



SILENCE AGAINST POLITICAL RAPE: ARAB WOMEN'S SUBALTERNITY DURING POLITICAL STRUGGLES

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Abstract

Arab Spring movements in many Arab countries revealed a gap at the heart of Arab society and politics: the large-scale subalternity of Arab women in such movements. In this essay, I hypothesise that, with few exceptions, Arab women have always avoided participation in social and political activism because of their fear of political rape – raping women as punishment during political turmoil. The essay traces the history of political rape through different stages of Arab history. The examples are taken from history, literature and international reports and they mainly cover three countries: Syria, Egypt and Libya. These examples prove that vulnerable women's horror at any possibility of their being sexually abused and then rejected by their families and society has always haunted them, preventing them from struggling or protesting. The essay concludes that subalternity is the only stance from which Arab women can encounter political rape. Then, the essay discusses the subalternity of Arab women in the light of the thought of the postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak. This argument leads to the contention that the silence of Arab women vulnerable to political rape should not be considered passive and that feminist theories and actions cannot be successful in supporting subaltern Arab women without the ethical responsibility theorised by Spivak as the most appropriate approach to the subaltern female. This approach entails respecting subaltern Arab women's culture and fears and avoiding any attempt to make them copies of the European feminist self. Subaltern Arab women who are afraid of being sexually abused have the right to protect their bodies and stick to their culture while still participating in public life.

Keywords

rape, Arab feminism, Arab Spring, subalternity, Gayatri Spivak

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In the context of the Arab Spring revolutions which erupted more than three years ago and in light of the absence of attention to subaltern Arab women's situation in such countries as Syria, Libya and Egypt, this paper sheds light on subaltern Arab women's statements against political rape, a crime that has always been committed during political struggles. Political rape in this context refers to the resort to raping and sexually abusing women as a punishment for the political stances of their male relatives, whether fathers, brothers, husbands or sons. In this respect, Elizabeth Marcus says:

Like other forms of violence and repression, sexual violence against women has been used as a tool to punish or intimidate those advocating for political change. The most horrific of these tools being used to control women is rape. Using rape as a weapon of war is not new, but in the context of patriarchal religious societies, it holds unique potential as a horrific tool of political repression. (Marcus, 2011, p. 1)

In Syrian, Egyptian and Libyan societies, this punishment is effective and is resorted to because, as in any society that has an Islamic majority, dishonouring the women of the enemy brings disgrace to the enemy (Ahmed, 2003, p. 115). This kind of punishment places subaltern Arab women in a position where they are doubly oppressed because of the political affiliation of their male relatives and because of gender. The subaltern women, vulnerable to political rape, are always afraid of being sexually abused and tortured, let alone the social reprimands of such kinds of abuse. The immediate result of this horror is the silencing of a considerably large group of Arab women who, apart from a few examples, abstain from political and even social activism and for whom the only possible stance against political rape is subalternity. Though subalternity cannot be simply defined, a possible description of the term is the following: the silence resulting from the subaltern female's inability to access the dominant discourses to speak for herself due to double marginalisation (Spivak, 1999).

Because this is a neglected topic, this paper first offers a general background to the question of political rape in Arab history. So, the first section explains the Arabic concept of *al-'ird* (honour) and presents a few literary and historical examples from the pre-Islamic period. The second section examines the same concept during the colonial occupation of Arab countries and the period of the post-independence governments, governments that used political rape as a method of torture and silencing. Then, the paper moves to political rape and its crucial role in silencing the subaltern Arab women during the Arab Spring movements, presenting examples taken from the media and from international reports. Finally, the paper examines ethical responsibility, as advanced by the post-colonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, as a possible approach to the topic of the subalternity of Arab women vulnerable to political rape.

Ethical responsibility in Spivak's thought (1981, 1994) means encountering the subaltern and trying to attend to the subaltern's call. This call is not necessarily expressed through the self's signification methods; the subaltern can call for responsibility even through the gaze or silence and this silence is not passive because it incites engagement with the subaltern. In this encounter, the self should not view the subaltern as a copy of the self and should not impose the self's methods of signification like language. Ethical responsibility also entails not trying to interpret and represent the subaltern as an object of knowledge. Finally, this kind of responsibility should not lead to offering benevolence or help from the viewpoint of the self. Accordingly, this paper also advocates that subaltern Arab women's subalternity is not a passive attitude because it is their silence that calls for action and therefore, as argued by Spivak (1994), the subaltern Arab woman participates in the ethical responsibility.

Al-‘ird (Honour)

Using rape both to show and impose political power goes very far back in Arab history, even before the advent of Islam. According to the culture of the majority of Arabs – even non-Muslims – one must defend *al-‘ird* with all strength. What is meant by *al-‘ird* is the honour of one’s female family members. A good explanation of the term *‘ird* is presented by Raphael Patai in his book *The Arab Mind*:

That the sexual conduct of women is an area sharply differentiated from other areas of the honor-shame syndrome is reflected in the language. While honor in its non-sexual, general connotation is termed “sharaf,” the specific kind of honour that is connected with women and depends on their proper conduct is called “‘ird” [...] It is almost as if the physical attribute of virginity were transposed in the *‘ird* to the emotional-conceptual level [...] The two are similar in one more respect: *even if the woman is attacked and raped*, she loses her *‘ird* just as she loses her virginity. (Patai, c2002, p. 128)

As Patai contends, in most cases, it does not matter whether the woman has herself committed adultery or whether she has been raped since the stigma will follow her whole family as an everlasting curse. Therefore, for Arab women, “the primary danger is deemed to come from males whose passion could cause a breach in the code of honour” (Allen, 2006, p. 61). The power of the concept *‘ird* entails that the only real man is the one who can protect these females from being sexually abused by others. Awareness of this fact makes oppressors adamant in humiliating the women of enemies, rebels or revolutionists by encroaching on women’s sexuality (Ahmad, 2003, p. 115). As stressed by Elizabeth Marcus (2011), commenting on Arab Spring countries, “[i]n many cases sexual violence against women is a desperate reaction of the powerful elite groups linked to authoritarian leaders and dictators who are rapidly losing power and relevance” (p. 1). Henceforth, the married woman becomes doubly victimised: if her husband is politically oppressed, she must suffer because of his political affiliation and because of her body, as a woman.

Capturing Women during Arab Jahiliyah

The source of the seriousness of protecting the honour in Arab culture is the pre-Islamic age, referred to as *Jahiliyah* in Arabic. The reference here is to the Bedouin life of Arabs between the fourth and sixth centuries A.D. in the Arabian Peninsula “which is bordered in the north by the chain of territories commonly known as the Fertile Crescent— in Mesopotamia, Syria, and Palestine— and their desert borderlands; in the east and south by the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean” (Lewis, 1993, p. 15). During that age, the main unit of Arab society was the tribe and as Bernard Lewis argues:

The dominant feature of the population of central and northern Arabia in this crucial period immediately preceding the rise of Islam is Bedouin tribalism. In Bedouin society the social unit is the group, not the individual. The latter has rights and duties only as a member of his group. The group is held together externally by the need for self-defence against the hardships and dangers of desert life, internally by the blood-tie of descent in the male line which is the basic social bond. The livelihood of the tribe depends on their flocks and herds and on raiding the neighbouring settled countries and such caravans as still venture to cross Arabia. (Lewis, 1993, p. 24)

Though this was the case of Arabia, not Syria, Egypt or other Arab countries located in Africa, it is still the commonest image of Arab life that was recorded in Arabs' poetry and history. This culture can be considered as the source of Arabs' tradition in almost all Arab countries because historians and even Arab public see that the "Arabian Peninsula is the cradle of the Semitic family of peoples, who later became known as the Babylonians, the Hebrews, the Assyrians, and the Phoenicians" (Nissim, 2008, p. vii).

As stressed by Bernard Lewis, Arab tribes used to raid one another and one of the major consequences of these raids was capturing the women of the defeated tribe. As the French intellectual Régis Blachère argues, Arabic history and literature are replete with "detailed stories about battles erupting for the sake of water sources during dry seasons, raiding, capturing women, stealing cattle and seeking revenge obstinately" (Blachère, 1984, p. 484). Women were often taken either for the sexual pleasure of the victorious men or to be sold as odalisques, female slaves in a harem, especially in Turkey. For instance, the Moroccan feminist writer Fatima Mernissi argues that even after Islam, "the female captive could be sold by the man who captured her, or he could decide to make a marital relationship with her – as a mother of his children – or to take her as an odalisque" (Mernissi, 1993, p. 167).

This situation can be considered as one of the oldest forms of political rape in the Arab world. Illustrating how sensitive Arab men were when it came to their women during *Jabilyyah*, Shawqi Dayf writes: "Nothing upset Arabs more than capturing their women [...] and they used to follow their women very quickly and to face all hardships to return them and wash their shame which was worse than any shame" (Dayf, 1960, pp. 72-3). Moreover, the ability to capture women represented power and political domination in different ways. Some powerful men did not need to go on a raid to disgrace the men of weaker tribes by raping their women. A case in point is 'Amleque, the King of *Yamamah*, who forced the men of *Jiddees* tribe to send him their brides to be raped before their husbands could even touch them. Once upon a time, a bride called ash-Shamoos came back to her tribe bleeding and with torn clothes and rebuked the men of her tribe, asking them to wear female dresses and make-up if they were not able to defend their honour (Al-Asfahany, 1994, pp. 112-113).

Because capturing women was so disgraceful, many Arab men during that age thought of no other solution but burying their female babies alive before they would grow up and be captured and raped. Thus, one can argue that this old form of political rape led to more suffering: since this female baby would soon be vulnerable to rape by men from the more powerful tribes, she had to die. She died because of her men's potential inability to defeat the enemy and because of her body as a source of sexuality – a double oppression. The tradition of burying baby girls was recorded in books of Arabic literature and history. For example, one reads: "Arabs had different methods of burying girls alive [...] Some of them did that due to the fear of the stigma which might result from capturing their women by other men" (Al-Aloosi, 1899, p. 42). Then, with the advent of Islam, this practice was prohibited. There is a clear threat in the Quran that those who used to bury girls alive will be asked about their crime and punished in Doomsday as in the verse: "And when the girl [who was] buried alive is asked for what sin she was killed (81: 8-9)" (The Quran: English Meanings, 1997, p. 620). Yet, since no religion can fully abolish previous practices, Islam could not completely eliminate the taking of female captives during wars – perhaps because this tradition was so widespread and deeply rooted in Arab culture.

Arab women were not only victimised by Arab men in a reflection of political power; rather, every new political situation brought with it more examples of political rape: the Tartar invasion of Arab lands, the Ottoman Empire, European colonialism and finally the post-independence governments. For the purposes of this essay, the focus will be on the European colonisation

of Arab countries because this is the stage that most strongly influenced the later dictatorial practices, including political rape, which are still prevalent in Arab countries.

European Colonisation of Arab Countries

From the 1910s onwards, many Arab countries, especially the ones which have witnessed Arab Spring movements, were colonised by three main European countries. Libya was an Italian colony, while Egypt was under the British mandate and Syria under the French mandate. Even before 1910, Egypt was colonised by the French, and French soldiers used to abuse Egyptian women in front of their husbands as declared by Jacques-François de Menou who was addressing French soldiers referring to their joy when they “mistreated a man trembling with fear or humiliating his wife” (Laurens, 1995, p. 533)

During the European colonisation and until these countries obtained their independence, Arab men were very vigilant not to let the foreigners touch their female relatives because this was thought to be one of the most humiliating weapons. A case in point is Syrian men’s fear of French soldiers who were thought to sexually abuse the girls and women taken to their prisons. In Syria, French soldiers were notorious for drunkenness and improper advances to women as depicted in the Syrian novel *Death of a Brave Man* by Hannah Meenah (1997, pp. 68-9). This led to Syrian men becoming even more conservative than before with respect to women participating in public life and political activism. When any demonstration against the French was planned most people made sure that their daughters were not among the demonstrators due to a belief that the French soldiers would take those girls to prison where they would be sexually abused.

Understandably, it is very difficult to find official documentation of political rapes during the European colonisation of Arab countries as this was a very sensitive issue. Even those who were exposed to such practices would have hidden what happened in order to protect their reputation. However, this paper is discussing not only actual political rapes but also the fear of political rape. There are many representations of this fear of sexual abuse by foreigners in Arabic literature and dramatic television series written about the days of European colonisation. A case in point is the famous Syrian novel *Damascus: The Smile of Sadness* (1995) by Olfat Al-Idliby. The heroine of this novel, Sabriyah, joins a demonstration against the French and returns in the evening with her brother’s friend, Adel, whom she loves. He has told her that the protestors are relying on women’s participation in the demonstration this time; she immediately promises him to join and says: “I always envied men for what they are doing for our country and I always wished to serve my country in action rather than merely in feeling for it” (Al-Idliby, 1995, p. 246). However, Adel – though proud of her – warns her against rushing into the decision because her parents will certainly prevent her. She answers that she will not wait for their decision. She does join the demonstration but she returns in the evening to find her family furious at her late return.

Her brother has seen her with Adel and thinks that the latter has destroyed their honour, but when the father asks Sabriyah, she answers saying: “I was in the demonstration with my friends” (p. 254). Here, the father starts hitting her madly saying: “I do not have daughters who go out on demonstrations with men” (p. 254). When they ask her about being too late, she lies to them, so that they do not think she had a relationship with Adel and says: “We were arrested by the police [the French police] and I had to wait until it was my turn to be investigated” (p. 255). To escape one trouble, Sabriyah falls into a more dangerous trap because then her brother bursts out: “What a greater disaster! I know what the French and the police do with the girls whom they take to police centres. No girl will escape them [with her virginity maintained]” (p. 255).

The father and mother are shocked. The former is unable to stand it anymore and the latter

asks her daughter secretly: "I am your mother. Please tell me the truth; did any one rape you?" (p. 257). She also tells her that they have sent for the midwife to check her virginity. Sabriyah feels humiliated and expresses her anger but they force her to be checked and they discover that their daughter's virginity is intact. Yet, this leaves a deep scar inside Sabriyah who, after that day, is imprisoned at home and is prevented from continuing her education. She says: "I have become unable even to shout" (p. 260). Sabriyah continues her life in silence and the only thing she can really do is write her diaries which would be read only after Sabriyah's death by her niece.

Thus, even when Sabriyah has tried to use her voice in a demonstration against the colonisers, she has been oppressed because of *'ird*. She is doubly oppressed as a colonised individual and as a female. This is a literary representation of the silencing of Arab women for fear of political rape; humiliating the oppressed by humiliating their women. Even when Sabriyah is proved to be a virgin, the fear remains that one day she might be raped. Therefore, for peace of mind, let her be silent at home.

Modern Arab Governments

As mentioned above, Islam could not prevent the political rape of women, especially as the consecutive forms of colonialism followed by dictatorial post-independence governments consolidated rather than eliminated *Jabilyah* Arab traditions. Although no one can deny that Arab women in some countries like Syria, Lebanon and Egypt have seen improvements in their rights to education, work, joining political parties and standing for parliament (Gerner, pp. 304-315; Nydell, pp. 33-46), there are still some laws that over-exaggerate the issue of *'ird*, the issue that keeps both men and women controlled by the phobia of the potential destruction of their honour. One example of these laws is related to the so-called honour-based crime, a possible definition of which is the one offered in AS/EGA (2002):

The so-called 'honour crimes' should not be confused with the concept of 'crimes of passion'. Whereas the latter is normally limited to a crime that is committed by one partner (or husband and wife) in a relationship on the other as a spontaneous (emotional or passionate) reply (often citing a defence of 'sexual provocation'), the former may involve the abuse or murder of (usually) women by one of more close family members (including partners) in the name of individual or family honour (AS/EGA, 2002, cited in Welchman & Hossain, 2005, p. 10).

In this kind of crime, sometimes there is no difference between the sexual relationship outside the frame of marriage and rape, though from an Islamic point of view there is a great difference. In Islam, the punishment for rape falls on the rapist because he does what is worse than adultery by forcing sexual intercourse on a woman outside the frame of marriage. As for the woman, she must not be punished because she was forced, and there is evidence in Chapter 6, verse: 19 in the Holy Quran (1997) that those who commit sins by force will be forgiven. So, this proves that in Islam, the woman is not to be blamed for being raped. The social punishment of raped women is tolerated by the legal system in some Arab countries like Syria and Egypt, and is contradictory with the rules of Islam.

In fact, the sensitivity of the issue of women-related honour is still consolidated through some points of discrimination against women in Arab civil laws, the most shameful example of which is the one related to the honour-based crime. For example, the law in Syria still protects any man

who kills a female family member to remove a stigma caused by her entering an adulterous sexual relation. In Syrian Penal law, there is a special article – number 548 – related to the honour-based crime. While the punishment for murder in Syrian law is death, a murder that happens due to a man seeing his wife or one of his female relatives in an adulterous situation is excluded from the death penalty for his murder. He is excluded from the punishment even if he sees them in a suspicious situation; that is, even if he has not seen them in actual sexual intercourse. Until 2009, no death penalty was imposed in such cases. In 2009, a penalty of no less than two years – still less than the death penalty that is imposed for murder – was instituted for a man who kills his wife or any female relative for adultery or suspicious relationships (Euromed Gender Equality Programme, 2010, pp. 17-18). In 2011, again the article was changed to impose no less than five to seven years for the honour-based crime, while other murderers are still sentenced to death (Amnesty International, 2011, p. 4).

There are similar laws in other Arab countries such as Egypt and Jordan (Welchman & Hossain, 2005), and the implications of these laws are very serious as they affect most social classes. Undoubtedly, there are different attitudes towards how honour-based criminals are dealt with among Arab educated people, activists in human rights and the different strata of the Arab public. Yet, even if they escape death, it is more often that both raped and adulterous women are generally considered unfit for marriage and are blamed since even “[w]omen who have been raped are viewed as having brought the crime upon themselves by transgressing conservative social and sexual norms. Consequently, there is a deeply rooted cultural taboo associated with being a rape victim” (Marcus, 2011, p. 2). In this context and taking into consideration any enemy’s awareness of this sensitive issue, *ird*, vulnerable Arab women are often careful not to become involved in politics.

The law related to the honour-based crime is only one example of how women are discriminated against in even the most open Arab countries. Not all these laws are based on Islam; many of them are derived from Arab traditions inherited from *Jabilyah*. Arab states and countries often still emphasise these old traditions as a way of keeping control of their civil societies. For example, in Islam, even adultery needs four witnesses who saw the man and the woman in an actual intercourse to prove the accusation of adultery: “Those who commit immorality [i.e., unlawful sexual intercourse] of your women – bring against them four [witnesses] from among you. And if they testify, confine them [i.e., the guilty women] to houses until death takes them or Allâh ordains for them [another] way (4:15)” (Quran: English Meanings, 1997, pp. 71-2). Moreover, those who accuse a woman of adultery without four witnesses should be punished severely: “And those who accuse chaste women and then do not produce four witnesses – lash them with eighty lashes and do not accept from them testimony ever after. And those are the defiantly disobedient (Chapter 24: verse: 4)” (Quran: English Meanings, 1997). The condition of four witnesses is nearly impossible to achieve in such cases. This shows a great contradiction between religion and the law despite the fact that most Arab governments declare their laws as stemming from Islamic laws. How could the law then find excuses for a man to kill a woman without four witnesses? And why is the woman alone to be killed, whereas in most cases the man seen with her would escape? This paper suggests that when the law allows this, it gives the issue of honour greater importance in cases of raped women, who are supposed to be thought of as victims rather than criminals. By maintaining the laws which protect those who kill for honour, the political authorities in the Arab countries under discussion are the main responsible parties for women’s fear of political rape which might prevent them from involvement in public and political issues.

The fear of political rape is still existent and this is not wrong; obviously, no man in the

whole world would like his female family members to be punished for his political stance. The action that should be taken must be against the sexual violence of the states which exploit some cultural aspects of their peoples in order to control them. For example, the punishment for raping a woman in Iraq before Nouri al-Maliki became its president (2006) was death; yet, the current government of Iraq does not hesitate in capturing the female members of the so-described ‘terrorists’ as the following extract – commenting on a speech delivered by Nouri al-Maliki – shows:

Mothers, sisters, daughters and wives have been unjustly detained, tortured or raped, simply because they do not know the whereabouts of the men in their families. Thousands of women have been detained with no legal accusations. Some of them are imprisoned with their infants and children in unbearable prison conditions just because Maliki claims that their husbands, brothers, or fathers have committed an act of terror. (Al-Azzawi, 2013, para. 2)

So, the state allows itself to practise illegal violence against women due to their male relatives’ deeds or opinions. Even before that, Saddam Hussein’s regime was known for its political rapes and this became a theme in the literature on Iraq. For instance, in *Five Mirrors*, Haydar Haydar represents Hussein’s soldiers raping the heroine, shooting her and then throwing her corpse into the river. The question that the author utters is: “Would this woman’s patriotic feelings have remained the same if she had imagined that this monster’s [Saddam’s] soldiers would rape her, tear her body with their bullets and then throw it into the river” (Haydar, 1992)?

There are many other examples of this modern political oppression tool represented in Arabic literature. One of these representations is found in Naguib Mahfouz’ *Al-Karnak* which is about intellectual and political oppression during the presidency of Jamal Abdunaser in Egypt. The novel was published in 1974 and the story mainly concentrates on the arrest of university students discussing political change in a café called al-Karnak. In prison, these students are tortured. Among these students are a young man, Ismael and his fiancée, Zainab, studying medicine. While in prison, Zainab is raped mercilessly. When she tells her story, she says that the intelligence officer only moved his finger and this motion destroyed her life. She says the officer “decided to watch an exciting, pleasurable and unfamiliar scene [her being raped]” (Mahfouz, 2006, p. 67). However, what is more cruel is that they take her to her fiancé’s cell and threaten to torture her in front of him – torturing that might include rape – until he changes his mind and confesses what they want him to confess when they promise him they will leave his fiancée intact. Unfortunately, only when they are set free does he discover that they raped her even before his change of mind (Mahfouz, 2006). When Zainab is set free, she starts to punish herself by acting like a prostitute on many occasions, blaming herself by means of the following logic:

I am the daughter of this revolution and despite everything that happened to me, I did not give up its essence. Therefore, I am completely responsible for it and must endure its consequences. In addition, implicitly, I am responsible for what happened to me, so I decided not to fake an honest chaste life and decided to live on as any woman without dignity would. (Mahfouz, 2006, p. 70)

During the Arab Spring

In the three years since the Arab Spring started, we have heard many stories about Arab women being raped as a way of taking revenge on their men, whether husbands, fathers, brothers or sons. A case in point is the well-known story of the Libyan woman, Iman al-Obeidi, who accused fifteen of Gaddafi's men of raping her repeatedly. Marcus (2011) argues:

Throughout Qaddafi's fight to remain in power, his regime ordered soldiers to go into villages and rape the female adults and children, some as young as 8 years old, in front of family members. Condoms and Viagra were found in pockets of dead Qaddafi soldiers [...] Raping a woman strips the woman, her family, and her community of "honor" (p. 3).

Although many women participated in public political activities, most Arab women during the Arab Spring were only busy escaping their enemies with their daughters, and others were busy dealing with their broken honour resulting from rape for political reasons. The immediate result has been a large-scale absence of women from the political struggle of their countries.

In "Rape as a Political Weapon," Michael J. Totten says: "Hosni Mubarak's secular regime and nominal US ally used rape squads against dissidents, as did the Egyptian Army between the Mubarak and Morsi presidencies" (Totten, 2013, para. 9). In addition, according to France 24, a survey by the Thomson Reuters Foundation resulted in the conclusion that the women of three of the Arab Spring countries -- Egypt, Syria and Yemen -- have been the biggest losers (2013, para. 3). The Thomson Reuters Foundation survey also illustrates that "[t]he Syrian woman is a weapon of war, subjected to abductions and rape" (France 24, 2013). Regardless who is using women as a weapon or tool for political oppression, the result is always the same; these political rapes are causing trauma and fear of participation in any political activity on the part of women.

Further, the survey shows that when women joined men in the Egyptian protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square, they were exposed to discrimination by the law and to many sexual assaults (para. 4). Egyptian politicians accused these women and girls of being loose and they "were beaten, charged with prostitution, and forced to submit to 'virginity checks'" (Marcus, 2011, p. 3). When confronted, a senior Egyptian General stated, "The girls who were detained were not like your daughter or mine [...] These were girls who had camped out in tents with male protesters in Tahrir Square" (Marcus, 2011, p. 3). This implies that if these protesting females had been of those who respect the social conduct and values of chastity, they would not have participated in these protests. This also implies that these girls and women had nothing that they would fear to lose; that is, *'ind'*. A consequence of such accusations could be that many families would prevent their daughters from participation in any political activity because reputation and honour are more important; and in fact these people are not to be blamed if they want to save their female relatives from being violently sexually harassed.

The Role of the feminist¹

With special reference to the thought of the postcolonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Arab women encountering the fear of political rape can be described as an example of the "subaltern female", a term advanced by Spivak since 1983. The subaltern female can be defined as the female who has no access to the dominant discourses which causes her inability to be heard

1 This section draws partially on my PhD thesis: "Gayatri Spivak: Deconstruction and the Ethics of Postcolonial Literary Interpretation," University of Essex, 2013.

(Spivak, 1999). In terms of theory, the issue of the subalternity of Arab women vulnerable to political rape can be best addressed with the notion of ethical responsibility towards the subaltern female as the first step. The following paragraphs first explain the concept of the subaltern female and then ethical responsibility as an approach appropriate for tackling the issues of subaltern Arab women who are susceptible to political rape.

Spivak's theory of the subaltern female started with the example of the (allegedly) Hindu tradition of sati, popularly known as widow-burning. She believes that sati was one of the practices that were emphasised by the British government in India in order to justify its interference in Hindu culture and law. An idea about how Spivak construes the British manipulation of sati can be obtained from her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice" where she proposes that this category of the subaltern was marginalised by both the coloniser and the colonised: "[b]etween patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (Spivak, 1988, p. 306).

Spivak (1988) explains that sati from the Hindu perspective expresses the female's loyalty to her husband. The Hindu woman's free will is associated with her desire for or refusal of self-immolation and under the "ideological production of the sexed subject," the female takes her sanctioned suicide as a "signifier" of her desire (Spivak, 1988, p. 300). Thus, a female who immolates her body after her husband's death is promised to receive the heavenly rewards, while she who does not will remain the prisoner of her body. Conversely, the British perception of sati was different, as Spivak explains through her discussion of *Suttee: A Historical and Philosophical Enquiry into the Hindu Rite of Widow Burning* (1928) by British poet, translator, historian, and novelist Edward John Thompson (1886-1946), who became a missionary in Bengal in 1909. Thompson (1928) stated that "the victims of suttee were punished for no offense but the physical weakness which had placed them at man's mercy. The rite seemed to prove a depravity and arrogance such as no other human offense had brought to light" (as cited in Spivak, 1988, p. 301).

What Spivak means is that Hindu women subject to this practice lost their voice because no one heard them. Their voice was lost between two discourses; that of Hindu men and culture, and that of the British. This is quite similar to the situation of the victims of political rape in the Arab world, women who are also losing their voice between the political stances of their male relatives and the abusive violence of the opposing sides, either governments or other groups. What can be understood from Spivak's theory is that the subaltern female can speak but in her own way, using other signification methods than the dominant discourses. Therefore, the communication with the subaltern female should not necessarily be achieved using any of the dominant discourses as if she could be turned into a copy of the self. This is exactly what causes Spivak's criticism of the British interference and benevolence in the case of sati. For her, this practice was used as the pretext for British colonial interference in Hindu law (Spivak, 1988; 1999).

Because both the British colonisers and Hindu men spoke for sati, the first defending the Hindu woman against a crime and the latter defending her culture, sati's voice is irretrievable. For Spivak (1999), anyone speaking for the subaltern female will be manipulating her voice for a certain agenda. This even includes feminism and non-governmental organisations, as Spivak stressed in her participation in the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994. In the paper which she presented at this conference, the subaltern female is described as the poorest woman of the South – what was known before as the "Third World". Spivak criticises the issue of reducing reproductive rights to abortion, which was under discussion in this conference. She argues that abortion is immaterial in the South where poor

women consider children a source of social security. She accuses the proponents of reducing the reproductive rights to abortion of not taking into account the heterogeneity of poor women in the South. The proponents of such a solution view the poor woman of the South as a copy of themselves: “[f]ocusing reproductive rights so intensely on abortion [assuming] that the able woman of the North is a person endowed with subjectivity and that the poor woman of the South should of course want what she herself wants” (Spivak, 1995, pp. 3-4). The woman about whom Spivak is speaking is a good example of the subaltern female because she cannot represent herself at such international conferences, as she is amongst the poorest women of the South who do not have access to the dominant discourses of the globalising system. Many world organisations and local non-governmental organisations speak in these women’s names suggesting solutions for what they evaluate as these poor women’s problems without listening to them. In brief, the voice of the poorest women of the South is still lost and covered by western women and organisations.

In other words, solutions that are applicable in the west may look impossible in other places like in Arab countries. The feminist, Spivak argues, should rather give up viewing the other female as a copy of the self as if looking in the mirror (Spivak, 1981). This emphasis on heterogeneity in feminism is the main characteristic of what is known as third-wave feminism. Though it is complicated to identify three clear-cut waves of feminism, there are some possible definitions of the third wave. In “On the Genealogy of Women: A Defence of Anti-Essentialism,” Alison Stone defines third-wave feminists who emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s as those who “object, in particular to, exclusive tendencies within the dominant feminist theories of the 1970s and 1980s, theories that emerged more or less directly from second wave feminism” (Stone, 2007, p. 16). In *Politics and Feminism*, Arneil defines third-wave feminism as embracing “the diversity and differences in perspectives among ‘women,’ ultimately straddling both ‘one’ and the ‘other’” (Arneil, 1999, p. 186). As Shelley Budgeon also explains, third-wave feminists can be defined by a “deconstructive impulse” to start from multiple differences among women instead of dealing with the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (Budgeon, 2011, p. 4). Second-wave feminists wrote about women as a universalised or homogenised sisterhood, a homogeneity that is refused by third-wave feminists – usually described as anti-essentialist feminists. Like other third-wave feminists, Spivak jettisons essentialism because in her opinion “[w]ithin mainstream U.S. feminism the good insistence that ‘the personal is political’ often transformed itself into something like ‘*only* the personal is political.’ The strategic use of essentialism can turn into an alibi for proselytizing academic essentialisms” (Spivak, 1997, p. 358).

Spivak moved chronologically through the two waves of feminism during her career. Later, she would explain her affiliations with second-wave feminism as a politically useful strategy for maintaining the possibility of women’s collectivity and consequently political activism. However, this strategic essentialism should be forsaken when the aim of forming a collectivity is achieved, and the following step should be paying attention to differences within this sisterhood itself. Abandoning essentialism entails forsaking the idea of the representation of, with the meaning of speaking for, heterogeneous women. What is needed now is not the political representation of women but the ethical responsibility towards them.

As far as the topic of Arab women is concerned, the problem in the west has so far been that an Arab woman is still stereotyped as the Muslim woman who is completely oppressed all over the Arab world. As Muhja Kahf argues, the “core narrative itself [in western thought] whittled to one sentence for working purposes, is this: “the Muslim woman is being victimized” (Kahf, 2002, p. 1). This homogenisation is an attitude refused by third-wave feminists. What is always forgotten is that there are many sects within Islam. In Arab countries, there are women of different ethnicities, of which the Kurds are only one example. There are educated women,

working women and housewives belonging to different social classes. Nonetheless, all women in the Arab world – even the non-Muslims – are exposed to the same threat when wars or political struggles erupt and all of them are subject to the legal discrimination of the civil laws, threats and discrimination which affect them in different ways. The heterogeneity of subaltern Arab women's experiences requires an approach which is based on an awareness of this heterogeneity.

There are some scholars, like Margret Nydell, who have started to realise that a different version of feminism is needed in Arab countries: "Feminism in the Middle East is not the same as in the West. Muslim women do not expect an all-at-once liberation from traditional restrictions, and certainly not from gender roles. They are working within religious values, picking their battles, and taking it step by step" (Nydell, 2012, p. 79). Yet, more effort is required in the field of respecting the different cultural particularities of women in the Arab world. In this respect, much can be learnt from Spivak who stressed that the subaltern must be heard while in subalternity without asking them to forsake their culture. This Spivakian approach is clear in her reading of Mahasweta Devi's "Pterodactyl" in 1999. Spivak especially highlights how the protagonist of the novella shared the secret of the people of a tribal village in Bengal, and participated in their mythical rituals though these are not congruent with his knowledge and though their beliefs are scientifically not possible (Spivak, 1999). For Spivak, this is how the subaltern should be heard. In other words, the subaltern must be heard in their own signification methods and their culture should be respected rather than banned or refused as unacceptable.

Accordingly, in order to respect the otherness of the subaltern Arab woman and to approach her subalternity, one can resort to Spivak's ethical responsibility, a concept which she advanced and defined in 1994 saying: "I can formalize responsibility in the following way: It is that all action is undertaken in response to a call (or something that seems to us to resemble a call) that cannot be grasped as such" (Spivak, 1994, p. 22). This responsibility emerges through the ethical encounter with the subaltern female. The responsibility is the decision to respect this female's difference from the self and the awareness that what applies to the self does not necessarily apply to the subaltern female because in such encounters, as Spivak contends, "when the philosopher – or anyone – tries and tries to explain and reveal, and the respondent tries and tries to receive the explanation and the revelation, that the something that must of necessity not go through is the secret and changeable 'essence' of that exchange" (Spivak, 1994, p. 21). The secret which Spivak is stressing is caused by difference that even includes the signification methods used by both sides. The secret of the subaltern is what invites the self for the responsibility.

In the case of the subaltern Arab woman, the secret that cannot be transmitted is there because the subaltern Arab woman is different in her cultural and religious beliefs, and perhaps this makes her an alien to the western self. For example, in the case of the Muslim Arab woman, some people might view the hijab or veil as a barrier to the extent that the "[w]estern feminist movement campaigned over many years for the right of women to be uncovered in public" (Yaqoob, 2004). However, the feminist should be aware that this barrier was created and over-emphasised by colonialism itself and caused a discrepancy between the Muslims' and the West's discourses on hijab. Hijab being a symbol of piety and modesty for many Muslims and a symbol of oppression for the West and numbers of modernised Muslims makes encountering the woman wearing hijab complicated and she becomes a subaltern figure whose voice is lost. A woman wearing hijab might be stereotyped in many ways depending on the different discourses on hijab without listening to her. Katherin Bullock argues that the veil and hijab were a barrier in colonial times, and that "attacking the veil was an essential part of the colonial project, necessary to break down the barriers between colonial power and hidden women" (Bullock, 2002, p. xxxix). The voice of the Muslim Arab woman herself is lost between both discourses. As argued by Yaqoob,

“It would be unfortunate if a Muslim woman was only viewed in terms of whether she wore a hijab – by her brothers and sisters in faith who may not regard her as “highly” if she doesn’t, or non- Muslims who may regard her as less worthy if she does” (p. 5). As a result, as Spivak argues, there is a secret that is at the core of the interaction between the feminist and the subaltern Muslim Arab woman. This secret should be maintained rather than removed.

Because Spivak believes that the subaltern participates in ethical responsibility by enticing a response from the other side, she insists that the object of ethical action is not an object of benevolence. Benevolence means the imposition of certain types of help, exactly as western colonialism imposed its benevolence as a way of ‘civilising’ the world. This colonialist practice contributed to the construction of the colonial subject as an incomplete image of the self. Responsibility is not the duty of the self only, but the duty of the subaltern as well. In addition, Spivak’s ethical approach does not mean to be attentive to the subaltern female in the sense of making her an object of knowledge, which is usually the approach of anthropological studies, because for Spivak “[e]thics are not a problem of knowledge but a call of relationship” (Spivak, 1996, p. 32). By analogy, in order to be heard, the subaltern Arab woman, vulnerable to political rape, does not have to become a copy of what is normed as the free European woman.

Moreover, based on Jacques Derrida’s thought, Spivak (1994, 1999) clarifies that within the structure of ethical responsibility, the gaze or silence of the subaltern assigns one with responsibility. Therefore, the subaltern gaze or silence which is a call for an ethical relationship with the self is not passive. On the contrary, it is equally participating in the responsibility. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that the silence of the subaltern Arab women is not passive. Rather, it is this silence that is inviting the world to establish the ethical relationship with them without transgressing their values and lifestyle. Their silence calls for respecting and understanding their difference. If the world attends to the silence of the subaltern Arab women exposed to political rape, then this silence will not be a passive stance; it will be a non-violent statement that participates in the ethical responsibility and calls the world to action.

Conclusion

Whenever subaltern Arab women have the desire to change the political life in their countries, oppressors threaten them with sexual violence. The experiences of Arab women are heterogeneous in this regard: the problem is not in religion, culture or the emotional familial relationships; rather, political oppression threatens everything that is human. Applying Spivak’s thought to the subaltern Arab woman who is vulnerable to political rape, feminism is not what colonises subaltern Arab women by excluding all their social and cultural values under the pretext that these are oppressive. Simultaneously, feminism is not expected to impose western values, and western version of freedom and individualism as a form of civilising benevolence, that gives subaltern Arab women a chance or a platform to speak. Vulnerable Arab women are already speaking for themselves on their own platform through their silence in the face of political rape.

It is extremely difficult to view subaltern Arab women’s freedom from the perspective of western women’s freedom. Subaltern Arab women threatened with sexual violence during political struggles have the right to preserve their lifestyle and values and at the same time they have the right to speak their opinion on public and political issues. What could be more productive in this case is addressing the problem of political oppression through sexual harassment. The first step towards achieving this could be highlighting Arab women’s dilemma to the whole world and inviting the mainstream to respect the difference of these women from the western norm. It is also important to raise awareness of the fact that the subalternity of the vulnerable Arab woman

in the face of political rape is not passive, because if the ethical encounter is achieved, it is these women's subalternity that will have called for a response and an action. Their subalternity is their non-violent stance against political rape.

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