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## Reconciling Arabo-Islamic culture and feminist consciousness in North African women's writing: Silence and voice in the short stories of Alifa Rifaat and Assia Djebar

### Reconciling Arabo-Islamic culture and feminist consciousness in North African women's writing

This article sets out to explore the theme of silence and voice in selected short stories by two North African women writers, Alifa Rifaat and Assia Djebar. In their representations of women's lives in Egypt and Algeria, respectively, both Rifaat and Djebar present different strategies employed by women to counter gender oppression. Although the female characters portrayed by both writers encounter diverse, and sometimes opposing, circumstances, they tend to share a common plight – the need to break free from the constricting fetters of patriarchy. A comparative reading of selected stories reveals that Rifaat's characters resort to silence as a means of self-preservation, while Djebar's characters, on the other hand, use techniques ranging from writing to outright protest to show their rejection of gender-based segregation. In spite of this difference in approach, it can be said that both Rifaat and Djebar have made a great contribution to feminist literary creativity in North Africa. **Key words:** Alifa Rifaat, Assia Djebar, Islam, women, short story, feminism.

### Introduction

One can hardly carry out a discussion on Arabo-Islamic culture without making reference to Islam, the dominant religion in North Africa and the Middle East. It is, however, important to state that Islam is not a monolithic entity with laws that apply to all Muslims in different places and times in exactly the same way. Camillia El-Solh and Judy Mabro (1994: 2) confirm this assertion when they note that although there is a unifying framework which is provided by the Qur'an and the five pillars of the creed – *shahada* (proclaiming the faith), *salat* (prayer), *zakat* (almsgiving), *sawm* (fast) and *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) – this unity is accompanied by a multitude of diversities which need to be taken into consideration in any discussion of Islam and its practices by Muslims. Such diversities become evident as one studies Islamic practices in different countries. In the book *Modernizing Women: Gender & Social Change in the Middle East*, Valentine Moghadam (1993: 10) observes that the countries of the Middle East and North Africa differ in their historical evolution, social composition, economic structures and state forms, and thus to study Middle Eastern women is to recognize the diversity

within the female population, for not only are the women stratified by class, ethnicity, education and age, but they are also divided ideologically and politically. Thus, it would be a matter of cultural bias to ignore regional differences in Islamic cultural practices in a discussion of North African women's writing such as this one. It would also be prejudiced to say that feminist movements in North Africa and the Middle East share uniformity instead of commonality.

The debate on whether feminism is relevant to Muslim women in North Africa and the Middle East is a long-standing one, with strong arguments for and against that cannot be delved into in this paper. Differences in opinion notwithstanding, many critics of Arabo-Islamic cultures have shown that feminist movements play a contributive role in Muslim women's struggle to transform their societies into egalitarian systems based on the principles of gender equality and justice (Accad 1991: 247; Malti-Douglas 1995: 11; Golley 2004: 521–522). The South African Indian feminist Sa'diyya Shaikh (2003: 155) has put forward a salient argument on the relationship between feminism and Muslim women in modern times:

While some Muslims eschew the term "feminist", increasing numbers have begun to utilize the term to describe themselves. The value of retaining the term "feminism" is that it enables Muslim women to situate their praxis in a global political landscape. This in turn creates greater possibilities for alliances, exchanges, and mutually enriching interaction among different groups of women. These connections enable varying groups of women to share and learn from each other's experiences, whether this is in an exchange of feminist tools of analysis, or of varying ways of implementing activist initiatives, or simply an exposure to other forms of justice-oriented gender praxis. Furthermore the use of feminist language is helpful in that it creates a finely tuned vocabulary for a constellation of ideas that are linked to a critical consciousness surrounding gender politics. To accept feminism as a Western concept is in the last analysis to concede the most visible discourses around women's rights and gender justice as the property of the West and to marginalize the indigenous histories of protest and resistance to patriarchy by non-Western women.

In line with Shaikh's argument, Indian feminist Chandra Mohanty (1991: 7) states that the notion of "third world" women and the politics of feminism brings together an "imagined community" of women: "imagined" not because it is not "real" but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries, and "community" because in spite of internal hierarchies within third world contexts, there is a deep commitment to "horizontal comradeship". These imagined communities of women with divergent histories and social locations are "woven together by the *political* threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but also systematic" (Mohanty 1991: 7). Thus,

women in many non-Western cultures have appropriated the term “feminism” and redefined it to acquire meaning within their specific socio-cultural environments. The question that still remains is: to what extent do these women succeed in negotiating a balance between culture consciousness and feminist aspirations? In other words, are they able to reconcile feminist consciousness with their awareness of their individual cultures? This paper attempts to investigate this issue using short stories by two North African women writers, Alifa Rifaat of Egypt and Assia Djebar of Algeria. Before delving into the analysis of selected stories, however, it is important to contextualize Arab feminism.<sup>1</sup>

### Arab feminism and gender discourse

A study of Arabo-Islamic women’s writing reveals what Chidi Amuta (1989: 81) has termed a “reactive stance” towards gendered differentiation in North Africa. Muslim women encounter different forms of gender oppression, the degree and intensity of which differs from country to country and from region to region, and the choices they face are influenced as much by patriarchal social arrangements as they are by religious ideology (El-Sohl & Mabro 1994: 1). This is evident in the writings of many North African women, such as Nawal el-Saadawi, Leïla Sebbar, Alifa Rifaat, Assia Djebar, Marguerite Amrouche and Aïcha Lemsine. Although these writers use different approaches in their representations of women’s lives – some emerging as moderates and others as revolutionaries – they share a common objective, which is to change, through writing, Muslim perception of women’s role in society. Aïcha Lemsine and Assia Djebar, for example, are two Algerian women writers who address the issue of tradition in their works. According to Silvia Nagy-Zekmi (2002: 2), while Lemsine in both her novels, *La chrysalides* (1976) and *Ciel de porphyre* (1978), tries to reconcile Maghrebian tradition and Western values, Djebar, in *La soif* (*The Mischief*, 1957), *Les impatients* (*The Impatient Ones*, 1958), *Ombre sultane* (*A Sister to Scheherazade*, 1987) and *L’amour, la fantasia* (*Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, 1985), opts for a deconstruction of tradition as an oppressive force in her representation of history, but at the same time she situates her writing in the Islamic tradition as an axis of religious and social identity.

Writing for these women thus becomes a forum where they can deliberate on major issues affecting women in North Africa, be it tradition, gender or religion. While some draw on personal experiences and the common experiences of women in Arabo-Islamic societies (Alifa Rifaat, Marguerite Amrouche, Aïcha Lemsine), others draw inspiration from history and mythology (Nawal el-Saadawi, Assia Djebar, Leïla Sebbar), thereby making women’s role in the historical evolution of their societies a major focus of their works. Nevertheless, in their attempt to create an Arabo-Islamic cultural discourse none of them claims that the women they

present in their works are representative of Muslim women throughout North Africa and the Middle East.

Arab feminists are concerned with a number of issues affecting women in their societies, issues such as culture constraints, gender segregation, class stratification, economic exploitation, religious intolerance and political oppression. Two main subjects, however, occupy centre stage in Arabo-Islamic feminist discourse, namely, marriage and sexuality. The problems relating to marriage addressed by Muslim women writers include early marriage for teenage girls, which is premised on the protection of girls from violation or unwanted pregnancy; contracted marriages in which parents choose a husband for the girl; polygamy, which permits a man to have as many as four wives; paternal cousin marriage, which ensures that property stays in the patrilineal line; and the divorce laws, which favour men over women (Keddie 1991: 8–9). The contractual nature of marriage, for instance, which underpins a patriarchal tradition of male domination and female compliance, is a subject of great concern to Arab feminist writers like El-Saadawi and Djebbar. El-Saadawi's *Two Women in One* (1985; *Imra'atan fi imra'a*, 1975) and Djebbar's *Les impatientes* (1958) both present female characters who flout established norms on marriage, male-female interaction and sexual behaviour, for they do not only reject their families' choice of spouse but also pursue an independent course that puts individual needs above family obligations and societal demands. Thus, both novels seem to suggest that a complete break from patriarchy is indispensable to women's struggle for self-preservation.

Closely related to marriage is the issue of sexuality, one which has generated much criticism in recent times. Mumbi Machera (2004: 157) sees sexuality as a "complex term with a multifaceted meaning referring to deep emotional feeling as well as issues of power and vulnerability in gendered relationships". She notes that although the feelings and power dynamics are linked to the biological existence of an individual as either male or female, the scope of sexuality is socially constructed in the sense that "sexual feelings and behaviour are influenced and constrained by cultural definitions and prohibitions rather than by physical possibilities for sexual indulgence". This explains why matters of sexuality often become "forbidden territory" for women and female children in many patriarchal cultures.

In a paper on sexuality and sexual politics in the Middle East, the Lebanese feminist critic, Evelyne Accad (1991: 240), refers to her meeting with Ilham Bint Milad, a Tunisian feminist, who feels that the silence of Tunisian feminists falls over three main spheres – the feminine body, women's personal relationships, and sexual identity. In Milad's view, as Accad states, silence reigns over subjects such as menstruation, virginity, masturbation, sexual pleasure in general, abortion, birth, and the feminine body as a whole. Looking at a short story like Rifaat's

“Distant View of a Minaret”, in which sexual intimacy between the female character and her husband is marked by dissatisfaction and a desire that cannot be verbally expressed due to traditional constraints, it becomes evident that silence over matters of sexuality is not peculiar to Tunisian women. Accad (1991: 244) describes the Lebanese situation when she identifies certain practices she ran away from in Lebanon at the age of twenty-two, including forced marriage, virginity, the codes of honour, the veil, polygamy, repudiation, wife-beating, lack of freedom, and the denial of the possibility to achieve one’s aims and desires of life. These practices, in her opinion, are part of a range of oppression women suffer in the Middle East. It is this prevailing injustice in sexual politics that moves her to insist that “change is fundamental at the level of sexual and familial intimacy” (Accad 1991: 237).

The practice of female circumcision is central to Arab feminist studies on sex and sexuality.<sup>2</sup> In one of her early non-fictional works entitled *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World (Me’ahore Hara’alah: Nashim Be-olam Ha-aravi*, 1980) El-Saadawi (1980: 40) observes that the circumcision of girls was not originally an Islamic custom; it was practised in societies with varying religious backgrounds, including Egypt, Sudan, Somaliland, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. Her research on the prevalence of this practice in Egypt revealed that behind circumcision lies the belief that by removing parts of girls’ external genital organs sexual desire is minimized, thereby permitting a female who has reached the “dangerous age” of puberty and adolescence to protect her virginity, and therefore her honour, with greater ease (El-Saadawi 1980: 33). As a physician in many rural areas of Egypt, El-Saadawi was called upon to treat numerous complications arising from circumcision, and thus she was able to state with conviction that “the lifelong psychological shock of this cruel procedure left its imprint on the personality of the child and accompanied her into adolescence, youth and maturity” (El-Saadawi 1980: 33). Perhaps it is this firsthand experience of what she considered as women’s sexual mutilation that moved El-Saadawi to become a gender activist in Egypt. Her numerous campaigns against all practices that oppressed women resulted in her imprisonment by the Sadat regime in 1981. According to Fedwa Malti-Douglas (1995: 199), this incarceration, rather than silence El-Saadawi, only added to her vocal courage as her post-prison narratives take the patriarchal bull by the horns and attempt textually to destroy it.

El-Saadawi’s indictment of clitoridectomy is glaring in *Woman at Point Zero* (1983; *Imra’a ’ind Nuqtat al-Safr*, 1975) in which the main character, Firdaus, laments the loss of her ability to experience sexual pleasure later in life as a result of the forceful excision of her clitoris when she was young. Alifa Rifaat, also an Egyptian writer, seems to join El-Saadawi in her exposure of the ill-effects of this rite on women and female children. As a child growing up in rural Egypt, Rifaat herself was subjected to this practice and has admitted to the physical and emo-

tional trauma that comes with it (Rifaat 1990: 74–77). Interestingly, one of her stories in *Distant View of a Minaret* (*Leil Al-Shetea Al-taweel*, 1983) entitled “Bahiyya’s Eyes” presents a female character who undergoes forceful excision and eventually adopts a code of silence which she carries right into her adult life, an eventuality similar to that of Firdaus in El-Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*. Effectively then, Rifaat in this story shows not only the viciousness with which matters of sexuality are suppressed in traditional society, but also that circumcision is one of the means by which social control over women is exerted, thus forcing them into silence.

Women’s “silence” remains a major subject of Arab feminist criticism. Deborah Cameron (1990: 4) explains this phenomenon of silence when she states that women’s voices are not *silent* but have been *silenced*: “for it is not just that women do not speak: often they are explicitly *prevented* from speaking, either by social taboos and restrictions or by the more genteel tyrannies of custom and practice” (original emphasis). Thus, by writing stories in which women express their desires, feelings and wishes, North African women writers are giving their sisters a voice, thereby subverting and transgressing established norms within their cultures. The very act of writing in itself challenges the patriarchal ideology that “the order of language is a masculine order dominated by the phallus” and, therefore, “those who do not possess the phallus – women – remain marginal to language” (Cameron, 1990: 9). By daring into a male tradition, that is, writing, these articulate women succeed in negotiating power with their men.

In an introduction to her anthology of African women’s writing, Charlotte Bruner (1993: 151) describes North African women writers as “significant interpreters of their own cultures and of women’s place therein”. Bruner juxtaposes writers like Nawal el-Saadawi, Leila Sebbar, Assia Djebar, Gisèle Halimi and Andrée Chedid who are overt in their condemnation of undue restraints on Muslim women with less prolific writers like Alifa Rifaat and Laila Said who, though not outstanding as advocates of equality between the sexes, still boldly pinpoint the flaws inherent in the system. Thus, if one thinks that Assia Djebar is unduly harsh in depicting restraints on North African women, then one should read the short stories of Alifa Rifaat, who may not condemn the system but who still conveys the shallowness and impoverishment of women’s ordinary lives in Egypt (Bruner 1993: 150–151). Bruner’s assessment of North African women’s writing indicates that although their narrative voice differs in tone – some being more overt and radical than others – North African women writers ultimately aim at raising consciousness on the need for change in male attitude towards women in the Arabo-Islamic world.

In essence, then, one could say that Arab feminism seeks to interrogate, and possibly eradicate, practices that affect women’s wellbeing in Arabo-Islamic soci-

eties. What is truly remarkable about Middle Eastern and North African women writers, as Bruner (1993: 151) observes, is that “these articulate women share a hope, if not a promise, that a new world order of equality and empathy could exist, based not on might, coercion and violence, but on mutual respect and understanding”. This is the artistic vision that both Alifa Rifaat and Assia Djebar share (as a reading of their short stories illustrates), for although Rifaat presents characters who benignly accept prescribed norms of female behaviour in both marriage and sexuality while Djebar’s characters often reject such norms, both writers ultimately see Arabo-Islamic values as an essential part of North African women’s cultural identity. The following analysis would focus on selected stories by these writers. Four stories – “Distant view of a minaret”, “Bahiyya’s eyes”, “Badriyya and her husband” and “The long night of winter” – from Rifaat’s short story collection *Distant View of a Minaret* and four of Djebar’s stories from various anthologies – “Three cloistered girls”, “My father writes to my mother”, “There is no exile” and “Women of Algiers in their apartment” would be used to illustrate the different ways in which these writers address the silence-and-voice binary in their representations of women’s lives in North Africa. Each set of stories has a linear thread and thus provides room for a comparative analysis.

### **The cry of a mother hen: Alifa Rifaat speaks for Muslim women in Egypt**

Few domestic birds are as protective of their young ones as a mother hen is of her brood of chicks. The cry of a mother hen both announces the presence of a predator in the vicinity and establishes the need for its chicks to seek refuge under her wings. Her wings effectively become their only assured means of survival. Like a protective mother hen, Alifa Rifaat unveils the many wrongs perpetuated against women in her society, but at the same time she upholds the Islamic way of life as the ideal. Her short story collection, *Distant View of a Minaret*, is an anthology of fifteen stories, including a translator’s foreword by Denys Johnson-Davies. With the exception of one story, “At the time of the Jasmine”, the lead characters in all the stories in this collection are females – either women battling with problems in their marriages and reminiscing over their childhood, or young girls moving from a state of innocence into one of guilt.

Although critics (Johnson-Davies 1983: viii; *Contemporary Authors Online*, 2001: 2) have argued that Rifaat’s main themes are sex and death, a closer reading of the fifteen stories in the collection reveals multiple themes pertaining to women’s lot in Islam, such as marriage, love, interrelationships, teenage pregnancy, bereavement, widowhood, old age, loneliness, estrangement, and, above all, loss. In this case, sex and death become merely generic terms encompassing a broad range of themes, in which the term “sex” would include sexual relationships,

gender relationships, and interrelationships like mother-daughter and father-son, while “death” includes loss of spouse, loss of innocence, loss of faith and loss of meaningful relationships. What is particularly striking about Rifaat’s stories is the openness with which she treats the subject of sex within marriage. Although her lead female characters tend to adopt an attitude of resignation as a way of dealing with problems of sex and sexuality in marriage, the act of writing women’s lives in itself gives them a voice. Thus, Rifaat does not only speak for Muslim women in Egypt but, in fact, reveals herself to be an advocate of gender justice.

In her study of women in the novels of Mariama Bâ and Aminata Sow Fall, Dorothy Wills (1995: 162) notes that in Senegalese culture speech is classed as action, and thus to speak much or to complain indicates non-nobility and to assert one’s right is to violate one’s claim to nobility. The result is that women are forced to be silent and submissive in order to be seen as noble, good or pious (Wills 1995: 164). While this phenomenon does not directly apply to women in Arabo-Islamic culture, it does indicate that the silence of women is something that is imposed on them through value systems informed by patriarchal ideology. Rifaat captures this trend in four of her stories depicting women forced to adopt silence as a coping mechanism.

The title story “Distant view of a minaret” is a beautifully constructed piece of narrative in which the “Muslim concept of active female sexuality” (Mernissi 1987: 27) is played out in a dramatic mode. Although sexual references are explicit in this story, Rifaat sidesteps an endorsement of soft pornography by situating the descriptions within the sanctity of marriage. The story opens with the male and female character involved in sexual activity. In spite of the intimacy of the act, the female character feels estranged from her husband: “as usual at such times she felt that he inhabited a world utterly different from hers, a world from which she had been excluded” (1).<sup>3</sup> The rift between them is indicated by the fact that he inhabits a world of his own, while she remains indifferent to his movements, her eyes roving around the room, taking note of the cobwebs that need to be brushed off the ceiling and her toenails that need to be trimmed.

Tellingly unnamed, the female character recalls her desperate attempts to get her husband to feel her sexual needs: “when they were first married she had tried to will her husband into sensing the desire that burned within her and so continuing the act longer”; but “she had been too shy and conscious of conventions to express such wishes openly” (1). Her inability to openly discuss her wishes with her husband points to a code of silence by which sexual matters between them remain a forbidden subject. This silence shrouding the subject of sex transcends male-female relationships, for even when married women talk about their sexual relationships with their husbands they do so in “hushed terms” (1). Thus, the female character is trapped in a situation where she cannot freely express her



wishes and desires either to her husband or to her women friends. In an attempt to overcome this barrier she resorts to body language in making her husband feel her need, "but on each occasion, when breathlessly imploring him to continue, he would – as though purposely to deprive her – quicken his movements and bring the act to an abrupt end" (1). Having failed to communicate her need by action, the character eventually gives up and submits to a "passive role" (2), which allows her husband absolute control over their sexual life. In effect, her sexuality becomes passive not by choice or nature but through the domineering, selfish act of her husband.

In a revised edition of her book *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi (1987: 44–45) explains that what Muslim theory considers destructive to the social order is *active female sexuality* rather than *sexuality* itself, for while sexuality *per se* is not a danger, the woman is *fitna* – "a living representative of the dangers of sexuality and its rampant disruptive potential". Thus, to maintain the social order, female sexuality must be made inactive, if not non-existent. Rifaat in "Distant view of a minaret" shows just how male agency is instrumental in this process. The lead character's husband does not only fail to satisfy her sexual needs but also to realize that they even exist. As a result, sex with her husband has become more of a ritual than an expression of love, and the silence shrouding their relationship is cemented through her sexual passivity. The Islamic way of life becomes the only constant in her life, for "her five daily prayers were like punctuation marks that divided up and gave meaning to her life" and "each prayer had for her a distinct quality, just as different foods had their own flavours" (3). This suggests that Islam alone provides solace to women battling with marital problems, and deviating from its teachings may result in alienation of one's self from God, in which case one would only have a distant view or perception of the Supreme Being, represented here by the minaret.

The significance of the title of the story surfaces as the female character sits near a window after the sexual act and looks out at the city of Cairo. She observes that Cairo, which used to have "countless mosques and minarets", now has only the single visible minaret, "the tall solitary minaret that could be seen between two towering blocks of flats" (3). She notes that "this single minaret, one of the twin minarets of the Mosque of Sultan Hasan, with above it a thin slice of the Citadel, was all that was now left of the panoramic view she had once had of old Cairo" (3). The solitary minaret is a symbol of the female character herself, a lonely, unhappy woman in an unfulfilled marriage, who is caught between two overpowering blocks: a patriarchal culture which inhibits woman's sexuality, on the one hand, and woman's desire to be sexually fulfilled, on the other. This juxtaposition brings out the contrast between male attitudes toward women's sexuality and women's right to loving and kind treatment in marriage as prescribed by the

Qur'an.<sup>4</sup> Thus, one could say that Rifaat's construction of woman against a backdrop of deteriorating religious amenities symbolizes a collapse of social institutions when religious duties are not performed to satisfactory levels.

Rifaat's concern about woman's lot takes another dimension in "Bahiyya's eyes", a story in which she shows that "this business of womanhood is a heavy burden" (Dangarembga 1988: 16). Although the story is written in the epistolary mode in which the lead character, Bahiyya, is writing to her daughter in the city to inform her of her impending blindness, the narrative voice gives it the quality of a song of lament, making it affective in profound ways. By making Bahiyya tell her own story – a story of woman's powerlessness in the face of deep-rooted customs – Rifaat breaks the silence cloaking the Egyptian woman. The lead character, whose name means the one with beautiful eyes, is an aging widow with failing eyesight, which the doctor attributes to "the flies and the dirt" (6) but which Bahiyya knows is caused by "all the tears I shed since my mother first bore me and they held me by the leg and found I was a girl" (7). Thus, Bahiyya's gradual loss of sight results from the many tears shed for her own and other women's lot in a patriarchal society, making her decry even her own gender.

This is a beautifully crafted story in which the theme of sex is approached through gendered difference between males and females and the practice of clitoridectomy. Bahiyya learns about the process of procreation by observing animals like cats and dogs, noting the similarity in their ways of mating, and bit by bit she is able to understand how the same thing happens between men and women. Thus, it is only by adopting a system of self-education that she begins to understand the dynamics of sex and sexuality. Responding to the dictates of her curious mind, she creates her parents out of mud, putting in-between her father's legs "a thing like a cat's tail" and giving her mother "something like a sort of mulberry" (9). The poignant irony is that the pre-teen Bahiyya's growing curiosity results in a group of women forcefully and crudely excising her clitoris with a razor blade. The cruelty with which the rite is performed on the bewildered nine-year old is embedded in the narrative tone as the incident is recounted:

Then early one day as I was about to go out to have a look at my mud things and see whether or not they'd dried yet in the sun, I found the women coming in and gathering round, and then they took hold of me and forced my legs open and cut away the mulberry with a razor. They left me with a wound in my body and another wound deep inside me, a feeling that a wrong had been done to me, a wrong that could never be undone. And so the tears welled up in my eyes again. (9)

The narrative voice betrays not only the physical and psychological pain of the sufferer but also the ruthlessness with which that pain is inflicted. It seems that

the girl-child is not entitled to freedom of expression of any kind. Bahiyya carves her parents out of mud with their distinct sexual organs in place and the women are so appalled at her expressiveness that they grab her and cut off her "mulberry". Like Bahiyya, Firdaus in El-Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* asks a question about her paternity and her mother responds by getting her circumcised. Both situations attest to the brutality with which the Egyptian female's expression of knowledge about sexual matters is silenced by women themselves. The excision rite performed on her aptly illustrates the notion of "surplus" women and female excess. Dorothy Driver (1988: 4) explains this notion as follows:

The social threat of "surplus women" was precisely that the "surplus" in "woman" was threatening to break free, the "surplus", that is, which is at odds with the Symbolic Order which dishes up human beings in their categories of masculine and feminine, and identifies female sexuality with reproduction. About to overwhelm and disrupt the signifying system, the surplus or excess in "woman" was being excised, and the word "woman" was being firmly redefined as "feminine", thus having its status confirmed as (patriarchal) sign.

In line with this argument, clitoridectomy can be seen as a way of getting rid of the "excess" in woman. Bahiyya is subjected to this rite because of her natural curiosity and creativity. It is as if the women attribute her boldness to her possession of a clitoris, in which case the clitoris becomes an "excess" or a "surplus" that must be eliminated.

It becomes evident that clitoridectomy is one of the means through which the suppression of female sexuality is effected. The silence-and-voice binary in this story is thus situated within the gender issue, and the two aspects of the story – sexuality and clitoridectomy – coalesce around gender rather than sex, *per se*. The story shows that society may endorse the dominant and often bullying role of males, but within the same society women can be equally domineering and cruel and, in fact, are complicit in their own oppression. Ultimately, Bahiyya's rapidly fading eyesight comes to signify a lack of enlightenment that transcends gender. In essence, Rifaat does not only address the dynamics of female sexuality but also interrogates the complexities that surround the practice of clitoridectomy in her society.

As in "Distant view of a minaret", women's marginalization in marriage and sexuality comes through in "The long night of winter". The story presents a woman trapped in a marriage blighted by the constant betrayals of her husband (a scene evoked with relative hope by the Nigerian writer Zaynab Alkali in her novel *The Stillborn*, 1988). Zennouba wakes up at night to the sounds of nature and realizes that she is in bed alone. While waiting for her husband's return, she reminisces about her idyllic childhood. Like Bahiyya, her freedom is curtailed when she

attains puberty, for she is prevented from playing with her friends and soon afterwards is married off to her cousin "so that the land might stay in the family" (56). Thus, in this story, the theme of loss is embodied in a young girl's loss of her childhood freedom and dreams, while the patriarchal manipulation of females is revealed through the practice of marriage to one's cousin. Zennouba's marriage is an economic transaction, which ensures that her family's land remains in the patrilineal line (a situation similar to Bahiah's in El-Saadawi's *Two Women in One* referred to earlier on). Rifaat here shows that patriarchy operates through marriage transactions as much as it does through sexual relations.

Male abuse of power and privilege is again seen in this story as Zennouba's husband turns out to be a cruel partner. Zennouba recalls the first night of their marriage when he had to proclaim his right over her body: "it had been a night of violence and pain" (56). This suggests the use of brute force, a pattern that does not end on the first night, for "since then it had been repeated hundreds of times, with the element of pain replaced by that of repugnance at the rough hands that kneaded her body, and the evil-smelling breath and spittle" (56). Such vivid description projects the marriage bed as repulsive. Zennouba's marriage has become a seedbed of pain and unhappiness as a result of her husband's lack of tenderness and consideration for her own feelings. His aggressiveness indicates that sex is simply a power game, and like so many "games", it is a violent one.

Besides her husband's cruelty, Zennouba is plagued by his constant unfaithfulness as he sneaks off on many nights to sleep with the servant girls. When she demands a divorce, he placates her with gold earrings and an affectionate kiss on the forehead. However, "with the passing of time such nights were repeated and gifts of gold jewellery were made to her, while the girl servants came and went at his bidding without apparent reason, for he was the master of the house" (57). Thus, the male character surfaces as a cruel and unscrupulous man who uses females for his own selfish gratification. Not only does he subject Zennouba to nights of "pain and violence", but he also exploits the servant girls who are mere sex objects to him. The theme of victimization is heightened in this story: women seem to be mere pawns on the patriarchal chessboard. In effect, male selfishness, cruelty and exploitation of females are forces that turn woman's life into a "long night of winter", a life devoid of warmth, contentment or hope.

Sexual frustration and marital infidelity are two themes that re-emerge in the story "Badriyya and her husband". Badriyya is a young married woman whose husband, Omar, has just returned from prison. Like the female character in "Distant view of minaret", Badriyya finds herself in a marriage in which sexual contentment is absent. Her marriage is a seedbed of shattered dreams and unfulfilled desires; first, because her husband goes to prison soon after they are married: "the single month they had spent together before he was taken away merely opened

her appetite for something that remained unknown and untried deep within her. She was like a piece of land that has been prepaid for sowing and suddenly left" (33); and second, because even after his return from prison Omar fails to perform his marital duties, owing largely to his sexual escapades outside of marriage. His infidelity is revealed by Umm Gaber, the shopkeeper from whom Badriyya buys cigarettes. In response to Badriyya's questions about there being another woman in her husband's life, Umm Gaber tells her frankly: "Girl, wake up I tell you. The whole place knew about him even before you married. Prison's just made it worse. That husband of yours, if he were a woman, would have been pregnant years ago" (37). It is at this point that the truth about her husband's late nights dawns upon Badriyya. What her uncle and mother had said before their marriage about Omar being "a wastrel, a good-for-nothing, who had merely been looking for a roof over his head and a woman to look after him" (33–34) seems to have come true. Not only is he a philandering husband, but he also exploits Badriyya economically by making her pay for the expenses involved in his debauched life without her knowing it. As in "The long night of winter", Rifaat here paints a heartrending picture of a woman who suffers emotional abandonment, which Mbye Cham (1987: 89–90) describes as predominantly a female condition resulting from the male's misuse and distortion of power and privilege.

The four stories discussed above have shown that Rifaat uses the medium of writing to articulate Egyptian women's realities and voices. What is particularly significant about this writer is that although her stories focus exclusively on women's problems, each story is situated within the frame of Islam and – contrary to Western feminist writing – within the frame of marriage. Thus, on the one hand, like Assia Djebar, she is concerned about the lot of women in Arabo-Islamic societies, but on the other hand, unlike Djebar, she constructs her stories against a backdrop of Qur'anic teachings, and her characters seem to find meaning in life only when they adhere to the Islamic way of life. This confirms Johnson-Davies' (1983: vii–viii) assertion that although most of Rifaat's stories express a revolt against many of the norms and attitudes related to woman and her place in society, such revolt remains within a strictly religious, even orthodox, framework. It is evident from the stories in *Distant View of a Minaret* (especially the ones discussed above) that inasmuch as Rifaat boldly pinpoints the flaws inherent in Muslim perception of womanhood, she does not wish to separate herself from Islamic culture. The constant reference to the call for prayers, the performance of ablutions, and the offering of the prescribed prayers for each period of the day attest to her vision of Islam as a sanctuary for Egyptian women. As Carole Boyce-Davies and Elaine Fido (1993: 318) have argued, the vision she presents in her stories is that of "a dissident womanhood within Islam that nevertheless intends to remain within that culture". It is this profound Islamic consciousness and the desire to remain within its culture

that sets Rifaat apart from other North African women writers like Nawal el-Saadawi and Assia Djebar.

### **Assia Djebar as an advocate of women's rights in Algeria**

In countries where Islamic legal thought emphasizes a preservation of social and traditional family structure and a suppression of individual freedoms (Mayer 1990: 134), the pursuit of individual freedom comes at a high price, for it places writers, particularly female writers, on the brink of ostracism. Assia Djebar's attempt to upgrade the importance of individual freedoms by writing novels and stories in which women strive to be self-assertive has invited much critical attention. According to Rafika Merini (1999: 94), Djebar has declared in a speech that in spite of receiving repeated attacks for the individualistic nature of her writing, she fully intends to go on writing as she has. One major area in which Djebar has received wide critical attention relates to her stance on feminist politics in North Africa.

In an article entitled "Feminism and the Question of 'Woman' in Assia Djebar's *Vaste est la Prison*" Jane Hiddleston explores this trope in Djebar's writing and contends that Djebar does not celebrate a united feminine identity, such as feminism seeks to impress, but navigates between this collective mode and the individual feminine experience. She states:

Feminist resistance for Djebar revolves not around the uncomplicated celebration of female solidarity but around a continued shifting between collective and singular critique. Women's resistance to patriarchal oppression in Algeria consists of a continual process of convergence and divergence. Djebar does not propose a single feminist argument but charts instead the very difficult process of creating a shared concrete cause. (Hiddleston 2004: 91)

What seems to be the focal point of Hiddleston's argument is not that Djebar does not privilege feminine homogeneity over individualist ideology, but that she creates a platform of compromise where these essential elements can exist in a state of complementarity. To accomplish this, Djebar struggles to dissociate herself from the discourses of both Islam, which emphasizes communalism, and Western secularism, which thrives on individualism, and rather explores both singularity and collectivity by turns, revealing the ways in which these modes of thinking become intertwined. Nowhere in her writing does Djebar endorse "a monolithic feminist ideology", as if to say that African women face identical problems irrespective of their specific cultural backgrounds. Neither does she glorify the individual to the detriment of communal relations; rather, she seeks connections between women of different epochs and laments their common plight (Hiddleston 2004: 92-94). It is in this sense that one can say that Djebar's discourse is

constructed against a backdrop of mediation between communal interests and individual desires, between Arabo-Islamic culture and the feminist aspiration.

In "Tradition and Transgression in the Novels of Assia Djebar and Aïcha Lemsine," Silvia Nagy-Zekmi moves beyond Djebar's relationship with feminism to look specifically at her reaction to patriarchy. Nagy-Zekmi (2002: 1) begins her critique on Djebar by invoking Trinh Minh-ha's theory of the "triple bind" which proposes, firstly, that women of third world countries may find themselves caught between the problems of race and gender – being colonized once by the colonizer and then by the patriarchal order – and, secondly, that women writers often find themselves facing the odd predicament of writing in a language which upholds a white-male-norm ideology and is used predominantly as a vehicle to circulate established power relations. Cecily Lockett (1989: 29) explains the South African experience of the "triple bind" when she states that "where white women confront only gender oppression, black women are the victims of what is termed 'triple oppression' – racial oppression, class oppression and gender oppression". Thus, the burden of African women is triple in the sense that their oppression is based not just on gender, but also on race and class.

For women in North Africa and the Middle East, this triple oppression is effected through the sex/gender system, class location and state policies (Moghadam 1993: 14). While these categories regulate social behaviour for women in the public and private sphere, tradition confines them to the private space. Thus, Nagy-Zekmi argues that although Djebar proffers tradition as an integral part of a person's identity, she also sees it as the force that keeps the flames of patriarchy alive and prevents women from escaping this triple oppression. For women to break free from the constricting fetters of tradition, therefore, they have to "transgress taboos", like those pertaining to marriage and sexuality. Djebar's works present female characters who rebel against "the domineering traits of patriarchy" as a means of self-preservation (Nagy-Zekmi 2002: 2). By creating characters who destabilize established norms, Djebar herself becomes a transgressor of tradition.

Mildred Mortimer (1997: 103) provides a compelling explanation as to why Djebar's writing can be seen as a "transgression of tradition" – an invasion into forbidden enclosures. She notes that while Western civilization delights in airing private matters – desires, sins, sufferings – Islamic culture is bound to the unspoken word (silence), and therefore a Muslim woman who is seen or heard in public disclosing matters of the private world is guilty of a "double transgression", while the female writer who dares to preserve for posterity the very secrets that are not to be revealed in public is committing a "triple transgression". While Mortimer does not claim that the discourse of silence is a universalistic truism for all Islamic cultures, her argument does underpin the challenges facing North African women

writers who desire to project women's voices and realities. Djébar, like Rifaat, is guilty of committing this "triple transgression"; but whereas Rifaat simply interrogates conventional attitudes towards sex and sexuality, Djébar virtually discards such established patterns and creates alternative ways of looking at female sexuality. Implicit in her act of transgression is an affirmation of an innate tendency towards self-expression and freedom of choice, an external manifestation of an internal drive towards human rights as the inalienable heritage of every human being.

Djébar's short stories, therefore, portray female characters who discard conventions to assert their right to individuality – "My father writes to my mother" – take on male attributes – "There is no exile" – subvert their family's role in their choice of spouse – "Three cloistered girls" – and sometimes abandon Muslim dress patterns in favour of Western styles – "Women of Algiers in their apartment". In effect, although the Islamic way of life – represented by the prayers and performance of ablutions – remains a constant feature in Djébar's stories, as it does in Rifaat's, her characters tend to move away from culturally sanctioned ways of acting and to assert their freedom of choice in radically conceived ways, especially in areas such as marriage, education and employment. Unlike Rifaat who sees the private space as a refuge for women, Djébar "distinguishes between comforting haven, conducive to female bonding, and threatening confinement, where woman is victim" (Mortimer 1990: 147). In this respect, her writings are closer to those of Nawal el-Saadawi than to those of Rifaat.

Djébar's characters employ different strategies to counter gender-based segregation. In the story "My father writes to my mother", the narrator's mother learns to speak French and begins to address her husband by his first name, a practice quite unusual in her society (Djébar 1993a: 162). The acquisition of a Western language thus empowers her to venture into a public space where power relations between her and her husband are negotiated on a platform of equality. In "Three cloistered girls", writing becomes a medium for asserting one's right to choice of spouse.<sup>5</sup> The youngest sister's declaration to the narrator illustrates this point: "I'll never, never let them marry me off to a stranger who, in one night, will have the right to touch me! That's why I write all those letters! One day, someone will come to this dead-and-alive hole to take me away: my father and brother won't know him, but he won't be a stranger to me!" (Djébar 1993b: 161). This declaration conveys not only the girl's disenchantment with arranged marriage, but also her ardent desire to assert her right to choice of spouse. She writes letters to Arab men all over the world as a way of moving beyond her "cloister" to embrace new freedoms – freedom of "movement", freedom of expression and freedom of choice in marriage. Thus, writing becomes a secret weapon in her rebellion against constricting rules on male-female relationships.



While she employs a subtle way of challenging established norms, the narrator in "There is no exile" opts for outright protest against arranged marriage. It is interesting to note from this story that it is women, rather than men, who engage in marriage negotiations between the narrating persona and the family of her prospective groom. The narrator's sister, Aïcha, and her mother are the final decision-makers, for according to one of the women from the groom's family, "her father had already said yes to my brother" and so "the question remains only to be discussed between us" (Djebar 2002: 323). The narrator's rejection of the arrangement in the words "I don't want to marry", uttered with explosive anger in the middle of the negotiations, indicates her outright rebellion against the institution of marriage itself, for it is not so much the pre-chosen groom as the very idea of marrying in exile that moves her to speak out in protest. At the age of twenty-five she has experienced a series of tragedies "after having been married, after having lost [her] two children one after the other, having been divorced, after this exile and after this war" (Djebar 2002: 317). Unlike her mother and sister who seem to have reconciled themselves to life in exile, she is still grappling with the pains caused by the Algerian war and the ever-present reality of death, and therefore does not see marriage as a necessity in her present circumstances. This, in effect, is what moves her to speak out. Sadly, though, her protest is ignored by her mother who insists on giving her away, moving her sister's French teacher, Hafsa, to conclude that the true exiles "are those who keep bumping into the walls of the past" (Djebar 2002: 325). Thus, although Djebar paints a more graphic picture of women's suffering than Rifaat, because this suffering accrues from and is exacerbated by the war in Algeria, one can still draw a parallel between her characters and the female characters in Rifaat's stories, whose lives are marked by unhappiness and dissatisfaction in marriage. Ultimately, both writers question conventional practices surrounding Muslim marriage in North Africa.

As shown above, Djebar's female characters tend to reject traditional roles and embrace individualistic lifestyles. However, in no other story is the theme of female subversion more palpable than it is in "Women of Algiers in their apartment", the story that gives Djebar's short story collection its title. This is a story in which Djebar presents female characters who not only subvert patriarchal ideology, but also help other women to resist its overpowering influence. The title of the story is the title of Delacroix's painting of 1832 featuring three Algerian women, two of whom are seated in front of a hookah and the third one, in the foreground, leans her elbow against some cushions. According to Djebar (1992a: 137), Delacroix's painting is an artistic representation of his conservative image of woman, that is, woman as the traditional "housewife" without a profound consciousness of self, for the three women "remain absent to themselves, to their body, to their sensuality, to their happiness". Djebar adopts Delacroix's title, but

reverses its meaning by portraying women not as being *in their apartment*, implying physical imprisonment, confinement to domestic tasks, and enslavement to Muslim traditions, but as being *outside their apartment*, implying freedom of thought and expression, freedom of movement, freedom to pursue the education and career of their choice, freedom to engage in political struggles and to fight for their individual rights. Thus, the story "Women of Algiers in their apartment" can arguably be described as the totality of Djébar's artistic endorsement of Algerian women's liberation.

Concerning the irony surrounding Algerian independence, Nawar Golley (2004: 533) observes that in Algeria, where women played a great role in achieving independence, they were hoping to attain more rights than they actually have, for after independence men often return to the "old role pattern", which reveals "a painful contrast between principles of freedom and equality and the docile acceptance of traditional female submission". In "Women of Algiers in their apartment", Djébar acknowledges the contributions of women to the struggle for independence, but also shows how independence fell short of guaranteeing freedom from oppression for women.

The story plots the life of Sarah, a young woman working with a recording company, and the men and women who people her world, impacting on her life in various ways. It is during one of her delirious moments that another female character, Leila, reminds Sarah of the tragic experiences she and other women went through during the war years. The drifting images cascading through Leila's delirious mind symbolize the fragmented state of women's lives in post-war Algeria. Djébar shows that despite women's contributions to the war efforts, male attitude towards women remain unchanged, and consequently, women remain marginal to power:

Before the war of liberation, the search for a national identity, if it did include a feminine participation, delighted in erasing the body and illuminating these women as "mothers", even for those exceptional figures who were recognized as women warriors. But when, in the course of the seven years of the national war, the theme of the heroine becomes exalted, it is exactly around the bodies of young girls, whom I call "fire carriers" and whom the enemy incarcerates. Harems melted for a while into so many Barberousse prisons. (Djébar 1992a: 144)

The theme of loss emerges again, only this time more graphic than in Rifaat's stories, for Djébar places emphasis not just on the loss of lives but also on the loss of human dignity and identity. The quest for national liberation in Algeria reveals an ironic reversal of values whereby prisons and mad houses became filled with the very group of persons who spearheaded the struggle – women. Both Sarah and Leila had fought in the war and still carry evidence of their heroism, the

former having a scar on her abdomen to show for it, and the latter suffering mental disorientation as a result of it.

It is also ironic that women in Algeria enjoy freedom from colonial domination but remain subject to patriarchal oppression. Djébar shows that despite their having participated in the fight for freedom, “the image of woman is still perceived no differently, be it by the father, by the husband, and, more troublesome still, by the brother and son” (Djébar 1992a: 138). Thus, in spite of her present success as a song recorder, Sarah remains scarred by the injustices of the society in which she finds herself. She “thinks about the cloistered women, not even in a courtyard, just in a kitchen where they sit on the floor, crushed by the overcrowding” (Djébar 1992b: 23). Her prison experience shows that women’s oppression goes beyond physical confinement to include psychological incarceration as well. In response to a question from her French friend, Anne, about her life in prison, Sarah states:

The others noticed nothing but my silence. Leila said it only yesterday: I was a voiceless prisoner. A little like certain women of Algiers today, you see them going around outside without the ancestral veil, and yet, out of fear of the new and unexpected situations, they become entangled in other veils, invisible but very noticeable ones [...] Me too: for years after Barberousse I was still carrying my own prison around inside me. (Djébar 1992b: 48)

Sarah thus highlights the complexities surrounding the notion of freedom, showing that a release from prison does not automatically mean a release from bondage; neither does a casting off of the veil necessarily mean liberation for the individual. Her words to Anne as they drive back from the airport indicate a need for continuous activism, without which women’s liberation will become nothing but a catchphrase:

For Arabic women I see only one single way to unblock everything: talk, talk without stopping, about yesterday and today, talk among ourselves, in all the women’s quarters, the traditional ones as well as those in the housing projects. Talk among ourselves and look. Look outside, look outside the walls and the prisons! The Woman as look and the Woman as voice [...] Not the voice of female vocalists whom they imprison in their sugar-sweet melodies [...] But the voice they’ve never heard, because many unknown and new things will occur before she’s able to sing: the voice of sighs, of malice, of the sorrows of all the women they’ve kept walled in [...] The Voice that’s searching in the opened tombs. (Djébar 1992b: 50)

Djébar here uses the image of the wall to show the degree of women’s seclusion and exclusion from public activities. Cultural taboos have become like a wall that

blocks women's view of the world around them and keeps them under constant surveillance. Thus, for Algerian women to enjoy true freedom, the wall of silence must be broken down through continuous activism, and the power of the "Voice" must become a possession of all women. Only by talking continuously about women's plight, addressing problems and positing possible solutions, do the female characters in this story, especially Sarah and Anne, find a sure hope for Algerian women. Women's liberation from colonial and gender oppressions thus emerges as the dominant theme in this story.

Djebar shows that while women may encounter different forms of gender oppression, unity of action is indispensable to their struggle for gender equality. Her concluding words in "Forbidden gaze, severed sound" (Djebar 1992a: 151), the postface to *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*, points a way forward for Algerian women: "Only in the fragment of ancient murmuring do I see how we must look for a restoration of the conversation between women, the very one that Delacroix froze in his painting. Only in the door open to the full sun, the one Picasso later imposed, do I hope for a concrete and daily liberation of women". If all Muslim women in Algeria were to share Djebar's conviction, perhaps someday one of Delacroix's descendants would be inspired to paint a portrait of women of Algiers *outside* their apartment.

### **Shared concerns, different approaches**

As shown above, Djebar's primary concern is the liberation of women from all incumbent traditions that privilege communal interests based on patriarchal norms over women's individual freedom. Although positioned within societies that engender female submission to male authority, Djebar's characters strive to attain self-realization through the pursuit of educational goals and professional careers. In contrast to Djebar, Rifaat seems to infuse her female characters with what Mamphela Ramphele calls the "victim syndrome" (quoted in Coullie 2004: 4). As shown earlier, her female characters succumb to societal pressure by maintaining silence on fundamental issues germane to their happiness. The female character in the story "The long night of winter" is the creative representation of the Egyptian woman as Rifaat perceived her, for "in compliance with her husband and for the sake of the children, [Zennouba] had submitted to the role of wife and mother, a woman protected by marriage and by the home that she would leave only when they bore her to her grave" (Rifaat 1983: 56). The character's benign acceptance of her husband's infidelity, for the sake of her honour and the welfare of her children, seems to suggest that suffering is a necessary price that women pay in exchange for social security. Thus, Rifaat's portrayal of women, albeit being a critical statement on the absence of the element of companionship within Muslim marital

relationships, betrays her conservative approach to the marginalization of women in Egypt

In spite of the differences in creative vision, both Rifaat and Djebbar address similar issues affecting women in many North African countries. The issue of forced or arranged marriage is critiqued in the stories of both writers. In Rifaat's "Bahiyya's eyes" and "The long night of winter" and Djebbar's "There is no exile" and "Women of Algiers in their apartment", one meets female characters "shoved" into marriage by their families. Their common plight underpins a culture of repression which prevents women from exercising their right to choice of spouse.

Both Rifaat and Djebbar address the issue of female sexuality, thus stressing its centrality to Arab feminist discourse. It is easy to draw a parallel between the female character in Rifaat's "Distant view of a minaret" and Sarah in Djebbar's "Women of Algiers in their apartment". Both characters face a situation in which sexual activity with their husbands is more of a ritual than an expression of love, thereby positing the notion that the world of sex is predominantly a male-authored one in which women are excluded from active participation. The females do not only remain outside the borders of sexual pleasure, but are, in fact, marginal to experience in the sense that they are completely shut out by their husbands who retreat into a world that is "closed off" from them, moving Sarah to conclude that "a man always remains opaque" (Djebbar 1992b: 28). The image used here is that of an unfathomable and impenetrable surface that blocks out visual access and frustrates all attempts at understanding its very nature. Arguably, then, it is the male's eviction of the female from his cocoon world of self-indulgence that forces female sexuality out of the *active* and into the *passive* realm. One has to admit that Rifaat, using Islam as a frame of reference, is more overt than Djebbar in her condemnation of male suppression of female sexuality within marriage, as evident in the four stories analyzed above.

The dynamics of power relations as exemplified in the writings of Rifaat and Djebbar lend force to Mahmoud Manzalaoui's (1985: 20–21) argument that the Arabic short story, from its inception, has been directed towards didactic ends, ends concerned not only with personal morality but with the problem of social and political injustice. Both writers have displayed a consciousness of the dual purpose of literature – to entertain and to teach – by producing fiction that not only serves as a magnifying glass on their respective societies, but also seeks to establish ways of reconciling women's individual needs with society's demands on them. But while Rifaat chooses a conservative approach of allowing time and fate to improve one's situation, Djebbar opts for a radical approach which involves the taking of firm action to change one's lot in life.

## Notes

1. The term "Arab feminism" is used here to refer to feminist movements in North Africa and the Middle East. While it is used in the singular form for the purpose of convenience, it recognizes that different brands of feminism exist within Arabo-Islamic societies.
2. Different forms of female circumcision are practiced throughout North Africa (see Camillia El-Solh & Judy Mabro (1994: 13). This paper, however, refers specifically to clitoridectomy, which involves the complete removal of the clitoris (see Dorothy Wills 1995: 164).
3. All text quotations are from Alifa Rifaat's *Distant View of a Minaret* (1983).
4. The Qur'an states: "And among his signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquility with them, and he has put love and mercy between your (hearts): verily in that are signs for those who reflect" (Sura 30: 21). Commenting on this verse, Abdullah Ali (*The Holy Qur'an* 1993: 1056) states that there is a special kind of love and tenderness between men and women, which differs in quality from that between men, and that this kind of tenderness may from a certain perspective be likened to mercy, the protecting kindness which the strong should give to the weak.
5. According to Islamic religious teachings, a woman has the right to reject any marriage that is contracted without her consent. In practice, however, this right is suppressed through institutions that force women into silence.

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