

# Women's studies and transformative politics: an Arab-Muslim perspective

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## Introduction

Within an Arab Muslim context, male-dominated perspectives cutting across various intellectual trends, whether liberal, Islamic, conservative or secular, have expressed unease about the way issues of Arab women's rights are studied. It has been claimed that feminist discourses and gender critiques, as well as ethical stands and an ethos characteristic of women's studies, work to buttress Western imperialist projects and encourage Arab women to grow detached from their socio-cultural and religious values. Such claims, originated in response to historical and political circumstances peculiar to the Arab region in the colonial and post-colonial era, have contributed to slowing down significant progress in the empowerment of Arab women. They have also generated sentiments unfriendly towards women's studies either as an epistemological turn or as an academic discipline or programme within a university.

In March 2012 I participated in a conference hosted by the American University of Sharjah (AUS) on *Gender and Women's Studies in the Arab Region* by giving a presentation on my experience as Head of the Women's Studies programme at Jordan University. The main purpose of the conference was to explore the possibilities, challenges and advantages of establishing women's studies in Arab universities especially, but not exclusively, of the Gulf region. Given the opportunity to interact with women from the Arab Gulf countries – as well as from other countries – I realized that a common and familiar language was emerging amid the variations. Challenges were articulated, focusing notably on converging/overlapping political and cultural interests, socio-cultural and religious values and patriarchal mindsets. Due to those realistic and vibrant commonalities that will be touched upon later in this paper, I maintain that sharing experiences and reflections on women's studies can highlight useful pragmatics that are necessary in order to secure legitimate ground for this discipline in the Arab Muslim region.

Clarifying the curricular content in women's studies may help to calm down resistant voices or at least engage them in constructive debates. The reference here is to scholarly work on women articulated against subjectivities, sensibilities and practices structured by historical and cultural dynamics specific to Arab Muslim locations. An exposure to this scholarly work helps to avoid a reductionist perception of Arab women's rights – one that is caught up in secularism versus religiosity, West versus East or women versus men. In addition, whether as an independent unit in the university, or mainstreamed in various disciplines, or disseminated through different cultural platforms, women's studies can provide a way of thinking through gender inequality, and a sense of nourishment in organizing judicious transformative efforts.

Instituting women's studies in academia can bring about change in favour of women comparable to other sorts of change attained through teaching/learning processes in any other discipline. Education and moral awareness are reciprocally constitutive: both affect the process of human change and the formation of enlightened members of society. However, realizing the transformative effect of an educational project within academia is a complex process. Universities are constantly restrained from embracing too much nonconformist thought or identifying with 'against the grain' strategies. As

maintained by MacCabe (1987) in his foreword to Spivak's *In Other Worlds*, "the problem is neither the micro-political conservatism of any institution nor the genuine problem of elaborating an educational programme which emphasized both individual specificity and public competence. It is that such a project will encounter powerful macro-political resistance" (p. xviii).

## Necessary definitions

Before proceeding, some terms used in the present paper need to be framed. I begin with the term 'women's studies', which I use to refer to either departments of women's studies, or women's studies courses, or to the body of knowledge and scholarship on women. The context determines which of the above is intended. However, I use the term with capital letters to denote Women's Studies as an independent unit in the university. Mainstreaming gender and women's studies in school curricula and relevant cultural performances is a crucial initiative towards a heightened "feminist" consciousness; still, it is not the specific concern of this paper.

In this paper, I consider feminism as an integral part of women's studies. I find Mir-Hosseini's (2011) definition of the feminist epistemology in her article *Beyond 'Islam' vs. 'Feminism'* useful for the purpose of this paper. She describes feminism as a knowledge project that "sheds light on how we know what we know about women's rights in law, including laws that take their legitimacy from religion, enabling us to challenge, from within, the patriarchy that is institutionalised in a legal tradition" (p. 2). The definition is safe to adopt in view of its inclusiveness, but also in its resistance to hegemonic impulses. For her, feminism "includes a general concern with women's issues, an awareness that women suffer discrimination at work, in the home and in society because of their gender, and action aimed at improving their lives and changing the situation" (ibid.).

The use of the term 'feminism' in the above sense does not blur the fact that there are different types of feminism and that each is imbued with different political connotations. In fact, this pursuit of 'difference' has added to the ethical dimensions of feminism. Golley (2004) points out how "feminist theory is colonial when it studies Third World Women as a monolithic subject regardless of class, ethnic, or racial location" (p. 4). Islam, she confirms, "has always been the pot within which the subject Arab women has been cooked. The West has a generalized view that Arab women are Muslims and that Islam...oppresses women. The reaction to this view has also centered on Islam, this time defending its treatment of women" (p. 17).

As for the terms 'Middle East', 'the Islamic World', 'the Arab Gulf' and the 'Arab world', I use them bearing in mind that despite the wide variations between them, "crucial linkages also widely exist" (Mikdashi, 2012). A common Islamic cultural heritage and a common language have characterized a great deal of the Arabs' social sphere and maintained a distinctive character for the region and its peoples (Golley, 2004; Sabbagh, 2005).

The zealous commitment to tribal codes of practices and tribal identity in many Arab countries complicates political and civilian life, hampers progress pertaining to women, and often leads to the obstruction of democratic progress and transparent accountability. Nationalism and Islamism are "major discursive frameworks" of the Arab world (Moghadam, 2004, p. 67). Transformation in the Arab world is a gradual process, uneven in its modes and social scope, and influenced by each country's wealth, embraced ideology and attitudes, and political status (Golley, 2004; Moghadam, 2004). However, religious and cultural convergences constitute a common ground for handling some of the common challenges confronting the establishment of Women's Studies in the Arab region.

## Women's studies: curricula, methods and involved educators

"It takes a feminist curiosity to see a beauty salon as a political forum—and to pay attention. Here is where the relationship between public and private power is being sorted out" (Enloe, 2004, p. 296).

Rylance (1992) has argued that "while higher education institutions do not actively discriminate against women, their culture makes it significantly more difficult for them to succeed" (p. 159). The "uneasy alliance" (Lowe & Benston, 1991) between the University and Women's Studies calls for an exploration of the nature of the relation between the two. Whereas there are some common grounds accounting for such a problematic relation across various geographical locations, there are still others that pertain to specific locations.

Within an Arab Muslim context, the existence of Women's Studies as an independent unit in the university is often viewed as a strategic move to endorse a 'modern' image of the university. As argued by Enloe (2004), "patriarchy is not old hat. And it is not fixed. The structures and beliefs that combine to privilege masculinity are continuously being modernized" (p. 6). However, I draw upon my own experience in Women's Studies at Jordan University to share thoughts and insights that can enhance the performance of women's studies not only in my own context, but also in other similar Arab Muslim contexts, such as that of the Arab Gulf countries.

Seven years ago Women's Studies constituted a programme (not a department) in our university; and it was obvious to me that greater efforts were needed from within the programme to obtain official approval for what other departments typically obtained with less effort. Such approvals pertain to issues like the recruitment of more academic and administrative staff, provision of more space for the programme's activities, hosting speakers from outside the country, allocating a larger budget for PhD scholarships, and other less visible matters. This is not to mention the constant need to challenge male and female colleagues' scepticism about the academic and practical feasibility of the programme, its content, intended outcome, and impact on development issues.

Students frequently expressed unease concerning the quick turnover of academic staff, for the programme depended mainly on part-time rather than tenured faculty. In addition, they felt that generally instructors did not show keen interest in the advancement of women's status, nor in accumulating specifically feminist knowledge, nor in the (un)ethical implications of different discourses for women. Limited recruitment opportunities were a major challenge: due to the interdisciplinary nature of the programme, instructors were recruited either on a part-time basis or called from different departments of the university.

Students often complained that courses like *Women and Law*, *Women and Psychology*, *Women and Economy*, and others were approached in a manner that downplayed visions, strategies and politics necessary for the advancement of women's cause and sustenance of the programme itself. The transformative dimension inherent in feminist knowledge was pulled out of the overall curriculum, and dedication to feminist ethics and politics was either elided or relegated to a marginal position. In addition, the existing staff were, expectedly, committed to their original departments and did not necessarily have the vigour or the knowledge needed to nurture the foundational premises of Women's Studies. This mode of teaching tended to make the classroom a passive locus for the mere accumulation of uncontested knowledge, and for "accommodation and assimilation and consequent depoliticization in the academy" (Mohanty, 2003, pp. 195-204).

Even if the percentage of female academics in decision-making posts in Jordanian universities is on the increase, the issue, as framed by Rylance (1992), has to do with assessing their actual success in providing "a language for the exchange of ideas about values and the recognition of human experiences,

and [organizing] important political pressure for the establishment of that language” (p. 178). Mohanty elaborates on how radical educators envision the academy as a site for both disseminating and contesting knowledge. In the classroom, both the teacher and the student can resist and produce ideas as well as interpret them (2003). This sort of pedagogical democracy requires a developed system of education that encourages the above principles and the recruitment of academics who can work with these principles.<sup>1</sup>

Educators well exposed to feminist epistemology can better work out private and public strategies for change and inscribe a culturally informed feminist pedagogy (Mohanty, 2003). In fact, women’s studies in the Arab world can benefit a great deal from a liminal-spaced women’s enquiry – one informed by an intersection of multiple identities evolved through belonging to two spaces and times. The reference here is to scholarly enquiry made by Muslim women who live in the West and are currently producing a corpus of knowledge on Muslim women. The exposure to diverse feminist epistemology, politics and visions implicated in those studies is strategically needed in view of the fact that all branches of feminist thought have valued “multifarious female experiences – in consciousness-raising and in writing” (Whelehan, 1995, p. 205). This diverse exposure reinforces the ethical dimension of women’s studies in the academic institution considering the resistance with which those studies are met. Kamuf’s (1991) fears are not unsubstantiated when she explains how placing Women’s Studies in the university can subject feminist studies to male rule and deprive feminist scholarship of its passion and vigour. Kamuf calls for greater efforts to rectify women’s omission from the “institutional mainstream” dominated by masculine ideology (1991).

My involvement with women’s organizations in Jordan made me realize the extent to which the absence of a ‘feminist philosophy’ from development projects targeting women can affect women’s empowerment as subjects and objects of change. These projects are generally designed to render women agents for social and economic development rather than for their own self-development. They involve women and target women but alarmingly lack the focus needed to enable them develop a perception of their own self-worth, and become their own agents for economic autonomy—concepts that have been pivotal to feminism. The targeted women of those projects join useful training workshops, advocacy programmes, and skill enhancement courses. However, they continue to see their worth exclusively in terms of the benefits they bring to others. I do not mean to argue that the status of Arab women can be transformed only if they embrace ‘feminist’ ideals or acquire feminist epistemology: the absurdity of any such claim can naturally work to abort all efforts for transforming the status of Arab women. The intention, rather, is to encourage the involvement of people informed in feminist philosophy and ‘ethics’ in setting out objectives that serve women truly well in development-based projects.

## **Women’s studies and women’s movements in Jordan and the Arab Gulf countries: links, impacts and exigencies**

Tracing the emergence of feminism from within a Western context reveals how the women’s movement has had a considerable impact on the formation and development of women’s studies (Mohanty, 2003). Lowe & Benston (1991), in their joint article *The uneasy alliance of feminism and academia*, discussed how feminist scholarship and Women’s Studies both came out of the women’s movement and were

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<sup>1</sup> The generally stagnant/declining standard of the educational system at different levels and the poor quality of teaching-learning processes in many parts of the Arab world have been major issues addressed by various researchers, governments, and international organizations.

seen as “a way of disseminating feminist scholarship and of ‘educating for change’” (pp. 48). They reflect on how “feminism has given Women’s Studies a strong collectivist tendency because of the feminist conviction that individual development and strength depend on support from a community” (p. 49). Rosen (2006) also elaborates on how the Women’s Movements managed to affect all aspects of life in the United States, including the academic.

Women’s Studies at Jordan University did not come out of a Jordanian women’s movement: the latter cannot be said to have had a role in pushing for the establishment of Women’s Studies nor for setting out certain visions or strategies for it. How the absence of such relation could have affected the development and credibility of the programme would require a separate study backed by empirical data. It is true that historical and cultural specificity should be taken into consideration when undertaking a comparative analysis between Women’s Studies in Jordan and those in other Western countries as pertaining to their links with women’s movement; however, there remain some transpersonal outlooks and philosophies relevant to different endeavours (Brooks, 2010).

Exposure to Western culture during colonial rule, as has been argued by Ahmed (1992), and the promotion of a feminist discourse by Western colonialists inside the colonized Arab countries, mainly in Egypt and consequently other Arab countries, could have alienated a collective consciousness from developing a genuine interest in pursuing women’s rights, and in devising a platform, like that of Women’s Studies, for the promotion of those rights. The general association made between women’s rights issues and colonialism has led some to deny that Arab Muslim women have issues in the first place.

In any case, the first women’s organization in Jordan was established in 1944, when a group of women started the so-called Women’s Solidarity Society, with Queen Misbah (wife of King Abdullah) as its honorary president. Huda Sha’rawi, a feminist from Egypt (where feminist debates and women’s movements have been the most energetic in the region), paid Jordan a visit in 1944. While meeting with King Abdullah I, she asked for his permission to establish a women’s union branch in Jordan following the footsteps of the women’s union in Egypt and many other Arab countries. The first Women’s Union Society was established directly thereafter (1945), this time with Princess Zain Al Sharaf as the active president. In general, the activities at the time focused on meetings to raise women’s awareness in health, motherhood and community welfare issues (Al-Atiyat, 2010).

The Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967 had a crucial effect on women’s movements in Jordan and their activities. Both Jordanian and Palestinian<sup>2</sup> women focused on dealing with the refugees’ problems and the Palestine question. The Arab Women’s Federation (AWF) was established in 1954 and continued its activities until 1967; but they hardly mobilized women’s rights or touched upon serious political issues. The general environment of the country was restrictive: political parties and their activities had already been banned since 1957 (Al-Atiyat, 2010).

On March 5, 1974, a letter from the late King Hussein granted the vote to all Jordanian women. In 1981, the Society of the Women’s Federation in Jordan (WFJ) resumed its work under a new name, the Jordanian Women’s Union. In the forties and fifties of the twentieth century, women’s organizations were focused on nationalist issues while issues of women’s rights specifically were hardly mobilized. In the period between 1973 and 1989, women were allowed to establish or restart their efforts and provide simple social services. The General Federation of Women was established by the government to serve as the only umbrella for women’s actions and organizations in the Kingdom. After 1989, and due

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<sup>2</sup> Jordan and Palestine were united then under the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

to some national voices demanding more freedoms in various areas, more organizations were founded and allowed more activism in pursuit of political and educational rights for women. The state's intervention during this phase was represented by the active involvement of Princess Basma (Al-Atiyat, 2010).

Women's organizations and activities in Jordan are generally supported by the Hashemite Royal family. NGO's have proliferated in Jordan in the last two decades and implemented a great deal of development projects with a focus on women. Most of these are funded by foreign embassies and international organizations like the UN and USAID (Al-Atiyat, 2010). It should be mentioned that the scope of work of women's movements in Jordan is influenced by the wider political and social climate of the country and the international initiatives of the UN.

Only recently have some interactions and common activities begun to exist between women's organizations in Jordan and Women's Studies at Jordan University. It is interesting to note that in Jordan and the Arab Gulf countries, women's organizations and movements, whether classified as NGOs or SNGOs (state non-governmental organizations), are supervised and attended by the state or members of the ruling families. In both locations, the supervision of the state is seen as necessary to control the scope of work of civil society organizations, particularly those concerned with women, and prevent conflicts that might result between female activists and conservative groups who can be either the main supporters of the state or a perceived threat to its legitimacy (Krause, 2009).

In the Gulf States, the general socio-cultural and religious atmosphere has been influenced by the intellectual and ideological stands held by leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt who had to flee the persecution of the Nasser government in the 'sixties and 'seventies and settle in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. Those leaders reinforced the religious/Islamic identity of the Gulf States. Members of the Muslim Brotherhood coexisted with the Wahhabi and other less conservative Islamic groups that were prevalent elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula. The Brotherhood leaders were welcomed in their new homes since "they typically were well-educated people – engineers, chemists, doctors, scientists, and teachers" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 57). During the 'sixties and 'seventies, oilfields were increasingly discovered and developed, leading to increased wealth and investments in the Gulf countries and to social and educational development. It also intensified conflicts of values between modernity and tradition, especially in family matters and women's rights to self-determination and public participation.

The Gulf countries are "not a monolithic entity; a wide gap exists between the countries in their legal structures and social attitudes. Generally, the UAE and Bahrain tend to be more open" than some other Gulf countries in issues relating to women (Koorosh, 2012, para. 5). Elnaggar (2007) argues that women in the Arab Gulf region in general and in Oman in particular run the risk of being marginalized from today's knowledge-based economy, due to lack of training and a traditionally male-dominated ICT sector (2007). The rise of women's education in the Gulf has not been matched by a parallel rise in women's public participation (Krause, 2009). All the Gulf States have strict strategic control over internal security, economic threats, and potential attacks on local culture, particularly in view of the high volume of expatriates. The Gulf family has benefited tremendously from economic transformation and the level of consumption has significantly increased (Elhaddad, 2003). There has also developed an increasing tension between women's roles as defined by Western feminism and traditional ones referenced by public discourse that woman's 'natural' propensities and her duties are towards her family and nation (Krause, 2009). Gulf women pursue Islamist activities supported by Islamic associations that "can also be used by women as a legitimate avenue for pursuing various interests 'behind the backs of or against the wills of even the most powerful actors' (Ferguson 1994: 18)" (Krause, 2009, p. 33).

Krause (2009) draws on the theoretical work of Foucault, Dean, Ferguson and Gupta to examine women's government-supported organizations and their role in government conduct and production. She explains how the Arab Gulf countries as rentier-states restrict the work of civil society, creating obstacles to political and economic development. Oil-based prosperity allows the state to subdue and contain civil society activism by providing the services that they would normally perform or that they had performed in the past: "rentierism has produced what is called a 'rentier society', in which citizens are said to have an income without sometimes working" (p. 7). Krause notes, however, that leaders of the Gulf States have in many cases encouraged women to participate in the formal economy and to join the workforce.

Each women's organization is led by a sheikha (or sheikhas) of the area in which it is located. Elite state actors supervising women's organizations produce the state discursively and rely heavily on the monarchies that guide and fund the states' agendas. Those organizations undertake many activities evolving around women's familial roles, social service, Islam and child raising. Religion is often felt to be a subject that women should particularly understand and pass down to their children. Prestigious salaries and training for the elite members running the organizations produce empowered women who enable 'governing at a distance' (Krause, 2009) and "most government-supported women's associations direct their activities to areas they regard as 'apolitical'" (Krause, 2009, p. 22). Centers for childcare and women's literacy have been opened throughout the Emirates and funded mainly "by local notable women" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 275).

Great strides have been made by Gulf women in diverse areas; however, significant challenges still exist (El-Haddad, 2003). Kelly's (2011) study indicates that Bahraini women, for example, enjoy the greatest degree of freedom in the Gulf region, followed by women in Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar, and Oman; Saudi Arabia is significantly more conservative. Political participation and voting rights for women in the Arab Gulf lag much behind national and international standards (Krause, 2009). In many GCC universities, women now outnumber men significantly; while the rate of women's employment varies considerably between the GCC countries – and between regions within countries – reflecting different cultural norms (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2009). The Gulf countries are eager to get returns on their significant investment in educating women; however, the success in bridging the gender gap in education is not reflected in the workforce. A 2008 study found that women comprise only 19.2% - fewer than one in five - of the workforce in the GCC economies (Krause, 2009). This means that the countries are underusing a significant resource that could otherwise contribute greatly to their ambitions.

The Gulf countries did not perform well in nearly all areas examined in the Freedom House study, *Women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa: citizenship and justice* (Nazir & Tomppert, 2005). They scored particularly poorly regarding legal rights, protection from discrimination and political rights, as well as in women's personal status and autonomy. The few existing authoritative works on women in the Gulf are quick to point out that women in fact continue to struggle for basic political rights and are subject to inferior citizenship rights (Kelly, 2011; Al-Yousef, 2009). Females in the Gulf States compete not only with citizen males but also with non-citizen males who constitute a large percentage of the labour force (Al-Yousef, 2009). They still need to exert more efforts to overcome many of the obstacles that lead to their political disempowerment and subjugation (Al-Qassem, 2010). Even if the state provides for them through financial security provided to the males supporting them, their own economic participation will help them develop a sense of self-gratification and self-respect.

Gulf women's discursive engagement with Women's Studies either through instituted programmes based in their universities or through developing interest in women's scholarly work can lead to insightful reflections about issues including identity and self-worth, women's empowerment, and

women's financial autonomy. These studies can enable them to come to grips with the necessary rationale to make informed, ethical choices about their own lives, their part in enhancing the economy of their own countries and expressing practical solidarity with other Arab women on development issues. Knowledge, including feminist knowledge, is conducive to a change in perceptions and behaviour (Huysen, 1991). Feminist knowledge enables more substantiated claims for equal citizenship rights, erosion of gender-based discrimination in all laws, protection from violence, public participation, and women's rights awareness campaigns (International Federation for Human Rights, 2010; Nazir, 2010). Jordan is known to be more liberal and 'Westernized' than the Gulf States due to historical factors and the 'liberal' mentality of the ruling family. However, this should not undermine the commonality of certain dynamics involved in securing a credible presence of Women's Studies in both geographical locations. For, as in the Gulf States, the majority of Jordanian women, and indeed men, still subscribe to traditional codes and practices, and abide by strict tribal rules. In such contexts, local legitimacy is a major issue for women's studies.

## Women's studies and local legitimacy

Women's intellectual interventions in various humanist paradigms of knowledge exposed many of the moral gaps inherent to those paradigms. Weedon (2004), Flax (1990), Frazer & Nicholson (1990), Hekman (1995), Di Stefano (1990) and others have impinged on the relations that feminism can have with postmodernism. Kamuf (1991), Eagleton (1991), Harding (1990), Enloe (2004), Rosen (2006), among others, contested the notion of a grand theory subsuming the diverse subjectivities in various cultural locations.

Non-Western intellectuals living (or having lived) in the West have been involved in complex socio-cultural and political debates and clarifications about Islam, Islamic feminism, simplistic representations of Islam and other issues impinging on the multifarious relations between the West and the Muslim world. Those include works by thinkers including Edward Said (1993), Leila Ahmed (2011, 1992), Saba Mahmood (2005), Homi Bhabha (1995), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1987), Asma Barlas (2002), and many others. Works by Western intellectuals like Slavoj Žižek (Žižek & Gunjevic, 2012), Cynthia Enloe (2004), Isobel Coleman (2010) and others have also been concerned with Islam, political ethics, globalization and their impact on women in a range of contexts. The literary and intellectual work of some Arab and Muslim feminists is seen as having contributed directly or indirectly to reinforce an orientalist image of Islam as inherently oppressive to women and incompetent with modernity. This image of Islam is conjured to satisfy some Western readers' expectations/perceptions of Islam (Ibrahim, 2000; Ahmed, 1992; Said, 1993). Saba Mahmood has exposed how "women's oppression in Islam became a theme that was taken up in a raft of books that quickly became best sellers. Those books were almost all ... autobiographical works in which the authors, all women, attested to their personal sufferings under Islam" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 224).

There has been increasing scholarly work, unleashed by Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers, to expose how some Muslim feminists can cause offence to Muslim women and culture and to explore women's diverse moral voices and contextualized resistance to a hegemonic or colonial feminism – one which tends to define the Western emancipation of women as *the* universal model. Those intellectual and ethical interventions unravelling white and colonial discourses do not seem to have caused a significant revision of reductionist receptions of women's studies by many academics from within Arab universities. Their lack of interest in engaging with such studies is actually slowing the process of laying more legitimate bases upon which women's studies can be nurtured.

'Sisterhood', a concept long espoused by feminists, is being contested as an overly simplistic concept homogenising the various forms of women's oppression. Thus, for example, scholars like Saba Mahmood warn of an irresponsible feminism, asserting that "unless feminists rethink their complicity in [the imperialist Western] ... project ... feminism runs the risk of becoming more of a handmaiden of empire in our age than a trenchant critic of the European American will to power" (2011, p. 229). Ahmed (1992), Mohanty (1991, 2003), Spivak (1987) and others have persistently argued that the adoption of one version of feminism, such as that grounded in a Western model of liberation, can compromise the reality of other non-Western women's subjugation. It also works to support a colonial discourse utilizing Muslim women's 'oppressed' status to justify Western rule of others' lands under the moral pretext of civilizing those others. This discourse is now being deconstructed: Rosen (2006), for example, comments on how "Western feminists began to listen, rather than lecture" (2006, p. 341). Enloe (2004) urges women to pursue "a genuine cross-national alliance of equals" that is based on "intense listening, questioning, and rethinking" to increase activists' feminist recognition "of what causes the perpetuation of masculinisation in public life, not only 'over there' but 'here at home'" (p. 303). The intensity of those debates constitutes a challenge to voices suspicious of women's studies as totally complicit with imperialist plans and as culturally inattentive.

Mahmud (2005) rethinks the link traditionally held between secularism on the one hand, and emancipatory feminism, on the other. She builds her thesis on the question which puzzles many feminists, namely: why would a large number of women across the Muslim world actively support socio-religious movements that sustain women's subordination at a historical moment when more 'emancipatory possibilities' are available to them? She describes how such movements are judged within the terms of liberal progressive imagination, and how they proliferated as a result of "crucial elements within the historical trajectory of secular liberalism across the globe" (p. 192). Female pietists make use of tools associated with those movements, including the veil, to assert their identity, on the assumption that bodily practices create a subject that is pious and not the other way around. Mahmud's discussion is intended to contest the reductive assumptions associating female pietists with submission, and to emphasize that "the activities of the mosque or the piety movement are oriented ... toward the retraining of ethical sensibilities so as to create a new social and moral order" (p. 193). This kind of argument reclaims to many Muslim women their right to develop their identity as they deem appropriate within their own context. In addition, it challenges stereotypical images of female pietists or veiled women as passive presences or inactive/submissive followers.

Ahmed (2011), Mahmood (2009) and Jada'an (2010) critique some Muslim feminists like Irshad Manji and Hirsi Ali for their contemptuous, inaccurate and erroneous historical account of Islam and Muslim men as "unparalleled" in their "barbarity and misogyny" (Ahmed, p. 226). The latter authors' account is viewed as extremely subjective, biased and indifferent to historical and cultural variables shaping a particular perception of Islam in their own settings. In Islamophobic spaces, such an aggressive depiction of Islam can secure those feminists sympathy, publicity and recognition. It also can be manipulated to justify cultural imperialism and other hegemonic plans for 'the less civilized.' For Muslims, feminist scholarship that offends the sacred can provoke negative sentiments and jeopardize women's issues by rendering them "a handmaiden of empire in our age" (Mahmood, cited in Ahmed, 2011, p. 229). In contrast to such polarized accounts, a constructive debate can be encouraged in Women's Studies classes to expose the futile outcome of works that offend religious specificities of Arab Muslim women whose ethical code of reference is deeply rooted in those specificities. This engagement is part of pragmatic politics which Women's Studies can use to calm down antagonistic responses to women's issues as anti-Islamic.

However, women's studies grounded in new readings of women in Islam still trigger heated controversy and severe attacks by traditionalists. Ahmed notes that "some Islamists feel outrage at what is happening to Islam in America [which] cause[s] them to desperately begin to seek to figure out a way to, someday, put the genie back in the bottle" (2011, p. 305). After 9/11, she observes, young academics in the West identified as committed Muslims write about Islamic justice, which, by definition, includes gender justice. They clearly see that "past androcentric generations failed to interpret the Qur'an as entailing gender justice" (p. 277). The "variegated exploration of the Islamic religious heritage" (p. 286) by these young academics invokes the liminality which opening more horizons for many Muslim feminist writers defined through their presence and non-presence as Muslim in non Muslim spaces (Gambetti, 2009, p. 102). Their scholarly endeavours to uncover women's relation to Islam offers new perspectives on the latter as a cultural and political dynamic that defies stereotypical and reductionist images of Islam as dogmatic and ahistorical. This not only does justice to actual workings of Islam, but also adds a new value to women's studies as a rich site for debating those workings. Ahmed (2011) holds that Islamists and the children of Islamists and not "the secular or privately religious Muslims... are now in the forefront of the struggle in relation to gender issues in Islam" (p. 297). She confirms how the increasing numbers of Muslim women in the West studying women in Islam are bringing "Islam into balance with what has been the norm in academia (in recent decades, anyway) in relation to women in Christianity and Judaism" (p. 279).

Many Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers are aware of how issues of women within a colonial and postcolonial context have been manipulated to justify attacks on Islam and Muslims (Ahmed, 2011, 1992). Leila Abu Lughod unravels how "the Islamofascist ... people aren't at all interested in what's actually going on in the Muslim world...they just use the woman question as an easy way to target Muslims" (cited by Ahmed, 2011, pp. 221-22). Some Western advocates of women's rights, as shown by Ahmed, are anti-feminist imperialists at home and "have made of the issue of the 'oppression' of women by men of other societies, to justify imperial war and domination" (2011, p. 222) The "replay of this ploy throughout history is all too familiar. In the preceding couple of decades feminist scholars had thoroughly examined and exposed the fraudulence of these ploys" (ibid.).

For more than two decades now, scholarly contributions by Third World women have had a remarkable impact in shaping the body of feminist knowledge and mapping its ethical trajectory. Much of this literature is produced by Muslim (not necessarily Islamist) feminist scholars. According to LeVine & Armando (2009), Muslims, rather than Western observers, are more qualified to investigate socio-religious movements, because they can see how the social solidarity within a postcolonial context is attained through piety, welfare deeds, and passions for justice as a way of confronting the state to provide for its citizens.

Mir-Hosseini (2010) and Jada'an (2010) analyse the phenomenon of having active Islamic feminism outside the Arab world in Muslim countries and among Muslims in the West. The absence of this activism within the Arab countries can be attributed to political and religious conditions restricting the articulation of similar discourses that would label their producers and advocates as apostate. This labelling is not always Islamically justified. Mir-Hosseini acknowledges the shift Islamic feminism has introduced in feminist theory and rethinking dogmas. The Islamic feminist project, she points out, is opposed by "Muslim traditionalists, Islamic fundamentalists and secular fundamentalists" (2011, p.5). Both Mir-Hosseini (2011; 2010) and Mahmood (2005; 2009) are critical of the ever escalating exchange between 'secular feminists', on the one hand, and the possibility of an 'Islamic feminism', on the other. According to Mahmood (2005), what is required is to transgress typical boundaries for political and state discussions to focus on "what constitutes a proper way of living ethically in a world where such questions were thought to have become obsolete" (p. 192).

Mahmood (2009) advocates pulling apart premises that lead to drawing rigid lines between “religious extremism and secular freedom wherein the former is judged to be uncritical, violent, and tyrannical and the latter tolerant, satirical, and democratic” (p. 836) and opts for the academy as one of the places to explore tensions and mutual bearings of both. Women’s Studies can include in its curricula what encourages a healthy debate on Islam and feminism and what enables a sound interpretation of religious texts that goes beyond traditional male-dominated readings.

A debate on Muslim women and the veil has also been investigated by Žižek (2012), who tries to attribute to many of the Muslim practices meanings and values that defy typically stereotypical ones. He argues that “the need to keep women veiled implies an extremely sexualized universe in which the very encounter with woman is a provocation that no man will be able to resist” (p. 116). He also maintains that “the Muslim distrust of woman... paradoxically, in a negative way renders much more directly the traumatic-subversive-creative-explosive power of feminine subjectivity” (p. 126). Žižek not only discusses the meaning of the veil, but also underscores how “long before the unfortunate caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad, a deeply rooted scorn smouldered in the West towards any form of Islamic values, towards everything Islamic” (p. 139). Islam, he continues, was perceived as a “despotic, theocratic, violent, and anti-modern religion” (p. 140). He goes on to criticise the reaction of Western people to Muslim thinkers such as Tariq Ramadan who are “being tagged as hypocrites with a clear plan for the Islamification of Europe with their openly liberal views” (p. 141).

Islamic feminism is a sensitive area which has to be handled with caution and by people with religious knowledge, lest more tension is built between women’s studies and its opponents (Ibrahim, 2011; 2012). Mutahhari (2009) confirms that “in Islam there is no derogatory view about woman as regards her nature and innate constitution” and that “the Qur’an exonerates the female sex from the accusation that woman is the source of temptation and sin and is half a devil” (p. 258). Yassine (2009) assumes a similar position when she asserts that “in contrast to ‘Western feminists’ who (supposedly) define liberation as contrasting with religion, Muslim women should seek liberation from ‘macho interpretations’ of Islam upon which men have built their privilege and power” (p. 308). Yassine is an Islamic feminist who confirms women’s need to claim their rights that have been systematically confiscated by Muslim men and to obtain official degrees that enable them “to master the tools of theology” (pp. 309-313).

The above ‘ethical’ scholarship’ pursued by feminists or thinkers interested in women’s issues is now an indispensable part of women’s studies. Women’s Studies can be more empowered if it includes curricula significantly informed by the above ethical scholarship. Its academic role can be enhanced as a provider of a new trajectory for knowledge about Islam and Muslim women, thus enabling its students to use their studies to confront different challenges, not necessarily confined to women. In addition, the persistent dissemination of Arabic translation of the diverse scholarly work on Islam and women, whether produced regionally or internationally, can enable ‘feminist ethics’ become an integral part of the consciousness of a wider Arab public, including academics.

## Conclusion

The relationship between culture and institutions is symbiotic and mutually supportive. The academic institution has always transformed political consciousness and led to the revision of political institutions (Crothers & Lockhart, 2000). Cultural transformation initiates from multiple cultural locations that could be political movements or “institutions in which we can act as teachers and intellectuals” (Davis & Schleifer, 1992, p. 322). Women’s Studies within the academic institution, like other studies, can stimulate political and moral consciousness conducive to a better reality for woman in Jordan and the

Gulf. Yet, as illuminated in earlier parts of this paper, and in view of the problematic status of women's discourses in the region, Women's Studies need to be specifically heedful to legitimacy issues defined from within specific cultural contexts.

The adoption of certain pedagogical approaches can affect significantly how seeds of transformation embodied in many branches of knowledge can be nurtured (Mohanty, 2003; Žižek, 2011). Mohanty (2003) and Sanchez-Casal & MacDonald (2002) examine how hierarchy, whether in relation to theory or pedagogy, hampers progressive transformation. Not only is hierarchical theory vigorously contested as detrimental to feminist ethics, but also a hierarchical teacher/student relation should be fundamentally restructured. Orienting classroom practice toward a triad of teacher/student/difference (Sanchez-Casal & MacDonald, 2002) "highlights how multiply-situated cultural identities can be engaged" (p. 3) in the formation of the subject and object of Women's Studies' classes, building on narrated experiences from within classes. Students in a triad-structured acquire knowledge not only through the material they are assigned but also through their own negotiated differences. Teachers' and students' diverse experiences become tutorial sources from which students can learn and get a strong grip on the issue of identity difference not only across borders, but also within the same classroom (cf. Jones & Jenkins, 2007). They hence understand better the relation of their own situation to the curricula discussed in class. Also, the teacher can revise and transform the ground of her/his knowledge or inquiry in the light of those articulated differences. The teacher as such does not only guide, but s/he also listens, modifies and learns. It is through this triad engagement that students can be enabled to understand, criticize and act.

Women's Studies in the academic contexts of Jordan and the Gulf can help in changing the terms of cultural and religious debate to fight for women's empowerment within Islam and their culture instead of against it. The design of curricular content focused on local concerns, the utilization of available cultural tools, and the devising of productive pedagogical approaches are all pragmatic means for the success of Women's Studies. Also important is to plan for involving more students of Women's Studies in community research to deepen their understanding of how "the personal becomes intellectual, and the intellectual, personal" (Westkott, 1992, p. 396). Boundaries of statutory social work, as argued by Dominelli (1992), are pushed further if accompanied by an enthusiastic and sensitive 'feminist' vision.

Change in material conditions is quicker than change in values and beliefs (Tuchman, 2004, p. 164). Transforming women's status is interrelated with rethinking issues of identity, beliefs, pedagogical methods and cultural givens. It is a particularly hard process since it involves resisting oppressive practices often sustained under the pretext of protecting a religious and political sovereignty. Slow progress in women's rights and lack of commitment to gender equality in the Arab world imply that democracy may not be sustainable in Arab societies (Moghadam, 2003). Progress in women's issues is linked with a comprehensive view of development that challenges a totalitarian system restraining progress in socio-economic, political and cultural life. Žižek examines how "the notion of 'totalitarianism', far from being an effective theoretical concept, is a kind of *stopgap*: instead of enabling us to think, forcing us to acquire a new insight into the historical reality it describes, it relieves us of the duty to think, or even actively prevents us from thinking" (2011, p. 3). Diversity as a value inherent to feminism/women's studies today challenges all forms of ontological 'totalitarianism'. Giving due focus to 'feminist' exploration of diversity and the multiplicity of contextualized moral voices in curricula of Women's Studies reframes categories as 'Muslim women,' 'Western women,' 'sisterhood,' 'secular feminism' and 'Islamic feminism.'

However, the adoption of provocative feminist approaches intensifies counter-narrative and aborts progress in Arab women's status. Afshar (1996) and Azzam (1996) highlight the importance of social legitimacy for advancing women's status. This legitimacy is defined as one derived from anchoring

women's transformative work on insightful readings of Islamic values and *Shari'a* laws. Islam, as an integral part of the Arab civilization and an essential value-system, cannot possibly be marginalized in development discourses within contexts like Jordan or the Gulf. The emerging contemporary political scene is only one among abundant evidence testifying to the above. Interestingly, political Islam emerges at times as the common enemy of both feminism and regimes, and at others as a tool manipulated by totalitarian authorities to sustain their regimes. Women's Studies is a suitable locus for encouraging a scholarship grounded in new re-readings of Islamic original sources, the divine revelation, prophetic tradition, and traditional Islamic juristic books.

Anchored on all the above engagements and considerations, Women's Studies does not only pave a legitimate ground for its sustenance within the academy, but also enables us to trim down resistance to women's empowerment as Western cultural imperialism. The legitimacy of its undertakings will naturally help to overcome a great deal of the administrative obstacles that hinder the enhancement of Women's Studies from within the university or oppose their existence in the first place. The success of modalities of Women's Studies at some Arab universities can promote the establishment of yet more within the academic institutions of the region. These can further expedite the rhythm of constructive change in the lives of Arab women, given the high esteem Arabs generally hold for education.

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