



# Why are there No Great, Female, and Egyptian Scholars?

“TO ALL EGYPTIANS”

(Mona Prince, *Revolution is My Name*, 2012)

*This essay is a study on the topics that Egyptian women shine their lights on. I write this because I identify as an Egyptian woman, and I never hear these women’s names during my scholarship. I hope readers receive a sense of individualism for the “othered” women who write their ways out of their binds. My topic is crucial because Egyptian women are bound to either sexism in their own culture and racism in others, which begs my theory of a third space.*

I believe it was second grade when I first noticed. I mentioned to one of my classmates that I don’t see my dad’s side of the family that much because they live in Egypt, so it’s quite difficult to manage regular visits.

“That’s impossible.” I believe her name was Sarah, but I can’t really remember. “If your family was from Egypt, then they’d all be dead.”

That was a new one.

Of course, this took me completely by surprise, and I was dying to hear the rest of her thoughts. She was wrong, obviously, because my family was most certainly *not* dead. I had even just seen them a few months prior. I couldn’t possibly understand why she’d think that my family was dead. If you would, consider the thought process of a seven-year-old: death is a fairly new concept, and someone’s just told you, with the utmost confidence

and bravado, that *half* of your entire family, whom you've seen, hugged, and loved, never existed. What the hell was she thinking?

"They're not dead." I was baffled.

"They'd have to be." She wasn't quitting on this conspiracy theory. "If your family is Egyptian, then that means they're mummies now." There it was. I understood at that point what she had meant. Of course, a young child in rural Connecticut in 2005 isn't likely to have seen a lot of Egyptian or Arab people with the exception of child-friendly cartoons of Pharos or mummies. DreamWorks's *The Prince of Egypt* or Stephen Sommers' *The Mummy* could very likely be her only exposure to people from the Middle East. To her, to Sarah, Egypt existed exclusively in history and was a faint memory that frequents her media when plot devices call for it. I insisted that she was wrong, which invited the most powerful words uttered by elementary students to this very day: "Prove it." I couldn't blame her, but, as is the way of young children, I simply had to prove her wrong... in front of the whole class, naturally. The next day, I brought with me a scrapbook of my latest trip to Egypt and asked my teacher if I could show it to the class. Mr. Rogers—believe it or not, that was his name—agreed, and thus began my

impromptu show and tell. That wasn't the last time he allowed me to present my heritage to the class: about halfway through that school year, I moved to Egypt with my family with no immediate plans of returning to the United States, and he hosted an Egypt-themed going away party for me. Of course, it was Ancient Egypt, but I never thought much of that.

I never really got away from that mindset, though: Egypt is camels and ancient deserts. After moving there for a few years, I returned to the States as "The New Kid from Egypt". The novelty of my tan skin and bilingual tongue didn't last very long in my new, rural school in Northern New York, but the questions sure did.

"You're from Egypt? Did you go to school on a camel?"

"You're from Egypt? Did you live in a pyramid?"

"You're from Egypt? Is your dad a taxi driver?"

I can't get too frustrated with middle school students, but it follows me until this day.

"How do you say 'fuck' in Egyptian?"

"Your English is really good."

"Aren't men allowed to hit their wives in Islam?"

It never ended, but it begs an urgent question as to why this keeps happening

to me. Clearly, there's a much larger issue at hand: my classmates did not know about Egypt. No one knew about the brilliance –or, more importantly, the normalcy- that exists beyond the Pyramids and the Pharos and the Sphinx. It exists beyond the politics of war and oil. Just like any other country, just like the United States, there's complexity.

### **Driving Theorists**

When entering Middle Eastern discourse, the scholar whose name I hear almost exclusively is that of Edward Said, a Palestinian American scholar who dedicated the vast majority of his scholarship to studying colonialist relationships between the East and West. Rarely ever hearing any other names merits the question: where are the great, Middle Eastern scholars in the world, and are any of them women? Borrowing language from Linda Nochlin's (1971) essay titled, "Why Have There Been No Great Female Artists," my research moves beyond the initial inquiry in order to address why there hasn't been any attention paid to great, female, Egyptian scholars. Thus, contrary to common, Western perceptions of Arab women, there is a large community of Arab female scholars who own their authority to

discuss topics such as politics, gender, sexuality, identity, and, as plenty of readers are surely expecting, the veil. Specifically, I analyze Egyptian female scholars and their writing in order to examine how women who experience it first-hand observe subjects such as the aforementioned veil.

Gender politics within a marginalized ethnic group is tricky to assess. Mona Eltahawy (2015) explains there isn't a side that truly supports the independent actions of Egyptian women. On the one hand, in the Middle East there are traditional gender roles that hinder women's abilities; however, in the West there is a booming community of people who are too eager to point out the gender inequality as justification for Islamophobia and racism against the Middle East. I argue that these two hindrances keep Egyptian female scholarship in the dark even though it is just as crucial to feminist theory and research as Western scholarship. Egyptian female scholarship offers a perspective that further globalizes and unites feminist discourse. Ultimately, I argue that the opposing hindrances stem from masculine and male-dominated discourse that shuns the doubly other. A 'third space' that overcomes the strict dichotomy between the Middle East and West is vital for a feminist wave to stick.

The backbone of my argument stems from three major sources: Mona Eltahawy's (2015) *Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution*, Leila Ahmed's (1992) *Women and Gender in Islam*, and Chandra Mohanty's (2003) *Feminism without Borders*. Using media research, these scholars help frame my question while auxiliary essays provide evidence for the answer. A centralized focus of the marginalized identities of the scholars who write these works assists in proving my theory that a 'third space' is the missing piece for which Eltahawy (2015), Ahmed (1992), and Mohanty (2003) are searching. Ultimately, my research takes the shape of a literary review providing evidence for my theory, based on the experiences that these women share and elaborate. I conduct an analysis showing patriarchal foundation is the root of why there are no great, female, Egyptian scholars dominating feminist discourse in the West. Thus, my methods present themselves as such.

Mona Eltahawy's book, published in 2015, is the most recent source I have. She writes on the concept of the veil in Egypt through historical findings, literary reviews, and personal experience. She establishes the idea that

While I am acutely aware of Islamophobes and xenophobic political right-wingers who are all too glad to hear about how badly Muslim men treat their women, I'm also acutely aware that there's a right wing among Muslim men that does propagate misogyny. We must confront both, not ally ourselves with one in order to fight the other (Eltahawy, 2015, p. 30).

Clearly, Eltahawy (2015) confronts one of the greatest reasons that Egyptian scholars are unheard of in the West, and it's because of the "Islamophobes and xenophobic political right-wingers" (p. 30) as well as the Muslim men in Arab cultures who develop their own conservative right wing within the Egyptian political climate. Throughout her work, Eltahawy, references bold Egyptian women across centuries of Egyptian history who have made great strides in Egypt's feminism. She overtly explores the two hindrances that Arab women face, supporting my question as to why Western perceptions are so valued and how that exact value assists in adhering Egyptian women to their space in the domestic sphere.

Subtitled "*The Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*," Leila Ahmed's (1992) book breaks down the topic of gender into three parts as it flows through Middle Eastern history: "The Pre-Islamic Middle East," "Founding

Discourses,” and “New Discourses” (Ahmed, 1992). What Ahmed (1992) does with *Women and Gender in Islam* is provide historical context for a lively, 21<sup>st</sup> century debate that prevails today and follows a strict timeline while doing so. For my research, I’m primarily interested in the final chapters of Ahmed’s (1992) book that fall under the final section titled, “New Discourses,” specifically, the chapter, “The Discourse of the Veil”. This chapter touches on one of the most popular subjects concerning women in the Middle East. Ahmed’s (1992) chapter, following her contextual style of format, offers a historical background for the conversation that surrounds a woman wearing the veil in either a Muslim or non-Muslim country. Ahmed (1992) asserts that “... it is Western discourse that in the first place determined the new meanings of the veil and gave rise to its emergence as a symbol of resistance” (Ahmed, 1992 p. 164). This line, as well as her chapter, greatly exposes the gaping disconnect between Western perceptions of Middle Eastern, Arab, Muslim women and the reality that the women in these regions experience daily. Moreover, Ahmed’s (1992) book serves as the history against which the rest of my research rests. Ahmed looks at the beginnings of Arab and Middle Eastern

women losing their voice in their region, which ultimately bled westward to form inaccurate ideas.

The third piece that contributes to my research question is Chandra Mohanty’s 2003 research work, *Feminism without Borders*. Within it, she discusses the issue of “colonization” of non-Western topics by Western feminists and the harm that derives from it. Mohanty (2003) predominantly argues that Western feminism asserts and solidifies ideas that Middle Eastern women who veil or become housewives are slaves to their oppressive patriarchy. While Egypt, the Middle East, and a heavy handful of Western countries do, indeed, suffer from a male-dominated society, Mohanty (2003) counters that writing off women in non-Western regions as oppressed and silent actually perpetuates that oppression and silence in the Western sphere. Rather than attempt to learn about the lifestyle of a woman in a Middle Eastern or Arab country as she lives it every day, Western feminism robs itself of a new perspective that will unite and globalize feminism. Mohanty (2003) titles her work based on a single ideal: that feminist discourse and understanding would exist globally. This is a goal similar to my own and is the reason that I establish Mohanty’s (2003) *Feminism without Borders* as the third and

final element of foundation for my question and argument.

### **“Prove It”**

The remainder of my sources provide the evidence that answers my question as to why the West does not see and recognize great, female, Egyptian scholars. A curation of five additional sources, in short, exhibit that there not only is an abundance of Egyptian female scholars, but that they discuss topics far beyond the veil. Through their experiences, each woman showcases her work while simultaneously aiding in my discovery as to why they don't own any wildly public authority over the topics they discuss, such as Egyptian politics or mother/daughter relationships. An anthology titled, *Women Writing Africa: The Northern Region* (2009) and a text titled, *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader* (1997), offers a collection that shines a small light on Egyptian women and their scholarship.

*The Nawal El Saadawi Reader* (1997) is the perfect example of one of my major arguments: Arab women do not just write about the veil, and the veil is not the most burning topic in the Middle East. Nawal El Saadawi (1997), a medical doctor and non-fiction writer, makes it her personal mission to make globally public the everyday discourse

that surrounds the Arab or Middle Eastern woman. In her short text, she covers everything from women's health to orientalism to the Arab woman's imagination. Evidently, just through her choice topics, El Saadawi (1997) attempts to deconstruct the image that Western perceptions force Arab and Middle Eastern women to wear the veil. Part four of her six-part curation of topics features a chapter titled “Women, Religion, and Literature: Bridging the Cultural Gap” (El Saadawi, 1997). Essentially, El Saadawi (1997) argues that ‘bridging the gap’ implies two sides of equal ground “between which there is a gap” (p. 134). Each side should contribute to closing, but she discloses that the language does not correlate to the epistemological space occupied by the East and the West (p. 133). She introduces that, “Islam or Islamic culture has become like a guinea pig in the Western lab, to be examined, dissected, analyzed, and gazed at” (p. 134). This assertion offers the idea that existing in the dichotomy between the East and West is a one-sided othering. Although El Saadawi (1997) intends on relating her theory to the effects that such one-sidedness has on the progression of orientalism, she unintentionally introduces the reason that no Egyptian female scholars are

greatly included in prevalent, feminist discourse. According to El Saadawi, the West's othering of the Middle East is disguised as a two-way disagreement in which the West is equally othered and demeaned in the Middle East. In actuality, the West and its successful media is highly praised and appreciated in Egypt.

More from Nawal El Saadawi (2009) is a piece that's been curated into *Women Writing Africa: The Northern Region*. As her title suggests, she discovers a parallel connection between writing, both creative and factual, and liberation from what she describes as the expectations of an Egyptian woman by the world around her. Her writing of her own, personal experiences introduce an idea of 'The Egyptian Dream' as a Middle Eastern parallel to the 'American Dream.' Rather than cherry pies and white fences, though, it's kushari (rice dish) and medical degrees. El Saadawi lives under the name of her father forever, even as she moves from her father's house to her husband's. She is destined to become a doctor or a surgeon (a common occupation for young, Egyptian women) and eventually a mother. While the 'Egyptian Dream' suggests a great deal of confined spaces -- her father's home, her father's name, medical school, her husband's home, the kitchen -- it hardly

differs from the packed SUV and hot oven of the 'American Dream.' Further, El Saadawi (2009) considers the route "preordained for [her] before birth [...] dating back to Pharonic times" (p. 287). In her short, biographical essay, El Saadawi (2009) explains the power that comes from a woman's pen and paper to write through the consuming limits of either 'Dream,' although, rather ironically, her controversial writing lands her in prison. What this piece provides, however, is an Egyptian woman who arguably parallels French feminist theorist, Helene Cixous (1976) and her essay, "The Laugh of Medusa," where she implores her female readers to write themselves to liberation. Thus, El Saadawi (2009) discusses a confirmed, feminist topic --as indirectly supported by theorists who are well-known for their feminism; and she explains through my 'Egyptian Dream' theory why scholars don't hear her voice as loudly as Cixous' (1976).

Alongside Leila Ahmed (1992), Mona Makram-Ebeid (2009), in her flash piece, offers the most empirical data to my collection of sources. As a former member of the Egyptian parliament, Makram-Ebeid (2009) discloses that due to a quota requirement passed in 1980, thirty-five women served in seats of parliament until 1987 when the quota

was abolished. She recalls that only two percent of the parliamentary seats were held by women afterwards. Clearly, Makram-Ebied (2009), in her short and informative essay based on her experience in the Egyptian government, writes to implore female readers to involve themselves in their politics in any way that they can, as well as fight for more female representation in the Arab government all together. I recognize, through reflexivity, that I'm most fascinated with her rhetoric: Makram-Ebied establishes her argument with the opening sentences of her piece by breaking down the importance of including women in politics. She doesn't even mention the Arab world or the Middle East in the first paragraph. She clearly aims to unify all governments that have a severe lack of female representation before she narrows her focus. Makram-Ebeid (2009) showcases an aspect of Egyptian female scholarship that argues against the Muslim/Arab right wingers who remove women from positions of power, the "Islamophobes and xenophobic political right-wingers" (Eltahawy, 2015, p. 30) in the West, and even misguided Western feminism, which asserts that women in such regions are so violently oppressed that they can't even help themselves (Eltahawy, 2015).

Another topic of discourse surrounding Egypt is that of female genital mutilation (FGM). Mona Abousenna (2009) covers exactly that in an exploration of shame and honor, a common theme that occurs when discussing young women in the Mediterranean world. Abousenna addresses the theory of practicing FGM, which stems from the belief that FGM saves a young woman from dishonoring herself and her family with pre-marital sex. Abousenna (2009) bases her piece on the grounds that "the ultimate root of female circumcision [...] lies in the view of the female body as a site of shame" (p. 396), tracing the practice to a more complicated expectation of women in Egypt. This perfectly depicts the incredibly complex and difficult position that Egyptian women inhabit, for how could a woman defend a culture that is so deeply rooted in misogynistic practice? On the other hand, how can a woman be expected to go *against* her culture when the men within it are highly antagonized in popular media and news? The necessity of a 'third space' presents itself greatly in this situation; neither 'side' is technically correct or incorrect, for no history is ever so simple. Unfortunately, women in Egypt still struggle from both sides, and that's where the 'third space' becomes crucial

to the survival and success of Egyptian feminism.

Finally, Mona Nawal Helmi (2009), as a last example, borders on the side of radical. Her piece speaks of the upcoming Mother's Day holiday and how she plans to honor her mother by taking her mother's name. In Egypt, every child's middle name is their father's first name, and their surname is their paternal grandfather's first name. Thus, a young girl wears her fathers' names, and since women in Egypt don't typically change their name after marriage, she wears it forever. Helmi (2009) challenges that custom in her work titled, "From This Day, I Will Carry my Mother's Name". She occupies a majority of her essay with the honorable and admirable actions of the mother figure. However, she first makes a claim that radicalizes her entire work: "Western women [...] are in alliance with their fellow countrymen in a conspiracy to demolish the virtue of Islamic countries and the innocence of obedient Muslim women" (p. 400). I intentionally expose these beginnings to Helmi's (2009) work in an act of reflexivity, for while she addresses Western feminism in a way similar to my own work, she essentially performs the same act of generalization upon it that my work battles. Therefore, when

considering the 'third side,' that Eltahawy (2015) influences, Helmi (2009) clearly doesn't align herself with *it* but with the side of the Arab/Muslim right wing. However, she admittedly provides a glimpse into an aspect of an Egyptian woman's life as she lives out the 'Egyptian Dream.' Thus, in considering how both women in Egypt and in the West identify themselves with the names of the men in their lives, Helmi (introduces an entirely new concept that casts the mother figure as the identifier in an effort to centralize women in the Middle East and in the Arab world in a way that doesn't currently take place.

### **Current Breakthroughs**

What so conveniently ties my works together is a timely lecture titled "Empowering Women in the Middle East" by Manar Sabry (2019) that I was fortunate enough to attend. Dr. Sabry, an Egyptian scholar and feminist, discusses education, employment, and politics as it relates to women in the Middle East. She opened her lecture with a poem by Hafez Ibrahim (n.d.) called *Poem for Mothers*. This early 20<sup>th</sup> century work asserts "a mother is a school" and solidifies an ideal about women and motherhood that Sabry critiques. She exposes numbers:

Egyptian working women make 35 percent less than men, for example (Sabry, 2019). She raises an interesting point about women's rights in the Middle East. I asked her what she finds to be different about the way Western feminism participates in activism as opposed to the Middle East. Essentially, we concluded that Western feminism does not suit the Middle East. I believe this contributes to the wedging dichotomy between the two regions.

Activism has to look different because, while Arab women face similar discrepancies such as a wage gap, there are multiple forces working against Arab women such as traditionally gendered ideals. Protests in the street are not ideal. Over the last eight years, protests against the government are not tolerated. They have taken the form of riots, such as those in Tahrir Square in 2011. These riots unfortunately ended with a number of casualties. Admittedly, riots that have taken place over the last eight years are the protests that gain the greatest amount of global attention. All were geared towards the government instead of feminist issues. As El Saadawi (2009) suggests, liberation through educated means is crucial. Sabry (2019) speaks on the benefits of Arab and Middle Eastern women having access to more education, such as gaining a greater

awareness of women's rights. As she continuously asserts in her lecture, "It's getting better for women, but it's still not enough." The third space is what will make it 'enough,' because it addresses the liberation needed by women from an admittedly oppressive patriarchy as well as paints a clearer picture of Arab women to those in other regions. Generally, 'Women's Rights' means something different in a country like Egypt, which is where the Western misunderstandings originate.

### **"How Arab?"**

In second grade, I don't recall a conversation with Sarah after showing my scrapbook. There was no "I told you so" or other form of bragging. Maybe she fell quiet, maybe I didn't feel the need to prove anything else, or maybe we just forgot about it the next day. What I do recall, however, is how I encountered her mindset in other ways. Rather than, "your family must be dead," of course, it takes the form of more plausible questions. "How Arab?" for example, which implies that I descend from Egypt the same way a large amount of the U.S. population descends from Ireland. Peers who have asked me this question aren't convinced by my appearance and feel the need to know how deep the blood runs in my body. It's

important to note that these peers were never Arab or Middle Eastern-identified themselves. I've had this suspicion of my race further justified with statements like, "you don't look Arab." In actuality, even with my Scottish mother's features, I "look" very Arab, but those asking me likely don't know that. Perhaps they meant that I don't look like Queen Cleopatra—who was Greek, I might add—or that I don't wear a headscarf. Ultimately, these questions and statements stem from the same place as Sarah's bizarre second grade accusation, for they come from people who must not know what Middle Eastern or Arab women look like. There's a stereotype for Arab men in the media: dark skin, lots of curly dark hair, a beard, and probably religious garb. Women, if shown at all, typically wear scarves,

although recent offerings such as Hulu's newest original series, *Ramy*, work to step away from that narrative. It all comes from representation, or a lack thereof.

There isn't one solution that will fix these problems for Arab and Middle Eastern women, or even all non-Western and non-White women. Everyone in that intersection, and every other possible intersection that could likely accompany someone, suffers from the double-edged sword. Proper representation seems to be the best place to start. With plentiful accurate representation, there is less room for misunderstanding of certain cultures. Therefore, there is a much larger likelihood that women in other cultures will have a stronger voice in their own as well as other communities.

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