

# **”Islamic Feminism in post-modern Egypt”**

## **Reclaiming women’s Muslim space in modern Egypt**

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## Introduction

In 2012 the Egyptian-American Muslim journalist and psychologist Yasmin Mogahed described the core values of Islamic feminism by using traditional dichotomies:

*"As western feminism erases God from the scene, there is no standard left—but men. As a result the western feminist is forced to find her value in relation to a man. And in so doing she has accepted a faulty assumption. She has accepted that man is the standard, and thus a woman can never be a full human being until she becomes just like a man—the standard. We too have accepted men as the standard; so anything uniquely feminine is, by definition, inferior. Being sensitive is an insult, becoming a mother—a degradation. In the battle between stoic rationality (considered masculine) and self-less compassion (considered feminine), rationality reigns supreme. Given my privilege as a woman, I only degrade myself by trying to be something I'm not--and in all honesty--don't want to be: a man. As women, we will never reach true liberation until we stop trying to mimic men, and value the beauty in our own God-given distinctiveness."*<sup>1</sup>

Secular feminists have long maintained that the only way to advance women's rights in the Middle East was to break from religion and Islamic law. But another generation of women have voluntarily adopted Islamic lifestyle and supported the rise of political Islam, seeing the oppression of women originating not in the religion itself, but in the way regimes have interpreted it.

Often labeled "Islamic feminism", the outlook of these women has played and is increasingly playing a vital part of civil activism in the Middle East, namely in Egypt. Islamic feminists are seen demonstrating against injustice and political hypocrisy in the middle of the infamous Tahrir Square in Cairo, and Islamic feminists have shaped quite a part of Egyptian political opposition discourse both then and now.

But what political and social role has Islamic feminism played in the changing of postmodern Egyptian society? And how has Islamic feminism developed in postmodern Egyptian society from early 20<sup>th</sup> century until today's "Arab spring"-movement? These are the questions that this article will try to answer.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://world.mediamonitors.net/content/view/full/13883/>

## **Feminism defined:**

According to Webster's Dictionary feminism is defined as the *theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes and the organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests.*<sup>2</sup>

To analyze feminism in a philosophical or rather social discourse, we need to include analyses of woman's social role as presented to history by women itself, put in women's perspectives and with the communicative experience and statements of women themselves. In short, we may understand classical feminism as a complex attempt to define woman's *identity*

Using the term "postmodern" in concordance with the term "feminism" becomes a concept of dichotomy as opposed to the rights of and activities on behalf of men. Postmodern feminism as a sociological niche was first defined by the author Judith Butler in her famous treatise on "*Gender Trouble*". Her point was that postmodern feminism is casting away the theory of feminism as an identity concept; rather feminism in a postmodern context has been constructed into a new philosophical view, where feminism is not so much based upon sex (biological) and gender (cultural); rather it is defined by *performativity* of an individual human being. There simply is no formal, universal definition of *gender* to be taken into account in feminism discourse.

Dr Margot Badran, a graduate of both al-Azhar University and Oxford University, defines the paradigm of Islamic feminism this way:

*"...a feminist discourse and practice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeking rights and justice within the framework of gender equality for women and men in the totality of their existence. Islamic feminism explicates the idea of gender equality as part and parcel of the Quranic notion of equality of all insan (human beings) and calls for the implementation of gender equality in the state, civil institutions, and everyday life. It rejects the notion of a public/private dichotomy (by the way, absent in early Islamic jurisprudence, or fiqh) conceptualising a holistic ummah in which Quranic ideals are operative in all space."*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/feminism>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.countercurrents.org/gen-badran100206.htm>

Islamic feminism is thus defined by both classical and postmodern concepts. Basically, Islamic feminism can be said to describe feminism in an *Islamic framework*. It can be seen as a dichotomy of what popularly is called *secular* feminism; but even the concept of Islamic feminism cannot escape discourse neither as defined by classical feminism, nor as defined by postmodern feminism. To make things even more complicated, the term *Muslim feminism* is often used when discussing *secular feminism* in the Muslim sphere of interest (Muslim countries, among Muslim immigrants in the West etc.), while as *Islamic feminism* is often used as a concept for feminism in a religious, Islamic context.

In my paper I shall use the term *Islamic feminism* as routed in the definition of feminism expressed and experienced by Muslim women (in Egypt) as a *harmonious* concept, i.e. feminism theories expressed in accordance with Islamic dogmas and philosophies, in antithesis of secular Muslim feminism. Never the less, I shall mention and include the latter in certain places of my paper to underline differences in theory and experience.

### **Short history of Islamic feminism:**

Islamic feminism is as old as Islam itself. Already during the time of the revelations and the first forming of an Islamic state in Arab territory, women have played a huge role in defining gender rights and equality inside the umbrella of Islamic dogmas and philosophies. There are more than 8000 sources of female Islamic scholars currently being collected and analyzed by Dr. Mohamed Akram Nadwi from University of Oxford. A peek into his pre-thesis research shows that many of these women have been occupied with defining women's identity into concepts of classical Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and contemporary Muslim experience.<sup>4</sup> They may be the first Islamic feminists in history.

Early Muslim history and early Muslim society also contains many female figures that carried out work and held positions equally to men; such as military commanders, businesswomen and economic investors, religious and civil scholars, poets, healers (doctors) and even president of professional guilds. Compared to Europe at the time, in matters of family law, economical finances and professional life; Islamic women were way ahead in rights and social progress.

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<sup>4</sup> Nadwi, Mohamed: "Al-Muhaddithat: the women scholars in Islam", Interface Publications, London, 2013

As the Muslim world became colonized by Western powers, legislation (rights and duties) concerning women became stricter and to a great extent often regressing to sexism and gender inequality.

*“As for sexism, the common law long denied married women any property rights or indeed legal personality apart from their husbands. When the British applied their law to Muslims in place of Shariah, as they did in some colonies, the result was to strip married women of the property that Islamic law had always granted them.”<sup>5</sup>*

During colonization Islamic feminism played no important role in Muslim society, although there were subtle attempts by women of the Ottoman Empire to raise questions and issue of Islamic feminism in public.<sup>6</sup>

With the liberation and modern independence of states in the Muslim world, issues of Islamic feminism began to surface once again. In the search for national and religious identity after independence, and in the postmodern world, especially after World War II, Islamic feminism grew as first a social and later political trend among Muslim women alongside the growth of feminism as a gender issue in general.

### **Early Egyptian feminism and Islam:**

Some of the pioneers of Islamic feminism grew out of Egypt’s struggle for nationalism and independence from British hegemony. Early Egyptian feminists tended to be from the urban upper class and were primarily concerned with personal freedoms for women and the nationalist movement. The front figure of this kind of feminism was *Hoda Shaarawi*; who started public feminist discourse in Egypt already in 1908 and became a (short-lived) member of the nationalist Wafd-party, organizing protests against the British occupation, and lecturing Egyptian women about their rights during public speakings and articles in Egyptian newspapers. In 1923 she founded the Egyptian Feminists Union; perhaps the very first feminist organization in the Muslim world in postmodern times. Shaarawi was, however, no Islamic feminist. She did not distinguish between religion and tradition, and she regarded the Muslim veil and other religious (BEDRE ORD) as setbacks for the liberation of Egyptian women.

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<sup>5</sup> Noah Feldman (March 16, 2008). ["Why Shariah?".](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/16/magazine/16Shariah-t.html?ei=5070&em=&en=5c1b8de536ce606f&ex=1205812800) New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/16/magazine/16Shariah-t.html?ei=5070&em=&en=5c1b8de536ce606f&ex=1205812800>

<sup>6</sup> <http://zarafaris.com/2013/08/03/ottoman-women-during-the-advent-of-european-feminism/>

Together with the wife of nationalist leader Zaghloul, Shaarawi became perhaps the very embodiment of Egyptian feminism during the early modernist years.

We must not forget that Egyptian feminism comes in several categories. There is secular feminism which is in large parts a copied edition of Western secular feminism, including paroles of universalism and *laïcité*<sup>7</sup>. And there is Islamic feminism; Muslim women who disregard the non-religious aspects and the universalism of secular feminism, and who try to establish freedom and equality for women in the pretext of Islamic dogmas and philosophies. To some extent Muslim feminists are reluctant to even use the term “feminism”, as feminism in Muslim context often is regarded as an extensive part of colonialism, Western hegemony and cultural influence.

Islamic feminism in Egypt is often associated with the flow of Islamism; especially in contemporary Egyptian society after WWII. Where modernist view and waves of nationalism was predominant in Europe between WWI and WW2, traces of such nationalism and modernism was also widespread in Egypt. Nationalists – such as the Wafd party – wanted both national independence as well as technological and cultural progress in order to be able to compete culturally and politically with the West. Thus, women like Huda Shaarawi expressed first most a desire to be *independent* in order to be *free*. Egyptian women had to liberate themselves from whatever *cultural* and *legal* shackles that society (i.e. *men*) had bound them with. *Progress* would come along, when Egyptian women realized their freedom through modernism and independence.

In that view Sharaawai’s feminism was just another way to express the nationalism which dominated the higher classes of Egyptian society. In such early Egyptian feminism became a dichotomy for what was predominant in society; if women were exempt from work, then women working must be the solution. If women were practically unable to divorce their husbands, then a more liberal divorce law would be the solution which brings freedom and independence for women of Egypt etc.

Religion was not attacked nor abandoned for being religion, but religious practice was viewed upon as reminisces of old, cultural norms, all of which bound women from achieving their independence and their freedom.

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<sup>7</sup> A (French) concept denoting the absence of religious involvement in government affairs, which often is a base rule for political secularism.

Shaarawi and early Egyptian feminism pinpointed some of these issues in their feminist discourse; stressing the foremost need for education. The opening of schools for women was among the most important step of early Egyptian feminism during the early years after Ottoman rule. Then, with the revolution of Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Free Unitary Officers Movement, a different kind of feminism evolved in Egyptian society.

The American women's scholar Margot Badran holds the view, that although early Egyptian feminism was secular (including both Muslims and Christian Copts) it also contained the seeds of Islamic feminism, making reference to Islamic reform and interpretations of Muslim law in regards to women's issues.<sup>8</sup> Islamic feminism does not call for reform, but it shares secular feminism's presumptions of inequality in contemporary Egyptian society.

In that way Islamic feminism is outright different from secular feminism on one very significant point; *gender conflict*. Secular feminism seeks to construct a social framework from women's point of view that would guarantee them equality and freedom, whereas Islamic feminism already has this social framework and does not see gender as a contraposition towards establishing equality. Islamic feminism does not want to change Islamic laws or Islamic paradigms to benefit women's equality, but it wants society to return to authentic Islamic values in order to re-secure the equality and security that was guaranteed with the establishment of an Islamic state.

Thus, Islamic feminism has no problem with *gender*, but it has a problem with *performity*.

### **Nasserist feminism and Islam:**

After the July 1952 Revolution a phenomena known as *state feminism* was implemented into Egyptian legislation. Within the framework of the new nationalist government, Nasser sought to carry out reforms in women's roles from the top down in order to improve the efficiency of an increasingly modern Egyptian society. One of the most comprehensive steps in this regard was the right for Egyptian women to vote in national elections. Another one was the need for women to join the labor force.

Suddenly Egyptian women did not have to struggle for themselves finding sporadic friends in Governmental and non-Governmental places. Now the Government suddenly was encouraging women to become "modern" through both legislation and political discourse.

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<sup>8</sup> Badran, Margot: *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*. Princeton University Press, 1995

The revolution of Nasser's Free Unitary Officers Movement was based upon principles of mainly economics. Vast changes in the economic structures of Egyptian society became the main vision of the new Egyptian Government. One can easily argue that the change in feminist discourse during the era of Nasser was very much a product of Nasserist economy and politics. The feminism of Egypt during the Nasser-era is often labeled "state feminism", because gender became synonymous with state progress, especially through political symbolism and economic reforms. American history professor Laura Bier sums up how secular feminism under Nasser differed from the pre-Nasser secular feminism of people like Huda Shaarawi, but still had some common ground:

*"...the constellation of norms, discourses, practices and epistemologies associated with earlier colonial and nationalist projects that were aimed at remaking women were taken up by a new state elite and transformed in the context of postcolonial state- and nation-building...the question of gender shifted focus from the inner realm of cultural sovereignty to the outer realm of material development, making Egyptian womanhood central to both."*<sup>9</sup>

The link between feminism, nationalism, liberation and modernity were still very much at issue in pre-1952 Egypt. But then Islamic feminism became a member of this discourse. With the emergence of Sayid Qutb and the Muslim Brotherhood a new feminism player had arrived on the political gender program – and Nasserism had to begin dealing with it.

Nasser wanted very much the support of his people, and half of his people were women; even much more than half of his people came from the lower class of Egypt. In the politics of Nasserism, mainly the economic visions, the agricultural, social and financial reforms, the industrial built-up – women became a part of everything and received their place in everything. However, the Muslim Brotherhood did not. Less than two years after the 1952-Revolution Sayid Qutb found himself behind bars and the Muslim Brotherhood outside legislation.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (*Al Ikhwân al-Muslimîn*) originally established itself as a social and religious activism group advocating workers' rights in the city of Ismailiya, but took later part in the nationalist Egyptian struggle for independence in the 30ies. Their first leader, Hassan el-Banna, saw secular feminism as expression of colonialism, and he warned against the dangers of letting

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<sup>9</sup> Bier, Laura: *Revolutionary Womanhood Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt*, Stanford University Press, 2011, page 15

Egyptian women copy Western behavior. He supported the need for female education and female social advancement in Egyptian society; what he disliked was the *form* under which it seemed to take place and the Western *form* it seemed to emulate. His focus of gender was expressed around the notion of form, rather than content:

*“Following are the principal goals of reform grounded on the spirit of genuine Islam ... Treatment of the problem of women in a way which combines the progressive and the protective, in accordance with Islamic teaching, so that this problem – one of the most important social problems – will not be abandoned to the biased pens and deviant notions of those who err in the directions of deficiency and excess ... a campaign against ostentation in dress and loose behaviour; the instruction of women in what is proper, with particular strictness as regards female instructors, pupils, physicians, and students, and all those in similar categories ... a review of the curricula offered to girls and the necessity of making them distinct from the boys' curricula in many stages of education ... segregation of male and female students... the encouragement of marriage and procreation, by all possible means; promulgation of legislation to protect and give moral support to the family, and to solve the problems of marriage ... the closure of morally undesirable ballrooms and dance-halls, and the prohibition of dancing and other such pastimes ....”<sup>10</sup>*

Hassan el-Banna’s views on gender are seen upon by many as the start of *Islamic modernism* and even though not very much akin to Egyptian philosopher Muhammed Abdu’s idea of feminism, el-Banna certainly passed on some of its normative base lines.

Away with discourse on gender *identification*, the main focus was now on gender *form adapted to contemporary reality*. How should women dress and behave when going to school? What should they learn in university? How should women cope with being both a mother and a worker? El-Banna’s views tried to shed some clarification of how Muslim women in Egypt could cope with modernism in a way that did not emulate colonial modernism demands, but which fit the traditional Egyptian way of life; the Muslim way of life.

The Free Unitary Officers Movement that carried out the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 was by no means a secular movement; in so far it had no political agenda describing secularism as neither dogma

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<sup>10</sup> "Toward the Light" in *Five Tracts of Hasan Al-Banna*, trans. by Charles Wendell (Berkeley, 1978), p. 126

nor goal. It was a military power structure consisting of nationalists from several sides of the political spectrum who were unsatisfied by lack of progress and social unjust still alive in Egypt despite years of nationalist struggle. They wanted *change*; radical change. After WWII and the establishment of a Zionist state, many of the former military veterans from the armed forces battling Zionist armies in 1948-50 supported actively the Free Unitary Officers Movement; many of them coming from lower class background, and quite a few of them belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood. After the revolution in 1952, Nasser did not need the Muslim Brotherhood anymore, even though their activities were tolerated and at some point even encouraged, insofar the Brotherhood in poor areas carried out social activism in an idealized way that Nasser himself wanted to be a part of the “new social spirit” in modern Egypt; socialism in its practical form.

But then in 1954 things changed. The Brotherhood was outlawed, its leaders jailed or having escaped to Saudi Arabia or Jordan.

What did these important events in Egyptian history mean for Egyptian women and for Egyptian feminism?

First of all, there was the problem of organization. Independent political organizations outside Nasserist Government were simply outlawed, making it impossible for Egyptian women to organize themselves as they had done in the Egyptian Feminist Union of Huda Shaarawi or under Bint el-Nil. Instead, women’s organization in Egypt under Nasser became *charity organizations*.

The polarization between secular feminism and Islamic feminism began to take shape, because charity organization was already a well worked idea by the Muslim Brotherhood. The vast population of Egypt was lower class people with traditional views and very specific material needs. The Nasserist land reforms fulfilled some of these material needs very well, at least in the rural areas of Egypt. In urban Egypt, however, poverty and social problems did not achieve much Governmental attention, although workers’ rights and wages improved much more under Nasser than before Nasser. Urban Egypt became the battle ground of the Muslim Brotherhood – and some of the first “warriors” were Muslim feminists supporting the Islamic modernism as described by Hassan al-Banna and after him Sayid Qutb. Later during Nasser’s era, the cleft between Qutbs condemnatory views and el-Banna’s reformist (modernist) views grew after a long, internal leadership battle; the Muslim Brotherhood distanced themselves from the visions of Sayid Qutb and decided to approach and practice a reformist/modernist Islamic program.

## **The emerge of Islamic feminism in the Muslim Brotherhood**

The schism of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood became apparent after the death of Nasser. Seeking economic support from the West, president as-Sadat was more careful when dealing with the Muslim Brotherhood. He realized the social importance of having an organization (although still outlawed) that fed the poor while he could not feed the poor, and he eagerly sought their support and provided his own support in contraposing socialism. He did not bother to reconcile with the former Qutb-division of the Muslim Brotherhood (transformed into *al-Gamiya al-Islamiya*) who did not see friendly upon his political efforts to appease the forces of the Zionist occupation (Israel). Aided by likewise unhappy forces in the Egyptian military the *Gamiya al-Islamiya* staged a successful assassination attempt against as-Sadat on October 6, 1980.

Already during the time of Nasser traditional gender roles in Egypt began crumbling. As women began joining the working sector, their gender roles became more complex. Now Egyptian woman had to redefine her role in society not just as a wife and mother, but also as a public working woman. This gender development spurred many Egyptian feminists to create a new discourse on feminism as well.

And there was, also, a new social factor; internationalism.

Egyptian feminism during as-Sadat became much more aggressive and radicalized; perhaps because of the general way that feminism became radicalized on an international level in the early 70ies. Feminist activism during the early 70ies in Egypt copied the Western discourse of so-called “second wave-feminism”, stressing sexism as one of the biggest objectives contraire to women’s liberation and justice.<sup>11</sup>

In Egypt the front head of second-wave-feminism is undoubtedly dr. Nawal Saadawi; a doctor of medicine and outspoken feminist and author of the highly controversial book “*Al-Mara wa Al-Jins*” (Woman and Sex). She took upon sexism as a topic in feminist Egyptian discourse, namely issues of female genital mutilation and Egyptian men’s domestic violence and abuse of women. She also addressed the Egyptian problem of marriages, where many lower class and middle class Egyptian men are unable to marry because of material/economical regression; the result is sexual frustration among men and women alike.

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<sup>11</sup> “Second-wave feminists see women's cultural and political inequalities as inextricably linked and encourage women to understand aspects of their personal lives as deeply politicized and as reflecting **sexist** power structures. The feminist Carol Hanisch coined the slogan “The Personal is Political”, which became synonymous with second wave feminism.” From Whelehan, Imelda (1995). *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to 'Post-Feminism'*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. pp. 25–43

Being a communist and an atheist caused al-Saadawi to criticize religious practice and make it a part of the sexism that she claims is a clandestine – but in practice evident – root for injustice against women in Egypt. Thus her feminism is highly linked with criticism of Islam. This became even more evident when she published “The Fall of the Imam” in 1987 breaking several Islamic taboos, and in practice forcing her to leave Egypt for a long time due to an immense hostile reception by Muslim readers.

The “second wave” transformed the 70ies into a worldwide decade of dissolution of gender roles; and this was the case even in Egypt. The 70ies in Egypt witnessed a massive social gender transformation; although not as far-fetched as the social transformation of Western women, but still; Egyptian women took upon new gender roles and new identities at a steady rate during the 70ies. Egyptian films and theatre plays in the 70ies evidently mirrored this social change.

Yet, for the majority of Egyptians, faith is a fundamental part of both their identity and lived social reality, and Egyptian women’s reception of Dr. Saadawi’s second-wave feminism was dubious. On one hand Dr. Saadawi addressed issues in her discourse that played an incredible important role in the lives of Egyptian women. On the other hand, Dr. Saadawi’s attack on religion did not fall on soft ground among many religious and traditional women.

Interestingly, the aggressiveness and intrepidity of feminism of Dr. Saadawi were to some extent mirrored by religious feminists in Egypt during the 1970ies. They, too, became very aggressive and intrepid in their feminist discourse and activism. One of such women was the Egyptian journalist and writer *Safinaz Kazem*.

Born in Alexandria in 1937, she started out as a leftwing, nationalist supporter. Then, just as Sayid Qutb, she visited the United States and returned to Egypt with changed political view, embracing Islamism and becoming an increasingly bigger nuisance to the modern, secular feminism discourse as laid out by Jihan as-Sadat (wife of president Anwar as-Sadat) in the early 70ies. Her aggressive writing style became also increasingly political, and when she openly began calling for a toppling of the Sadat-regime and an implementation of an Islamic state in its place, she was forced to leave Egypt. She settled in Iraq, where she continued to criticize the Sadat-regime in her writings and public speeches, openly supporting the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979.<sup>12</sup>

She returned to Egypt shortly before as-Sadat’s assassination, which she openly praised on TV,

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<sup>12</sup> Howeidy, Amira: “Safinaz Kazem, Born to be Wild”, Al-Ahram Weekly, December 1999  
<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/1999/461/profile.htm>

expressing admiration for the assassin Khalid al-Islambouli, saying: “This was pure art. He (Sadat) protected himself from behind, but God struck him from the front.”<sup>13</sup>

Safinaz Kassem had a rare gift of combining secular discourse with Islamism discourse. She considers all her writings to be creative writings, even if they call for the toppling of Egyptian political regimes or the establishment of an Islamic state on Egyptian soil. Thus she distances herself from reality through art; yet she uses art to shape Egyptian reality. Her views are very accessible to mainstream readers and the big Middle class of Egyptian women, who are able to identify themselves with her through the familiarity of her upbringing, language and knowledge of Egyptian middle class social life.

Her many writings and media appearances forced both Government and population to acknowledge her presence in Egyptian society. Her provocative addressing required some kind of reflective response, and her newspaper columns or TV interviews often sparked weeks of public debate. Safinaz’ sister Masouma Kazem was the first Egyptian woman to hold an MA in pure mathematics and the only to contribute to the first Arabic book on modern mathematics.

Another famous Egyptian Islamic feminist was *Zainab al-Ghazali*, who was sentenced to 25 years of hard labor in prison in 1965 for allegedly being part of a conspiracy to attempt assassination of president Gamal Abdel Nasser. Being a popular Islamic scholar teaching at the Tulun Mosque in Cairo, she had close affiliation with and strong sympathies for the Muslim Brotherhood. When as-Sadat released her from prison shortly before he himself was assassinated, she began working as a writer and editor at the magazine *ad-Dawah*; which was issued by the Muslim Brotherhood.

While as Safinaz Kazim never accepted the label “feminist”; Zainab al-Ghazali had absolutely no problem with the concept of feminism. Being born in 1917 she herself had joined Huda Shaarawi’s Egyptian Feminist Union at the age of 16 in 1933, but left the movement within a year. Instead, only being 18 years old in 1935, she founded her own Islamic women’s organization, called “*Jama’at as-Sayidat al-Muslimat*” (Muslim Women’s Association). The Muslim Brotherhood offered to include the MWA into their own organization in the late 30ies, but al-Ghazali refused out of fear that the independent decisions and enterprises of Muslim women in WMA would succumb to the structural umbrella and organizational hegemony of the male leaders in the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> [http://tahyyes.blogspot.dk/2008/07/blog-post\\_30.html](http://tahyyes.blogspot.dk/2008/07/blog-post_30.html)

<sup>14</sup> Roxanne L. Euben, Muhammad Qasim Zaman (eds.) “Zaynab al-Ghazali” Princeton Readings in Islamist thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden.(Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009), page 276

She divorced her first husband, because he did not accept her Muslim activism outside the house (she was working with charity, orphanages, Islamic proselyting and teaching). She made it clear to him that her duty towards God came before her duty towards him and the family:

*“However, I believe one day I will take this step that I wish and dream of. If that day comes, and because of it, a clash is apparent between your personal interests and economic activities on the one hand, and my Islamic work on the other, and that I find my married life is standing in the way of Da'wah and the establishment of an Islamic state, then, each of us should go our own way.*

*I cannot ask you today to share with me this struggle, but it is my right on you not to stop me from jihad in the way of Allah. Moreover, you should not ask me about my activities with other Mujahideen, and let trust be full between us. A full trust between a man and a woman, a woman who, at the age of 18, gave her full life to Allah and Da'wah. In the event of any clash between the marriage contract's interest and that of Da'wah, our marriage will end, but Da'wah will always remain rooted in me. I accept that ordering me to listen to you is amongst your rights, but Allah is greater than ourselves. Besides, we are living in a dangerous phase of Da'wah.”<sup>15</sup>*

During her imprisonment in the 60ies al-Ghazali was subjected to torture and interrogations, which she proudly described in her biography (*Ayam min al-Hayati*, 1975) as being tougher than what her male inmates had to experience. Faith and religious consistency, she claims, were the tools that kept her best company during her years in prison, thus contributing to the vision of martyrdom that became the cornerstone of Islamic activism in Egypt during the late 60ies and early 70ies.

Al-Ghazali adopting her experience in prison as a sign of *martyrdom* is very interesting, because she is hereby transgressing a symbolism traditionally used by male Muslim activists, transferring victimization in the hands of a tyrannical Government's abuse into a sign of honorable *masculinity*. She becomes a *warrior of Islam* – a role not attached to women since the early times of Islam. She was subjugated to the same violent abuses as men while in prison, yet she survived and came out much stronger in faith and has thus carried out a very *masculine rite of passage* that made it hard for any Muslim male peer to criticize al-Ghazali's outspoken and boundary-pushing public role in view of

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<sup>15</sup> <http://kalamullah.com/Books/Return%20of%20The%20Pharaoh.pdf> (*Ayam min al-Hayati*, English translation)

traditional Muslim Brotherhood agenda.<sup>16</sup>

Al-Ghazali supported the notion that women's education had to be specific adapted to Islamic family role of women; but she did not confide its curricula to traditional female values as expressed by the Muslim Brotherhood; rather she saw outspoken public appearances and experience necessary for setting the agenda on the road to establishing an Islamic state on the ruins of the "jahiliya" (i.e. the secular Government of Egypt addressed as the pre-Islamic era.) Women's role as wife and mother were still primal; but if a woman fulfilled this request of being an Islamically defined good woman and mother; she was free to - and even to some point *obligated* to - pursue public interest and work (for the sake of Allah, the Exalted).

One of Ghazali's major contributions towards Islamic feminism is her two-volume *tafsir* (work of exegesis) on the Qur'an. So far it is the only Islamic authorized and accepted *tafsir* written by a woman in modern times. Relying on religious texts (the Qur'an, the Hadith and other works of Islamic jurisprudence) to further the notion that feminism is an integrated part of Islam has become a cornerstone typecast of Islamic feminism, which defines itself through constructing *belonging and harmony towards religion* rather than *rejection and deconstructing* of religion, as done by secular feminism.

More than anyone else Zainab al-Ghazzali defined feminism in an Islamic context using religious arguments adapted to the modern lives of Muslim women without *compromising Islamic values* and dogmas. She rejected secularism, and she believed that the liberation of women from the hegemony of men was to be found in embracing and practicing of Islam to its core. True liberation of women would only be fully implemented in an Islamic state, who could guarantee women their rights and security from abuse and subjugation. Issues such as domestic abuse, economic poverty and other social issues mentioned by secular Egyptian feminists were important; yet the solution would not be to embrace Western universal and secular politics or philosophies; rather the answer was to be found in the establishment of an Islamic state and return to proper Islamic upbringing and behavior among men and women in society.

Zainab al-Ghazali's Islamic feminism paradigm is at times in the West labeled *family feminism*<sup>17</sup> (in juxtapose to secular feminism allegedly being regarded as *individual feminism*). The intellectual and

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<sup>16</sup> Al-Ghazali's ancestry allegedly being related to the cornerstone symbol of Muslim masculinity, the late khalif Umar ibn al-Khattab, did not deminish her image as a female Muslim warrior in the eyes of the Muslim public!

<sup>17</sup> A term first defined and used by Elizabeth Warnock Fernea in her book "In Search of Islamic Feminism", 1997

cultural impact of her writings spread to other Arabic countries, setting a worldwide trend in Islamic feminism, not limiting it to just Egypt.

### **Islamic feminism in Egypt hits the 80ies and 90ies**

There is no doubt that al-Ghazali cemented Islamic feminism into a social paradigm in Egyptian history (and perhaps in the Muslim world in general) during the 60ies and 70ies. However, Islamic feminism kept evolving into new, distinct concepts up through the 80ies and 90ies.

Western feminists perceive the 80ies and 90ies as a so-called “third wave feminism epoch” – a time where women reacted to the backlash of the ineffectiveness of the former second wave-feminism epoch. Third wave feminism also realized the failure of shaping any form of feminist universalism upon the baselines of white, Western middle class women. Feminism, so it was claimed, has many shapes, much ethnic difference and abundant sexual positivities. Third wave feminism carried a scent of spiritual validity and new-age-optimism with it, but in Egypt this kind of feminism was not under construction. The 80ies and 90ies of Egyptian society became drowned in economic recession and even to some extent gender materialism; but there was also growing religious consciousness.

After the death of as-Sadat and the rise of Hosni Mubarak Egyptian society in the 80ies had little time for feminist discourse. The 80ies of Egypt became a battlefield of economical regression and the political agenda of Hosni Mubarak. The Mubarak-regime tried hard to implement market-oriented reforms as requested by the World Bank, resisting deep structural reforms that would have both harmed the ruling’s elites’ economic interests and entailed disrupting social dislocations. The Mubarak regime used economic liberalization to re-distribute privileges to its supporters and allowed important segments of the private sector to run in favorable ways, thus extending its support to society, but at the same time creating an expanding cleft between rich and poor; battling skyrocket-inflation rates, creating a massive kickback and bribe industry, and brought about a feeding a growing wave of unemployment problems that left the Egyptian lower middle class and lower class at the mercy of civil society. In many parts of Egypt *civil society* became synonymous with the Muslim Brotherhood.

This became very evident during the late 90ies and throughout most of the 90ies. Mubarak tried easing up on the Muslim Brotherhood after he assumed power in 1981. Members were released from prison, their organizations were not legally accepted but rather socially tolerated as long as the Muslim

Brotherhood did not interfere with Egyptian politics, but remained working with charity, religious education and morale building. Private charity and civil society activities kept the steam of a growing popular dissatisfaction with the Government.

The first serious situation of power clash between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Mubarak regime happened in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in Cairo in 1992. The economic regression hit Egypt hard, and low- or none-income citizens could expect little help from their Government to help with housing, feeding, rebuilding. The Muslim Brotherhood stepped in and through direct efficiency, empathy and high mobilization they did everything that Mubarak promised, but never kept. Egyptians spoke out publically about their disappointment with and alienation from the Mubarak regime in the aftermath of the earthquake.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time during the 80ies and 90ies Egyptians began adhering to very fundamentalist Islamic views spurred by the return of many Egyptian foreign workers from the Gulf, and by Egyptians having participated in various jihad-adventures in mainly Afghanistan. Egyptian society became economically polarized, religiously radicalized and nobody trusted the Government unless they received kickback. Tourists and Copts were attacked by a radical break-off-groups (some later cooperating with the infamous international al-Qaida movement) such as “*Jihad al-Islami*”, led by Dr. Ayman Zawahiri, it’s sporadic but violent attacks on foreign tourists in Cairo and Luxor threatened to undermine Egypt’s biggest income sector; tourism.

But, where were Egyptian feminists during the 80ies and the 90ies?

One of the foremost signs of a rising Islamic awareness started to emerge among Egyptian women in the mid-90ies; more and more women started to wear the Muslim veil in public. Popular news media again and again ran very stereotype news stories of how famous actors, former pop-singers, writers, intelligentsia and other women in Egyptian public suddenly had “reverted” to Islam, donned their former material lifestyle and had now found peace and enlightenment in their reborn faith; the visible proof of their stories was almost every time accompanied by before-and-after-pictures; one photo without and one photo with the Muslim veil.

The same happened at Egyptian universities during the 90ies; graduation pictures taken during between 1980 and 2000 showed how more and more female students are wearing the Muslim veil. The “granddaughters” of Huda Sahaarawi, who removed her veil in public as one of the first Egyptian

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<sup>18</sup> [http://articles.latimes.com/1992-10-15/news/mn-411\\_1\\_muslim-groups](http://articles.latimes.com/1992-10-15/news/mn-411_1_muslim-groups)

women in 1919, are now returning to the Islamic dress code, sometimes keeping their Western-style clothes and just adding a common headscarf to match their jeans and long-sleeved T-shirts; at other times, they wear a full-length loose dress, covering their hands with long gloves and topping their heads and shoulders with a Muslim headscarf.

There was also another transformation in Egyptian society regarding Islamic feminism; class. Whereas Islamic feminism was supported by mainly the low class and lower middle class during the 1950-70ies, we see a growing tendency among the more well-off middle class and even to some extent the higher class of Egyptian society expressing support of Islamic feminism by wearing the Muslim veil.

The veil became an important part of Islamic feminism discourse during the late 80ies and 90ies. It is foremost a symbol of piety; not necessary *assuring* that its wearer is a pious woman, but giving the *public appearance that she is*. Covering the hair and neck during prayer, in public and in *non-mahram*<sup>19</sup> situations is obligatory for any Muslim woman according to Islamic jurisprudence.

But the Muslim veil is not merely a symbol of piety. Carrying the Muslim veil in post-Modern Egypt became an expression of several other symbolic statements; it was 1) a protest against Westernization and Western hegemony, and it was 2) a symbol against the devastating materialism during the era of as-Sadat and al-Mubarak.<sup>20</sup>

In a Muslim social and historical context veiling had been a long tradition that carried ideas of morality, protection, and association. A woman from the lower class or the middle class might lack economic status, but by wearing a veil her social status became elevated and she reclaimed some of the honor that she felt she was losing by chasing material values that kept evading her. The veil expressed certain social *norms* and it expressed *performity*. This is how the Muslim veil also became a *political symbol* for Egyptian women; i.e. a political and social tool of expression by Islamic feminists.

During the late 90ies and early 2000'ies a new form of Islamic feminism emerged in Egypt. It became a part of the international multiculturalism trend, and one of the new women representing this view is *Heba Raouf Ezzat*, a member of as-Shaab Egyptian Labor Party, Academic scholar and civil society activist.

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<sup>19</sup> A *mahram* is the Islamic concept of a non-mariable man (i.e. father, son, nephew, brother etc)

<sup>20</sup> Many examples, see for instance: [http://zawaya.magharebia.com/old\\_zawaya/en\\_GB/zawaya/opinion/300.html](http://zawaya.magharebia.com/old_zawaya/en_GB/zawaya/opinion/300.html) and <http://www.aljazeera.com/focus/2008/09/20089812812445443.html>

Ezzat criticizes secular dualism; that man should be regarded as an antithesis to God, or that religion and state must be divided. But she also attacks the traditional Islamist view of Islam being an antithesis to Christianity. On the contrary, Ezzat claims, women should not be forced to choose between one side or the other, and neither is gender nor performativity limited to one special social construction:

*“We do not have to turn the past of the West into a future for the East. Many educated women in the Islamic world are rediscovering the liberating potential of their religious traditions. They demand respect, they actively participate in economics and politics, but they also are proud of motherhood as a value and a role, they believe in the family as a social institution and regard themselves as the guardians of the culture. Increasing numbers of them choose, sometimes against the wish of their own families, to be within the wider Islamic resurgence. They suffer from restrictions and sometimes rigid discrimination and violation of their human rights by the political regimes.”*

Heba Rauf Ezzat thinks that the political conditions related to the feminist legitimate presence in Egypt so far have been, in general, restrictive. Egyptian law, working as a bargaining instrument, has been successfully abused by the state as well as by the secular feminists (family law debates, women’s equal wages etc). Within that balance of power, Ezzat thinks the secular feminist movement has become one of the allies of the regime against the fundamentalist threat. In the discourse of Arab feminist movements, the direct discussion of the question of full implementation of *Shariah* (Islamic law) had to be marginalized, in order not to lose the support of the masses of women who would not tolerate a direct attack on Islamic principles. Therefore, Islamic feminism must include much more than just faith-based arguments, she says.

In some way Heba Rauf Ezzat has been able to merge traditional Islamic feminism with secular feminism in a way, that makes each one dependent upon the other, yet tolerates the views of the other. It also touches the political lines of governing and the economical lines of financing Egyptian society. The views of Ezzat makes Egyptian women rethink their political and economic responsibilities and how to invoke their religious rights through mundane tools.

Whereas the Muslim Brotherhood even up to the mid 2000’ies still was in the process of

deciding whether it was appropriate for women to engage in public politics (i.e. run for Parliament) for the sake of Islam or not!

## **Reconstructing Islamic feminism in Egypt after 2010**

The new millennium brought about a very important change in the discourse of Islamist feminism in Egypt. Whereas Islamic feminism had been an antithesis to secular feminism in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Islamic feminism seemed to become more universal and pragmatic in concept and in performity, especially in the age of social media. The Egyptian media revolution began with the freedom of Satellite TV, and later Facebook, Youtube and Twitter. Egyptian feminists – both secular and religious – would use social media to further their views and receive instant reponse.

Also, Islamic feminism became a part of the Egyptian film industry; although the male religious stereotype of the movie industry still was the frustrated, jobless young male Egyptian.

But then there was...as some would call it... a *revolution*. There has been much research done as to what happened and why it happened, but the “Arab spring”-movement was a wave carried through the Middle Eastern ocean by the winds of social media. People had the means to express themselves and to organize themselves in a way and in timed fashion, which they never had had in the history of ME before. Demonstrations and open political criticism burst forward and Egyptian society became changed, again. What impact did the 2011-uprisings (for lack of better word!) have upon Islamic feminism in Egypt?

The Egyptian uprising that began in January 2011, the ousting of Mubarak a month later and the Egyptian popular revolution which is perhaps still in the making as this article is being written has certainly had an impact on the paradigms of Islamic feminism.

Islamic feminists have been participating in first anti-Mubarak, then later anti-coup protests on Tahrir Square in Cairo and during many other occasions in other Egyptian cities; especially after the police crackdown on male anti-coup pro-Morsi protesters on June 30. Before that, the Muslim Brotherhood had seldom regarded women as political assets, but suddenly veiled women with gloves carrying signs with political slogans became a common view on Egyptian streets. Women were mostly put in front during organized demonstrations because the Egyptian police would not dare to react as violent, as if the frontline consisted of angry, bearded men. Secondly, the participation of veiled women in demonstrations had a symbolic value that could help shape popular opinion about the uprisings. And

once the Muslim Brotherhood (as later personalized in the pro-Islamic Freedom and Justice Party/FJP) could prove women were part of their political curriculum, the Morsi-government could also get the morale support of the West that is so vital in Egyptian international politics.

A few women became elected into Egyptian Parliament for the FJP. Women like Dr. Abeer Barakat, a Muslim Brotherhood member, public-health professor, mother of four children, and up until the military toppling of the Morsi-government, assistant minister of health for preventive medicine in Morsi's Freedom and Justice Party. *"Look at me—I'm well educated, a university professor. The men in my party respect me and listen to me as if I was a man."*<sup>21</sup>, she told Western journalists.

Muslim women from the Muslim Brotherhood ran for the first time for political office during the 2005 and 2010 parliamentary elections in Egypt<sup>22</sup>, promoting traditional Islamic agenda approved by the Muslim Brotherhood. They ran for office in the post-Mubarak 2012-elections under the umbrella of the Muslim Brotherhood. Six of them won seats in Parliament, although the 2012 elections presented the lowest number of women electees in a very long time.

Still, despite largely trying to implement greater political rights for women in Egypt during the time of revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood made it clear, that there can never be a female president; not even from within their own ranks.<sup>23</sup>

Yet it is evident that the Muslim Brotherhood has been losing their (defacto) monopole of representing Islamic feminism in a public and political context in Egypt, because the "Arab spring"-movement also meant the liberalization of independent organization. Whereas the Muslim Brotherhood has had almost religious monopoly on the topic of Islamic feminism, several womens' organizations popped up in Egyptian civil society; some of them trans-political, incorporating both secular and religious feminism. Many women decided to become "freelance" feminists, using blogging or tweeting to promote their views, being independent of organizational and structural support from movements; other women affiliating loosely with one movement or the other.

Egyptian feminists, both Islamic and secular, have found common grounds on many issues. They meet in conferences, workshops or civil programs and seemingly enjoy the dialogue. There is also a

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/07/09/the-sisters-of-the-muslim-brotherhood.html>

<sup>22</sup> <http://hiwar.dedi.org.eg/ar/highlight/67/>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/brotherhood-sticks-ban-christians-and-women-presidency>

growing trend of feminism in Egypt, where women have started to operate across secular and religious space, forming so-called *ad hoc* committees, for instance to combat the growing sexual harassments of women in Egyptian public, especially after research has shown that even veiled and decently dressed women are being mobbed sexually in public.

It could also look like the Muslim Brotherhood does not have any exclusive religious interpretation of Islamic feminism in Egypt anymore. When Jinan al-Halafawi, member of the Muslim Brotherhood, wanted to run for parliamentary elections, she was told she could never be a president, nor was it appropriate for her to run “like a man”, i.e. posting pictures of herself in public places and travelling the country to make speeches. She then approached sheikh Yussuf Qaradawi, who gave her a fatwa (Islamic jurisprudence) that went contrary to the views of the brotherhood, giving her permission to run for presidency if she wanted to, and giving her the permission to travel and make public posters of herself. Qaradawi, being a well-known Islamic scholar, was used to challenge the views of the Brotherhood in a way, that gave el-Halafawi opportunity to get political power to implement her religious views on women’s rights into a political context out of the Muslim Brotherhood. Her actions also mirror the rivalry between the traditional al-Azhar Muslim institution and the Muslim Brotherhood as an NGO.

## **The possible future of Islamic feminism in Egypt**

It seems that Islamic feminism has become much more pluralistic and unbound as it had been ever before in modern Egyptian history. So, what could be the future form of Islamic feminism in Egypt?

One of the most important tasks for Islamic feminism is to separate culture and religion. This could be very hard in Egyptian society which is very much based upon tradition. As culture sociologically is often founded upon the traditions of women in society, stability of society is equally often associated with the role of women in society. Islamic feminism, however, has not the goal to change authority with authority based upon woman, but to construct an *egalitarian* and more *just* society for women. A removal of traditions in favor of a more pure religious feminism would be very hard to implement in a society that is as traditional as the Egyptian society, because tradition in Egypt is so foremost associated with being woman.

The religious (*Salafi*-based) an-Nour party has a more puritan religious approach as one of its political visions, but it ascribes these visions to the “Golden Age” of Islam without being able to present

pragmatic solutions for modern problems in Egyptian society. Their political agenda is too theoretical, and women have no possibility to participate in the political process, so an-Nour party is not the favorite choice of Egypt's Islamic feminists.

There is also the problem of defining Islamic feminism into the context of Islamic pluralism. What about Egyptian shia-Muslims? What law school (*madhab*) should Islamic feminism follow? What kind of Islam does Islamic feminism adhere to? There are no real normative definitions to these questions. There is, however, a growing trend towards a renaissance of Islamic scholars, and Islamic feminism would be quite lazy if they didn't catch up on that trend, because Islamic scholarism means an opportunity to redefine Islamic feminism in a more pure Islamic context, and that is exactly what many modern Islamic feminists in Egypt are looking for today.

Finally, there is the practical outlook of Egyptian post-Mubarak society. More women are being harassed on the streets, female political participation has lowered and women seem to have fewer opportunities than before. The Tamarrod-movement is afraid women's rights will be violated again, or even regressed to a patriarchal state due to the political chances of the Muslim Brotherhood, and now when al Morsi has been disposed of, there is much uncertainty as to where women's rights are heading in the political vortex of post-Mubarak Egypt.

For many feminists – secular as well as Islamic – political feminism means to take up issues of inequality and injustice and translating their sound arguments into modern law. In that way feminism equals any political party or ideological interest organization; who is powerful enough to pass a bill in Parliament and enforce its outcome in society afterwards?

Egyptian society is still very much based upon the *wasta* system; citizens need connections and wealth to get things moving. Without *wasta*, any Egyptian citizen will have a hard time to do any political change; and even if he – she – makes any political change, the security of a legal or administrative follow-up might not come about naturally. What good is a law forbidding domestic abuse, when the law is not put into action?

Regardless of any future reflections, Islamic feminism seems to have plenty of challenges to work with in the future!

## Conclusion

Women are a little bit more than half of Egypt's population, so how big a part does Islamic feminism play in Egypt? Feminist views are naturally consistent with social relations in both time and space in Egyptian society, and as we have seen, Islamic feminism has been a part of Egyptian political paradigm since Egypt's independence from the Ottoman Empire, even though some scholars seem to accept Islamic feminism as a "new wave" of feminism.

As seen in this article, Islamic feminism has done a partner run with traditional secular feminism since the early 1920's. Mostly Islamic feminism has worked as a dichotomy to secular feminism, but both types of feminism have undergone changes during postmodern times. Islamic feminism has both adapted to time and to Egyptian society during the 50ies, the 60ies, the 70ies, the 80ies, the 90ies and through the decades of the current century. As society changed, so did the concepts of Islamic feminism with it; either as transient opposition to the normative lifestyles of the times, or as a social resort during times of trouble. Furthermore, Islamic feminism has gained acceptance and shown responsibility through its adaptive and enduring nature, both in Egyptian society and in the view of Western philosophy who originally rejected Islamic feminism as being feminism.

Islamic feminism does not simply "go away" – it is today deeply rooted in Egyptian tradition and religion and even in Egyptian modern history. It is both a part of "Muslim politics" as expressed by Muslim organizations, and it is evident today on a more individual level. As women become more educated, more economical and political powerful, Islamic feminism will also be a part of political and economic reality in Egypt, even though Islamic feminism changes, too. In Egypt, Islamic feminism has become a homegrown factor to be reckoned with; a factor that has been and still will *contribute* towards society.

We have seen Islamic feminism as a dichotomy towards secular feminism, and we have seen Islamic feminism as a political opposition movement and in popular uprisings. During the short-lived Morsi-Government we have seen Islamic feminism becoming a part of political reality, and even though the military stepped in to remove Morsi in a couples coup, I don't think we have seen the last of Islamic feminism in Parliament.

The biggest extern challenges of Islamic feminism in Egypt are popular traditions and the political power of the military. The biggest intern challenges are the struggle to deconstruct the paradigms of Islamic feminism in itself and to redefine a modern, Islamic feminist approach that will be embraced

more broadly in Egyptian society.

There is the possibility that Islamic feminism one day could become international and even universal in nature, such as secular feminism claims to be. In that case, the Islamic feminism of postmodern Egypt will be cited as one of the foundations of international Islamic feminism, because it has undergone a maturing process in time and space and has showed competence on both practical and elementary political level during its “lifespan” in Egyptian politics.

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