



Arab Feminism in the Orbit of Tradition and Modernity With a Reflection on the Views of Aisha Taymur and May Ziadeh

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ABSTRACT

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Introduction

An analysis of the status of women over the past century and earlier reveals that the prevailing cultural and social discourse of patriarchy within Arab society has relegated women to a marginal position. This tumultuous situation prompted reformers in the realms of culture, society, and civility to address the infringement of human rights and the societal status of women. Therefore, alongside male writers and intellectuals who advocated for women's human and social rights, women emerged who championed the cause of freedom and liberation from the prevailing circumstances. The women's movements that emerged in the Arab world, which were influenced by the ongoing tension between moderation and extremism, prompted women to become increasingly cognizant of their unfortunate circumstances within society. Consequently, they ventured into the realms of culture and literature to enhance their social standing and assert their rights. Upon comparing their societies with Western societies, they recognized a significant deficiency: women are not regarded as a vital component of their social structure. Therefore, through their endeavors, these intellectuals sought to empower the women of society to attain their rightful rights and social standing (Shrabi, 1990: 101; Ezz El-Din, 1960: 211).

Methodology

This research employs an analytical framework to examine the women's movements in the Arab world over the past century. It seeks to explore the perspectives and insights of two distinguished poets and writers, Aisha Taymur and May Ziadeh, to assess the moderate approach of this movement within the Arab context through an analysis of their respective works.

Findings

Women in Arab countries did not have a suitable position in terms of social rights. The traditional view that governed women's issues was the continuation of their chaotic situation in the era of decadence and before that. The social structure of this period was predicated upon a patriarchal framework, wherein women were typically regarded as a subordinate and inferior gender. This extremist perspective, often accompanied by erroneous interpretations of Sharia and Sunnah, resulted in their exclusion from participation in the community. These views were in an authoritarian spirit, deeply against all values and traditions that have been respected for a long time and sought to change moral and social values and even human nature. Radical feminists regard the persecution of women as the primary and most fundamental form of oppression. This group posits that the interests of men and women are inherently and inexorably distinct from one another. Furthermore, they contend that patriarchy and the subjugation of women represent the most significant historical manifestation of social division and oppression. They advocate for the resolution of this issue through the total separation of women from men. They are familiar with a moderate approach. The synthesis of tradition and modernity.

The proponents of this movement advocated for transformation through an alternative perspective on the role of women within Arab society. They cried out to liberate women from this deplorable situation and they were trying to make women free to attend society and

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acquire knowledge in various fields within the framework of Sharia and tradition and as far as reason and logic dictate. Aisha Taymur and May Ziadeh were among the trailblazers of this movement. The primary concern evident in the perspectives of both authors is the necessity for moderation and rationality. Both Aisha and May Ziadeh consistently adhered to the principles of moderation in their efforts to promote the enlightenment and empowerment of women during their era. This is despite the fact that the policy of both is different; Aisha grew up from a noble, literate family, with power and social status, which was dependent on the government of the time and adhered to traditional Arab traditions and heritage. Conversely, May Ziadeh was a peripatetic spirit throughout the Arab nations. He, being a Christian, was well-acquainted with the customs and cultures of European nations and frequently engaged in social interactions with their inhabitants. He was more in favor of modernity and innovation. This divergence in perspective—often characterized as a conflict between traditionalism and modernism—becomes particularly pronounced when addressing women's issues and challenges within Arab society, as well as their advocacy for heightened awareness and rectification of the prevailing adverse conditions. It diminishes and transforms into a voice that endangers the rights of women that have been suppressed. The development and advancement of these two writers in the realms of poetry and literature, their acquisition of multiple languages, and their publication of poetry collections, alongside their sustained and dignified involvement in exclusive poetic and literary gatherings—such as the monthly meetings of poets and writers within May Ziadeh's poetry circle, which persisted for several years—serve as a tangible illustration of the significant role played by women in the Arab world during that period.

Conclusion

Feminism in the Arab world commenced with the tension between traditional values and modernity. The traditionalists vehemently opposed any alterations to women's socio-cultural existence, whereas the modernists perceived the sole resolution to this issue as the renunciation of traditions and an unwavering commitment to Western culture and civilization. Amidst this tumultuous challenge, a moderate approach arose, endeavoring to reconcile tradition and modernity in a manner that is appropriate for the traditional Arab society. Two distinguished poets and authors, the traditionalist Aisha Taymur and the modernist May Ziadeh, emerged as the foremost figures of this movement. While one of them was grounded in tradition and the other was influenced by contemporary global currents, both were acutely aware of the challenges and demands faced by women in the Arab world during their era. They approached the issues associated with this socio-cultural transformation through the lens of social reformers. The writings of these two authors are incisive and replete with sophistication, as they elucidate a potential resolution to the impasse surrounding aberrant behavior towards women within the context of the contemporary world, while simultaneously honoring the traditions and customs of the East. Both individuals were staunch advocates for women's rights, seeking to promote their autonomy. Their intellectual rigor and pragmatic approach were central tenets of their thinking, and they possessed a profound comprehension of the women's movement. They pursued the advancement and empowerment of girls and women, emphasizing the importance of attaining scientific knowledge, maintaining chastity, and fulfilling a constructive socio-cultural role.

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