case of Saudi women also, their history has been marginalized by the discourse of the prevailing hegemonic patriarchal structures. By talking about the harrowing experiences of Saudi women, that resulted from the sexist policies, Sharif's memoir, therefore, established women's 'relationship to the history and the culture from which she finds her experience of herself and her life excluded' (Buss 3). But it was not only through the words in her memoir that the memoirist defied the authoritarian regime but she put her defiance into practice both in her personal and public life to subvert the restrictions imposed upon Saudi women.

Instead of putting up with her abusive husband, as tradition demanded, Sharif divorced him and moved to her company-housing inside the Aramco compound with her infant son. It was there in 2011 that she started with other women the 'Women2Drive' campaign on social media to challenge the ban on women driving. She stated in the memoir that her aim was 'to gain a basic right: the right of mobility, for the women in my country' (285). As part of the campaign she filmed herself driving her car on the Saudi streets outside the Aramco compound and uploaded the video to YouTube. Soon after, the Saudi morality police arrested and imprisoned her for the offence of 'driving while female'. She was released only after her story caused outrage in the international arena. In addition, her father had to procure a pardon from the Saudi king making a pledge on his daughter's behalf that she would never drive again inside Saudi Arabia. The memoirist, nevertheless, continued her activism to improve the socio-political condition of Saudi women.

In order for Saudi women to have greater agency over their lives, she began a campaign for ending the custom of male-guardianship. Another campaign was spearheaded by her against domestic violence when a Saudi preacher beat his five-year-old daughter to death. The man's concern was that his five-year-old daughter had lost her virginity. Up until then Saudi Arabia had no law against domestic violence and Saudi men were free to physically abuse their wives and children. The social activism of the memoirist in collaboration with other Saudi women helped in bringing several reform laws in respect of Saudi women. Following in her footsteps, many Saudi women filmed themselves while driving to press the cause of women's driving and finally in 2018, Saudi government issued a decree allowing women to drive. In 2017, women were also allowed access to government services like education and healthcare without the consent of their male-guardians. Another reform law was passed in 2015 permitting women to vote in the local elections and to be appointed to the Consultative Assembly. And in 2012, Saudi Arabia's first anti-domestic violence law was codified by the Saudi government. The upgradation of the social and political status of Saudi women through the reformative policies is significant in another respect also. Saudi Arabia is the emblematic Muslim nation. It was where Prophet Muhammad was born and it was where Islam originated. Observant Muslims all over the world face the direction of this country at the time of their ritual five prayers. Mecca and Medina, two holiest sites of Islam, are in the guardianship of this country. Due to these factors, the other Islamic countries often look up to Saudi Arabia in the making of their social policies. So, it can be hoped that the positive changes which the Saudi government effected in the lives of

Saudi women will motivate the other Islamic nations to enact policies for the empowerment of women.

The Saudi government, the religious clerics and a large part of the Saudi citizens denounced Sharif when she started her driving campaign. She was accused of disrupting the Saudi society by defying cultural taboos like the prohibition against women driving. She was also branded as an anti-national, a traitor and someone who sought to destroy Islam. The memoir of Sharif, however, demonstrated that she was not against Islam. She, rather, defined herself as an observant Muslim in the memoir and clarified that her observation of her religion was not the result of state-coercion but of her own volition. What she was against was the dogma of Wahabi-Salafism which, she maintained, was not synonymous with Islam; it was only a radical interpretation of Islam. As Islamic scholars have pointed out, the meaning of Islam is, indeed, subject to interpretation; it depends on the interpreter what s/he wished to make out of religion—patriarchal authoritarianism or gender-egalitarianism. Zine says that interpretations of the Islamic texts are 'shaped and informed by the social, political, moral and gendered location of the interpreter' (114). The memoirist's conviction in a positive and just interpretation of Islam showed her to be an Islamic feminist who observed religion and fought for gender-equality within an Islamic paradigm. Cooke remarked, 'Islamic Feminists are objecting to the fact that the Qur'an has been interpreted and history has been recorded and passed down almost exclusively by men' (95). Cooke referred to the example of Leila Ahmed, the Egyptian-American Harvard Professor who also argued that the interpretation of the Islamic scriptures and, thereby, the production of official Islamic knowledge has been historically done by men who were not in favour of gender-equality (126).

Hence, it is not surprising that down through the ages the Islamic prescriptions for women have been, for the most part, profoundly discriminatory. To change the scenario, Islamic Feminists, however, questioned the patriarchal interpretation of Islam by engaging with the cross-examination of Islamic history and hermeneutics themselves. In the process, Islamic exegesis of a patriarchal nature had given way to feminist understanding of Islam in the now cult classic texts of Islamic Feminist writers like Fatema Mernissi, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Leila Ahmed et al. In their ground-breaking works like *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Islam* by Fatema Mernissi, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* and *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* by Amina Wadud, *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* by Asma Barlas and *Women and*

Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate by Leila Ahmed, the authors demonstrated through their critical reading of the scriptures that the same verses in the sacred Islamic texts like the Qur'an and the Hadith could yield patriarchal or feminist interpretation depending on the beliefs and value system of the interpreter. Islamic Feminists, therefore, in the words of Cooke, have 'placed at the top of their political agenda women's right to examine the gendered formation of religious and local discourses, but always within a global framework.' (108). That Al Sharif also undertook this task could be seen when she embarked on the task of explaining the un-Islamic nature of some practices attributed to Islam. For instance, the memoirist argued through her critical reading of the Quran and the Hadith that nowhere in the sacred texts clitoridectomy was prescribed; that it was, rather, an ancient pharaonic practice which, as part of the local tradition, was eventually incorporated into some branches of the Egyptian appropriation of Islam. The author stated that her mother who was an Egyptian by birth convinced her father to get her and her sister circumcised.

This custom, the memoirist contended, was followed by some in Saudi Arabia only in secret and its practitioners could even be jailed if reported. The author was not dismissive of her ultra-orthodox native society either. The memoir demonstrated how she constantly tried to understand the issues that made her society the way it was. Her analysis of the dynamics that propelled the revival of Wahabi-Salafist ideology in Saudi Arabia occupied a rather lengthy section of the memoir. The memoir recounted how in 1979, the year Sharif was born in Mecca, the extremist doctrine took hold of her country when a band of radical Islamists who were advocates of Salafism conducted a siege of the Kaaba (the cube-shaped building situated at the center of Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, in the direction of which Muslims turn during their ritual five prayers) as an act of protest against what they believed a religiously lax and corrupt Saudi monarchy. Many Saudi people were drawn to this ideology that the rebels espoused because of the rebels' proclamation of a return to Islam in its 'purest' form. The rebels were eventually subdued by the Saudi monarchy but in order to placate the people and to prevent a potential Islamic revolution as was happening in contemporary Iran, the Saudi state adopted radical Islamism itself. The author wrote that until 1979,

> Saudi Arabia had been both increasingly prosperous and increasingly modern, supported by the global oil-boom…But afterward, fears of a radical Islamist tide began to pervade the country…In an effort to appease those who had gravitated to this ideology,

> the Saudi state decided to embrace some of their doctrines…the extreme beliefs would increasingly occupy the entire Saudi nation from within. (64-65)

Throughout the memoir Sharif made it manifest that she was proud of her Islamic heritage and that she had affection for her country even when she chafed at its restrictive system. Cooke's comment on the concept of multiple critique is significant to understand the position of Sharif. Cooke says that the utility of multiple critique for those women who undertake it lies in 'withstanding the dictates of system unfriendly to women but remaining in these same communities' (124). In her memoir, the author took precisely this stance. She critiqued her society for its patriarchal authoritarianism and Islamism but she did not break away from her community. She criticized it but she defended it against the detractors too. She was critical of her parents for their religious conservatism but she also acknowledged the fact that they defied social convention, despite their ultra-orthodox background, to educate her and her sister and encouraged them to have independent careers. She also humanized the common Saudi people who are often demonized as religious fanatics in the West. The point she established in her memoir was that the Saudi community was not homogeneous; alongside the patriarchal fanatics there were reform-minded benevolent people who were working for the emancipation of Saudi women. For her feminist activities, Sharif was condemned by many of her countrymen as Westernized but instead of dismissing the anti-West sentiment of her people, she empathetically explained why the common Saudis held a grudge against the West. Except the memory of the Western colonization of the Arab world, there were other issues, on account of which, hatred for the West, America in particular, was prevalent in Saudi Arabia:

> A central factor was the presence of US military bases in Saudi Arabia, which had been used during the First and the Second Gulf Wars. Other factors included [America's] strong bias against Israel in the Palestinian conflict with Israel; the sanctions against Iraq, which were seen as a form of siege and starvation; and America's support for dictatorial regimes in the Arab world. (Sharif 133).

This passage showed, the author was mindful of the fact that, while the iniquitous action perpetrated by Saudi fanatics like Osama Bin Laden against the U.S on 9/11 was highly condemnable, that action was largely an aftermath of the imperialist activities of the U.S itself in the Middle East. So, it can be said that the memoirist critiqued her society in a con-

structive way and not in an Orientalist manner. She did have patriotic sentiments for her country but she also wanted the sexism and misogyny in her country to be eradicated.

As shown already, the author's take on the West in her memoir was not uniform either. During her stay in America, the role of the American society in developing her feminist awareness was greatly appreciated by the memoirist but she was not oblivious to the downsides of this society. Her hybridized consciousness and her position in between her mother culture and the alien culture in the diaspora led her to look critically at both cultures and, thereby, perceive the pitfalls of the American society too. Her learning about the past system of slavery, American discrimination aimed at its black population led her to the realization regarding the hollowness of American civilization. Identifying with the African-Americans, she stated: 'I saw so many parallels between what I had experienced in Saudi Arabia and the American civil rights movement. Saudi women and African-Americans were both victims of segregation, unable to have any say in the most basic aspects of their lives' (202). Another glaringly unjust side of America was its co-optation into Saudi discrimination against women for its imperialist exploitation of Saudi-oil.

As mentioned earlier, Aramco, Saudi Arabia's national oil-company where Sharif worked as a cyber information security engineer was founded and developed by the Americans. Naturally the U.S government exerted great influence upon the Saudi monarchy whose chief source of income was through the Aramco oil-industry. Sharif pointed out that among all the Aramco employees, Americans were treated the best inside the compound. But even when the USA was so much influential upon the Saudi royalty and could have put pressure on it to stop its repression of women, the USA turned a blind eye to the condition of Saudi women whereas they declared war against Afghanistan and considered attacking Iran under the pretext of liberating women from oppression in those countries. The remark of Arundhati Roy is particularly enlightening in this context: 'It's being made out that the whole point of the war was to topple the Taliban regime and liberate Afghan women from their burqas. We are being asked to believe that the U.S marines are actually on a feminist mission. If so, will their next stop be America's military ally Saudi Arabia?' (18). Sharif's memoir suggested that as long as Saudi monarchy let the U.S reap a major portion of the profit from the Saudi oil-industry at the behest of the common Saudi people, American government tended not to be bothered about the ill-treatment of women inside the Saudi kingdom.

The above discussion demonstrated that the memoirist took various subject-positions in her writing on the issues of her native society, Islam and the West. Her subject-positions are multiple due to the plurality of her identity. She is simultaneously a woman, a feminist, a Muslim, an Arab and now a diasporic citizen in the West. Even if there is any apparent contradiction among these identities, as between her Muslim and feminist identity or between her identity as a feminist and an Arab nationalist for example, she is able to reconcile these identities through her practice of multiple critique. Cooke says that through the strategy of multiple critique, 'the linking of apparently mutually exclusive identities can become a radical act of subversion' (59). Sharif conducts this act of subversion when she takes on her feminist identity to critique gender-discrimination and Islamism in her homeland. The subversion can also be witnessed when she adopts her Arab identity to critique the West. And equally subversive is her foregrounding of her Muslim identity to humanize Islam and thus to critique Islamophobia. At the center of the practice of multiple critique is the desire on the part of the Islamic feminists to retain their agency and to effect positive changes in favour of women in their communities. As Cooke stated:

> Islamic feminists are not afraid to take on the multiple challenges to their right to seek their own well-being, even when they feel that they must criticize their men, and they know that such criticism risks being labeled cultural betrayal…[They fight] against patriarchal distortions of the values and norms of the founding Muslim nation. (107)

They are conscious that the accusation against them of cultural betrayal for seeking gender-equality can be an effective strategy of silencing them on the part of the Islamists and the religious hardliners. That is why, refusing to yield 'They reject silence and show it to be a form of acquiescence, capitulation and abdication of their right to participate in the political process' (Cooke 108). They are also aware that the only way they can challenge the patriarchal manipulation of Islam is by countering it through their own feminist understanding of the scriptural truths. Exercising the rhetorical practice of multiple critique, the author of the memoir under discussion, therefore, contested, in a similar grain like that of the other Islamic feminists, multiple forms of silencing and strived to subvert the different forces that attempted to curtail the autonomy of her and her fellow Saudi women. To conclude, it can be said that her memoir revealed that her views were in alignment with that of her fellow countrymen that 'yes, Islam is the ideal just society' (107) but she insisted that 'social justice en-

tails equality, dignity and respect for all, including women' (Cooke 107).

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