



The Arab Women between Tradition and Modernity- A phase of Transition

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Abstract

Arab women were a much neglected lot. The process of awakening has been started very late and the main role in this process has been played by the poets, authors, and the writers. The result was found in the shape of changes in the hierarchy of society. But it is a very slow and successful process.

Key Words: Arab Gulf, Patriarchy, Religion, Tradition, Sharia, Modern Legislation, Reform, Women's Associations, Ijtihad.

With the advent of 20th century, the political reform culminated into various other social reforms. The process of reform which was started by Mohammad Ali (1805-1848) of Egypt but Napoleon (1798-1801) has produced in the long run very conscious mind and bold heart to take the challenge with open arm thrown before them¹. The second half of the mankind, the women did not lag much behind. The transformed Arab women, a bold and courageous had the knowledge that she is oppressed, tortured or ignored and her share is due. The voice is no more muted and no more in low pitch as Nazzar Qabbani registers the feeling in these lines².

I will write of my friends
Each one's story-i see in each my self
A tragedy like my own.
I will write of my friends
Of the prison that sucks the life of inmates
Of time eaten by magazine columns
Of door that don't open
Of desires slaughtered in their cradles
Of nipples crying under the silk
Of great prison
Of its black walls
Of thousands and thousands of martyr
Buried nameless in the grave of tradition

Women and their status in the Arab region cannot be given one classification. It varies greatly according to the section of the society to which they belong. There are quite a few rich families whose women enjoy (though inside home or outside the country) full pleasure and to some way imitate the very European life style and on the other hand there are lots (badia, village and middle class town

women)of them with sufferings, torture, oppression and thus, they are very much mutilated. The paper under this head is trying to address various issues which are detrimental to women's position in society and hence play major role in the development of her personality. The subtopics which are covered are women's position, religion versus tradition, patriarchy, reforms, and women: Sharia and legislation in various Arab countries various women's associations and the role played by them by bringing women's issues in lime light.

Women's Traditional Status in Arab Region: The Arab culture stresses the concept of honor and gallantry. It also calls for protection of women on two grounds, one they are seen as weak section and secondly because the bear offspring³.Hence her status is drawn from her production of male child. In customary law, a women does not have the right to accept or refuse a proposed suitor (except in rare cases related to her socio-economic status).Her dowry, usually money, land or animal goes to her father. Women can easily be divorced for reason of appearance or personality .On the other hand they can't demand divorce(except with certain circumstances).In the event of divorce ,the possession of children is awarded to the father⁴.

Perhaps, the most central concept associated with women is that of honor Or Sharaf. Maintaining sharaf requires a women to be a virgin at the time of her marriage and there never be any hint of impropriety in her behavior with men⁵, while it is the women's behavior that maintains the sharaf, in the first instance, nonetheless, preservation of family honor is seen as a male responsibility, which requires that a women whose honr is questioned; be killed by a male family member. Such a crime is committed, at restoring family order is called honor killing and generally results in light prison sentences⁶.

In rural society, the responsibility for supporting the family and making decisions belong to male members .In villages either married or unmarried –engaged is unpaid for the family works, often in the fields. As elsewhere this activity is neither acknowledged by most rural dwellers nor accounted as such in national statics. Instead a women's worth derives from two things, her chastity and her producing offspring.

Patriarchy: Patriarchy is a common feature of Arab world in general and Arab Gulf in particular. Patriarchy is a term that essentially defines a specific kind of discourse and practices. A distinct mode of economic and patriarchal political organization⁷. Patriarchal society is a pre-capitalist social formation which has historically existed in various forms in Europe and Asia. The historical detriments of patriarchy is seen everywhere except in some cultured geographical developments. Now when we speak of Arab patriarchy we specific socio psychological totality in mind, which we encounter in two forms, in a social structure and in a psychological structure. We see it as a system of values and as a pattern of behavior belonging to determine economy and culture.

In classic patriarchy, the senior men have authority over everyone else in the family, including the younger men. The women are subjected to distinct forms of control and subordination. The subordination of women in agrarian societies is linked to the reproduction of the kin group or the peasantry, as well as to the sexual division of labor. Child bearing is the central activity. But just in capitalism what a worker produces is not considered, the property of worker, so in patriarchal context a women's product –be the children or rugs –are not considered her property but those of patriarchal family.

In patriarchal context, women are considered a form of property. The honor—and by extension honor of the family, depends in great measure on their virginity and good conduct⁸.

Michael Mann has identified and traced the inter-relation of five principal stratification nuclei---five collective actors that have effected gender stratification relation in recent history. They are atomized persons (more pertinent to liberal, bourgeois society); the network of family/household/lineage; genders; social class; nation and national status. According to Mann the patriarchal society is one in which power is held by male members of household. There is also clear separation between public and private sphere of life. In the private sphere of household, the patriarch enjoys arbitrary powers over all junior males, females and children. In public sphere, power is shared between male patriarchs according to whatever other principles of stratification involves. Whereas many, perhaps most men expect to be patriarch at some point in their life cycle, no female hold any public position of economic, ideological and political power. Within the household they may influence their male patriarchs and this is only their access to power. Patriarchy has two fundamental nuclei of stratification :the household/family/lineage nexus and the dominance of male gender.

Islam has come into being in a patriarchal society very much like Judaism and Christianity. But as Tillion argues that the origin of women's oppression in Muslim society has nothing to do with Islam but can be traced TO ancient times and at the beginning of the patriarchal society⁹. It was endogamy, the practice of marrying within the lineage which shaped the way for oppression of women in patrilineal society. Arabs are endogamous and favour cousin marriage, as noted by Goody, Tillion, Keddie, and Baffoun. They have pointed out that endogamy increased the tendency to maintain property within the families through control of women in tightly inter-related lineage. Keddie writes that nomadic tribal groups have special reasons to want to control women and to favour cousin marriage. Pastoral nomadic tribes the most common types in the Middle East, trades animal products for agriculture and similarly in modern parts for continuance of household business and establishment of nomadic autocratic political system in most of Arab Gulf States. Tillion calls the "Republic of cousins" and notes that even though most nomadic women are not veiled or secluded, they are controlled¹⁰.

The patriarchal belt is characterized by extremely restrictive code of behavior for women, rigid gender segregation and powerful ideology linking family honor to female virtue, as Kabir notes that male are entrusted with safeguarding the family honor through their control over female members, they are backed by complex social arguments that ensures the protection and dependence of women. In contemporary Muslim society such control are considered necessary as women are regarded as source of Fitna—that is moral or social disorder. Men traditionally have unilateral right to divorce and the authority to decide their women folk will take up outside job or travel. A family's reputation most heavily rests upon the conduct of women. As Mendle Baum puts "Honor is the key good for these men and their honor is balanced on the head of women"¹¹. The other characteristics which are very common to these kinds of society is an adverse sex ratio, low female literacy and educational attainment high fertility rate, high maternal mortality rates and low female labor participation in formal sectors¹².

Religion Vs Tradition: When a woman is denied her rights, the blame falls upon tradition, in many of these cases, not on religion. Nowhere in Holy Quran seclusion and veiling of face is mentioned. Local tradition brought them and preserved them. Islam in time become an integral part of tribal society, tribal custom, including those that made it difficult for women to exercise their economic and political freedom. It is seen as a sacred tradition passed down from their ancestors.

The Holy Quran strengthens the economic position of women but local traditions forcing women to remain within the confines of the home. It was difficult for them to exercise economic rights.

There is much Quranic legislation referring to women's right to inherit as well as bequeath. Daughters are entitled to their share as a wife and mothers and according to her position in the family¹³. They are free to invest this money or property as they wish without the approval of their closest male relatives. There is no shared community property between them. In Islam there is no community property shared by spouses. Another example of economic support is the bride price(mehar) which is to be given to bride not to her closest male relative father or else. But this rule is not in practice in most of the Arab Gulf states¹⁴.

Women, Shri'a and Modern Legislation: Islam is very sensitive and hence, it is very explicit regarding the women. Sharia, which constitute of Quran and sayings of Prophet are very clear about women's right. There are hundreds of verses in the Holy Quran mentioning about women, their role and status in society.

According to the Holy book men and women have been created from one spirit. They are to be each other's protectors, supporters and comforters. Their relationship is one of equality cordiality¹⁵. The Quran warns against slandering a chaste women (S:24:4-5). The other verses has been interpreted to sanction, segregation, seclusion(S:33:33) as well as defines proper clothing s and public behavior(S:33:59-S:24:31).While the verses understood to sanction veiling appears to address only the wives of Prophet. Some Muslims see in it a prescription for all Muslims¹⁶.The Shari's assertion of women's right to manage and control her property¹⁷.The separate rights of men and women are not affected by marriage. Inheritance regulation are spelled out in great details in the Holy Quran (S:4,11-121).

Islam regards marriage as a contract and hence like other contact, it is also subject to dissolution¹⁸ but as the Hadith says "All things permissible, the most displeasing to Allah is divorce¹⁹".Polygamy is expressedly allowed but in case of not giving equal treatment to all wives, only monogamy is recommended. Whereas, polyandry is harshly rejectd²⁰.

Despite all that has been mentioned however, it must be stated that the Quran does not recognize the concept of absolute equality of male and female. Men stand superior to women, in that Allah has preferred one over other²¹.Superiority could be in many respect as domestic, social, ritual and political.

The Arab Gulf countries (most of them) follow absolute Sharia but it is also a fact that the process of reform though on the basis of re-interpretation of Sharia has started in recent time in these countries. There are some aspects very necessary as an indicator to development to be taken care as in regard to women's development in social as well as political or economic hierarchy.

1. The establishment of minimum legal age for marriage.
2. The reform of inheritance law.
3. The regulation for abolishment of polygamy.
4. The abolition of man's right to unilateral divorce or easy provision for women to seek divorce.

Since Nov.1967 when British colonial rule has been terminated and National Liberation Front came to power, it took bold steps in realization of the fact that the development and change required active participation of women .Kin control over Women and practice of seclusion, consequently, had to be transformed. Hence in this context a new family law has been passed in 1974²².

The constitution recognize women both as mother and as producers, consequently, as forming part of the working people .According to the Preamble of the family law the traditional and the

feudal family is in compatible with the principle of National Democratic Revolution-because of its old relation prevent it from playing a positive role in the building up of a society. It established principles of free choice marriage; raise the minimum age of 16 for girls and 18 for boys; abolished polygamy except in exceptional circumstances such as barrenness or incurable diseases; reduced the dower (mahar) stipulated that both the partner must bear the cost of supporting the family; ended the unilateral divorce and increased divorced women's right to children²³.

Arab Gulf and Various Reform: To cope with time and other world it become necessary to bring some changes into the system. This change is termed as reform. All the Gulf countries at one time or other, undertook various reformative measures so that to improve lot of masses and solve various complicated issues which is the product of new social system. The above cited case of Yemen is one of them. The process of reform in the Arab World is started by Napoleon, followed by Mohammed Ali who sent Rafa'a al- Tahtawi among many reformer of Egypt to France to get unlighted from modern ideologies and development of the European world .In no time the whole Arab world undertook various reformative measures to improve the condition of women in their society .Tunisia and Egypt took some revolutionary steps but nonetheless effect was felt everywhere²⁴. As in the Arab Gulf states the first women's school was set up only in 1960s and by 70s the percentage of women's education was 3% in Kuwait, 8.9% in U.A.E.,2% in Saudi Arabia and likewise in other states which increased in 90s .The female education in these states reached variably from 40% to 64%²⁵.One of the most important development during these decade was employment of women in various sectors. The most conservatives among these states Saudi Arabia has also permitted their women folk to professions such as teaching ,medical and even the banks but segregation and seclusion is very much prevailed²⁶.

Women's Association And Union In Arab Gulf Countries:- With the advent of education in the Arab middle eastern countries in general and Arab Gulf countries in particular ,the women, the literate enough to know about their rights and their position in the society as well as well convinced about their importance as a productive source to society, polity and economy has began to raise their voices against all the odds prevalent in the society. The efforts culminated into formation of various associations in these Arab countries which enabled them to raise their voice and give them a platform from where the various issues close to their heart s were debated and amicable solution were sought²⁷.

The first prominent women's association in the Arab gulf is established in Jordan named "Women's Solidarity" in 1944 had the mother of king Talal of Jordan as its honorary president. The society's goal were limited to caring the children and providing assistance to power and needy. In 1945 society of Jordanian women's federation was founded with princess Zayan Sharaf (wife of Talal and mother of Hussain) as its active president. The organization differed from their predecessor²⁸ was concerned with raising their education level and improving child health care. The two Jordanian association combined as Hashemite Jordanian women's Society, but the organization was dissolved in the same year²⁹.

Like, the Jordanian Women's Society the other women's association also came up in different Gulf countries. In 1955, Al Nahada in Bahrain, and in 1963, with n the political demand a feminist union born in Kuwait and in 1973 the first women's association came up in Oman, like wise other women's society came to surface in other Gulf countries³⁰. The aim of all these early association were very limited to child care and taking care of needy, awareness regarding health hygiene and finally raising the educational level.

Later these early society was followed by more progressive associations and the women's movement has gone to a sea change in their attitudes. The women's were caught up in general political ferment and helping Palestinians who displaced from their land. The goal of these new organization were fighting illiteracy ,raising women's socio-economic level, preparing her to exercise her full rights as a citizen and developing bonds of friendship and an understanding between Arab women and women around the world to improve the situation at home and to strengthening the peace in the region. The women's association demanded change in personal status law, specifically outlawing divorce and polygamy³¹.

In the realm of more socially acceptable demands and political activity, women were in the forefront of demonstration in support of the Palestinian cause against the Zionists ,against French, British and Israel. Invasion of Egypt, French treatment of Algeria were protested. They also supported Nasser's nationalization of Suez canal in 1956.

The loudest voice of demand is made for suffrage right in all over the Gulf countries, where it is denied. The only Gulf country which has conceded the women's demand for enfranchisement on march 5 1974 is Jordan. Later Yemen and Kuwait which subsequentlypermitted their women folk to contest election³². The demand for suffrage in the other Arab Gulf countries is also vehement. Kuwait women many times demonstrated in this regard and most recently in December 2015 for the first time women of Mecca has got the right to vote as well as to contest. And, not to any surprise a women representative has won in the election.

Women Poetess And Authors Raising Their Voice: In such a conservative society as the Gulf society is raising the voice become very difficult and almost impossible but the voice of a poet and author cannot be silenced. Saudi Arabian women writes and others have been producing for a numbers of years ,seeking to raise the question about central issues concerning women and they are trying to change the way people think about them³³. The literature primarily essay, short stories, and poetries appear in main stream publication and widely read by university students. It is opening up a public discussion on matters once confirmed to religious authorities. As a medium of resistance and protest, it is successful as the literature can evade Governments censorship . Equally, important is the readers, willingly hears the message because it does not directly challenge the so called culture. The work of these women writers generally avoid attacking established institution such as family, marriages, veiling and sex segregation. Instead the idea of change is presented within these institutions. What these women are doing, however, slowly, curving out space, where discussion can occur in the hope of creating a new cultural understandings about women and women's right in Muslim society³⁴.

Conclusion: The process of reform which started from Egypt, called Al-Nahada Al- Arabia has left no country untouched. The impact is seen everywhere. The concept of Ijtihad as Mohammad Abdahu of Egypt narrates is well applicable in relation to Haquul ibad³⁵. Hence women's status and rights as he defines, falls under this category- can necessarily be improved. The Arab Gulf also saw, improving the lot of women in all respects. The contribution as a productive source is still to be recognized properly, though some exception is there. The oil wealth in this region and generalization of education has made them very conscious of their rights and positions. I will try to well conclude this paper by citing some examples (from rigid Saudi Arabia) where the voice is very clear and the tone high pitched.

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