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Can You Hear Her Now? Changing the Discourse on Women's Rights in Jordan

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My summer research, funded by the University of Kentucky Office of Undergraduate Research, has allowed for a thorough exploration of the quantitative data available on women in Jordan as well as the varied history of the Women's Movement from the 1940's forward. A number of interviews conducted with experts from the University of Jordan, the Jordanian National Commission on Women, and the Arab Women Organization gave me a direct connection to the Women's Movement work being done by women in Jordan. This information will be a crucial background to the process of forming a work group. I was also able to conduct preliminary interviews with female Jordanian students at Yarmouk University and to take field notes on the interaction of women in public spaces in Irbid and Amman. This research led to the formation of a fuller project than was originally imagined. Faculty mentor: Dr. Daniel Morey

Question posed to Dr. Rula Quawas, professor of feminist literature at the University of Jordan: "What role (if any) is there [in the Women's Movement in Jordan] for Western women, who care deeply about the issues, but whose involvement might fuel the impression that feminism in Jordan is an American import?"

Answer: "First, listen to us and understand our stories."¹

Irbid, Jordan. After a long week of classes, I joined Tasneem, an energetic third year Yarmouk University student, at a small café called Mango. This particular café is a bit of a curiosity in Irbid, a particularly conservative city in Northern Jordan. Some restaurants here are known by reputation if not by rule to primarily serve men, while others quickly ask their female customers to move upstairs to air conditioned "family sections" where they are safely shielded from the eyes of passing men. But Mango, a cool, flowery-smelling place with bright purple plush chairs, caters to a mostly female clientele. There is a sign in Arabic on the door that reads, "couples welcome!"

The two of us chose a table and ordered iced lattes, and I surveyed the other women around us. Like Tasneem, most of the women wore hijab, not only as a religious marker, but also as a stylishly-coordinated accent to their modern but conservative attire. As Tasneem and I exchanged a few energetic pleasantries, the song in the restaurant changed to Katy Perry's "Last Friday Night." The opening lyrics, "There's a stranger in my bed / there's a pounding in my head," seemed to go unnoticed by everyone in the restaurant, but in that moment, I was acutely aware of their irony. "What?" said Tasneem, searching for an explanation for my spontaneous laughter. "It's just this song," I said. "I didn't expect to hear it here." Tasneem seemed to understand my surprise immediately, and she leaned closer across the table, physically closing the space between us as surely as her words were meant to close the space between our cultures. "I love this song, but I don't want to imitate Katy Perry or anything. I mean, it's not like all American women want that either, right?"² And here it was, the first opening to exchange stories and build understanding between our respective experiences being female in Jordan and the U.S.

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Norma Khouri: Integrity Lost

In 2003, a Jordanian-born Christian woman, Norma Khouri, released a shocking memoir titled *Honor Lost: Love and Death in Modern Day Jordan*. The book, set in the capital city of Amman, described in heart-wrenching detail Norma's lifelong friendship with a Muslim woman named Nadia, which abruptly ended when Nadia was brutally murdered by her conservative Islamic family in a crime of honor. The book soared to the top of the bestseller's list in the United States and Australia and incited the tears, passion, and anger of its audiences.

In addition to drawing international attention to honor crimes in Jordan specifically, the story had the unfortunate effect of validating and reinforcing attitudes of Western cultural superiority over a barbaric and culturally homogenous Arab World. Khouri's depiction of events suggested that the vast majority of women in Jordan endured lives of violence and absolute misery with little or no protest, and that nothing was being done on their behalf to improve this situation. In response, scores of readers included scathing criticisms of Jordanian culture, politics, and social life in emotional five-star reviews of the book. On Amazon.com, for example, one Texas reviewer writes:

An overwhelming number of Jordanian men make the most outrageous American male chauvinist pig seem like a raving progressive feminist by comparison...The brutal fact is that some cultures are indeed better than others. Reactionary and despicable cultures deserve to be unhesitatingly condemned... their [the Islamic people's] ultimate goal is world domination... the women of Western Civilization should beware. Dalia's murder is a warning to them. They could be next...³

Meanwhile, two prominent Jordanian activists, detecting a dangerously inaccurate depiction of Jordanian culture, Islam, and the situation of women in Jordan, began quietly looking into the authenticity of Khouri's story. Amal al-Sabbaugh and Rana Hussein, who normally work to draw serious attention to honor murders and domestic violence, worked for the first time to deny an incident of such violence. They documented dozens of minor and major factual errors in the story, which was sold as non-fiction, and brought them to the attention of the publisher. In a statement to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, al-Sabbaugh said:

She ruined the reputation of Jordanian women, saying they were imprisoned in their homes and so on. Jordanian women have excellent education levels that are gradually being translated into participation in the workforce. Her tone is that all Jordanian women live under these traditional practices, which is wrong.⁴

Indeed, a year after its release, the book was officially revealed to be a massive hoax and pulled from the shelves, with the number of outright lies in the story becoming almost as shocking as the crime it described. Khouri, it turns out, is an American citizen who moved to Chicago, Illinois at the age of three and never returned to live in Jordan. Married with a husband and two children

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and wanted for fraud, Khouri successfully played on the ignorance and prejudice of her audiences and was rewarded with a bestseller. Rather than prompting people to examine stereotypes or learn more about the women's rights movement in Jordan, the Khouri controversy brought a lot of attention to...*Norma Khouri*. Eight years later, activist Rana Husseini's voice still brims with frustration when this book is mentioned; she describes it as a major step backward for the Jordanian Women's Movement.⁵

The Khouri incident is only one example in a troubling trend. A review of the literature produced by Western society on Families of Arab decent in the last four decades clearly illustrates that a colonial structure has dominated the scholarly and public discourse about women in the Middle East⁶ and has directly affected policy in the form of institutionalized Islamophobia, with laws against Shariah passing in some U.S. states and a ban on the burka, recently enacted in France. Valid discussions of women's rights in the Middle East have been co-opted and trivialized by various individuals, writers, scholars, and the media; the situation of women from Iran to Turkey to Egypt to Saudi Arabia is often painted as a cohesive struggle. The result is that women from countries all over the Middle East must fight to re-claim their movements. That they succeed in this fight is crucially important for the progress of these respective movements. Perhaps one of the greatest hurdles women must overcome in Jordan is the notion that feminism is not native. Those who consider it an American import, challenge it on the basis that it is just one more example of cultural colonialism or "westoxification" of Jordanian cultural heritage.

When did it become acceptable for Western individuals, writers, media outlets, and scholars to speak *instead of* Middle Eastern women, to dictate their thoughts, feelings, and concerns, and to build a discourse that purposely excludes and silences them? What does our willingness to accept this discourse without question say about our status as a post-colonial society? This research was undertaken with these questions in mind, and over the course of the summer, the author used them as the foundation for a qualitative study of the Jordanian Women's movement through the eyes of Jordanian women. This study will continue through the fall in the form of an undergraduate thesis.

The Project

The Women's Movement is a broad topic covering a tremendously rich array of social, political, and cultural specificities. For the purpose of this paper, the author would like to explore the theme of university education as a tool of empowerment and liberation. What is a university education doing to empower women in Jordan? Perhaps more importantly, what is it *not* doing, or where is it failing? The author will work in conjunction with Dr. Rula Quawas, the first professor to teach American feminist literature at the University of Jordan. Dr. Quawas has agreed to allow her fall course, titled *Islamic Feminism* to serve as a base point for the qualitative study to be undertaken. The author will participate in classroom activities and discussions as a form of fieldwork. From the students in the class, the author will form a work group of four to six Jordanian women who agree to meet weekly for one hour throughout October and November. The first two weekly meetings will focus on getting to know the women and allowing them to articulate their stories and their background. The following five weeks will be used to discuss specific topics relating to women in Jordan, ranging from the veil to family structure to dating/marriage, to the Arab Spring. The final week of the workshop will ask participants to

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reflect on their own experiences over the course of the semester; thus, the discussions, interactions, and experiences of the participants will be evaluated from the perspectives of both the author and the subjects.

The goal of this project is to empower Jordanian women to speak about their own situation, shape the discourse about their lives and experiences, and take ownership of their identities. The thesis will provide a forum for their voices to be heard outside of Jordan, while the discussions will provide a snapshot of the present and future of the Jordanian Women's Movement from the perspective of a young, educated generation.

Theory

This project aims to look at the experience of Jordanian women in a creative and intimate way. As such, narrative, through writing and speaking, as well as art, will become potential tools for communication between the researcher and the subjects. The decision to use these techniques came out of a reflection on post-colonial theory and post-modern narrative theory.

Post-Colonial Theory

Edward Said was the first to point out the lingering colonial structure of “the west” and its research on “the rest.” In the 1970's, he observed that much of the scholarship being produced by former colonizers dealt with formerly colonized by depicting their culture as exotic, uncivilized, and “other” compared to an advanced and morally superior West. Although colonialism in a physical sense had ended, scholars overwhelmingly preserved the oppressive colonial world order by perpetuating a prejudiced and oversimplified discourse.⁷

After Edward Said, there was a growing awareness of the need to develop a post-colonial framework for scholarship. This framework gradually emerged from a variety of fields, especially feminism and social justice initiatives.⁸ Post-colonial theory views the relationship between colonizers and colonized as complex and remains aware of the need to continually reexamine this theme in light of changing political, social, and cultural factors and in the context of an increasingly globalized society. The goal is to remain aware of the ongoing impact of colonial history on the colonized country, and ultimately to empower people within the formerly-colonized system to speak out on their own behalf.

In a 2010 literature survey, researchers documented 256 empirical articles written about Arab families in the last four decades in order to examine the attitudes of researchers toward these subjects.⁹ The findings of this survey illustrated that the modern body of scholarship dealing with the Middle East still often fails to avoid the pitfalls that preserve a colonial structure. The habit of overtly describing Middle Eastern cultures as barbaric, backward, and exotic has dwindled, but it is perpetuated by an exclusive focus on the oppression and violence present in the region. For example, the subjects approached most frequently in studies of Arab families were domestic violence and the impact of war on mental health.¹⁰ Completely unexamined, were healthy families that resisted patterns of abuse;¹¹ clearly establishing the nature of scholarship toward the Middle East as problem-based rather than strengths-based.

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Issues were also evident in the way scholars conducted and analyzed their studies. For example, a large number of studies on mental health focused only on polygamous families, automatically assuming a connection between polygamy and mental illness. Domestic abuse studies almost exclusively dealt with female subjects, placing a certain responsibility on women to understand this phenomenon.¹² 84% of the research employed quantitative methodology and analyzed it without employing a clear social theory, making it difficult to interpret the biases the author might have brought to the study.¹³

Oversimplification of contexts and subjects was another common problem. For example, in confronting findings that Arab men and women living in Israel accept and even justify domestic abuse, some studies failed to reflect on the political and social tensions influencing the status of these families within Israeli society.¹⁴ Without clarification of the complex cultural context in which a study takes place, the author automatically asserts a simplistic model for understanding the issue in question, which in turn perpetuates the moral superiority of the author over the subject. The ongoing use of generic or poorly defined terms such as “Arab,” “Islamic” and “the West,” meanwhile, render homogeneous many millions of people belonging to unique, rich, and diverse societies. Studies that do not sufficiently distinguish their subjects based on ethnicity, religion, sex, gender, region, culture, or kinship are inherently biased.

To avoid the issues described above, post-colonial scholarship cultivates an awareness of the tension that exists between the culture of the author or researcher and his or her subject. It neither denies these tensions, nor depicts them as signs of an imminent clash of civilizations, but embraces and appreciates cultural difference. A strength-based approach is often employed, emphasizing the resilience of Arab culture; qualitative studies are especially suited to this task, because they allow researchers to be very specific in describing whom they are studying and in what cultural context the findings apply. Finally, post-colonial studies seek to arrange themselves within a clearly articulated theory or framework in order to facilitate transparency in the research process and minimize biases.¹⁵

This theory applies especially well to a discussion of women in Jordan, because Jordanian women are a marginalized group within a formerly colonized group; they could be described as somewhat *triple incarcerated* in the international community, in their own society, and in the walls they put up to protect themselves. In such a situation, it is crucial for the researcher to be mindful of the dynamics that emerge in exploring sensitive issues across very different cultures.

Post-Modern Narrative Theory

Post-Modern Narrative Theory developed out of the field of philosophy, drawing heavily from the writings of Foucault, and is now commonly applied in the field of social work, especially in work between therapists and clients. The theory harmonizes with the goals of post-colonial scholarship, but it also uniquely fits the subject of gender identity and is well-suited to qualitative analysis. It allows for non-clinical, “intensity samples,” which involve drawing important but specific conclusions from small numbers of subjects.¹⁶ This approach is inherently strength-based, allowing people to use narrative to shape their relationship to the issue in question.

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Just as post-colonial theory keeps in mind the complexity of its subjects and the specific contexts in which they exist, post-modern narrative theory focuses heavily on the idea of “cultural competence.” Cultural competence involves being able to develop knowledge and awareness within a new and different culture, and then develop the necessary skills to interact and function positively within the culture. Another important aspect of cultural competence involves the ability to reflect on one’s own culture in light of factors such as ethnicity, gender, religion, and family. This leads to a conscious awareness of personal biases inevitably brought to the research process by the author in cases involving exploration of themes across drastically different cultures. Finally, cultural competence involves an awareness and acknowledgment of the way dominant groups produce discourse and the way different value systems interact in terms of dominance or privilege.¹⁷

Using narrative is an interesting way to embrace the complexity of modern issues and the way people form their identities in light of these issues. Post-modern narrative theory sheds the idea that one can have an “authentic” and stable identity, instead embracing the fact that individuals may subscribe to a complex array of identities all at once.¹⁸ They may also change these identities depending on time and circumstance, like one might change a coat. Narrative theory takes into account the role of social and political factors in determining and constraining an individual’s choices regarding identity.

Narrative based research truly embraces people’s ability to apply meaning to their own experiences, values, and attitudes. The researcher and the subjects work together to deconstruct narratives of oppression or to break through dominant discourses. It encourages the researcher to approach subjects with a sense of genuine curiosity, a kind of “informed not-knowing.” Or, as Kendell writes, “Curiosity can be seen as the one safeguard against the use of counselor expertise to steer the client in the direction that the counselor deems appropriate.”¹⁹ Thus, in combination with post-colonial theory, post-modern narrative theory will serve the goal of facilitating a constructive discourse between the American author and the Jordanian subjects interacting during the course of this study.

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