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The Dialectics of Fashion

Gender and Politics in Yemen

Sheila Carapico

The situation of Yemeni women is complicated and contradictory. On the one hand, compared with relatively fashion-forward Mediterranean Arabs, or even their affluent sisters in the Gulf, Yemeni women appear to be especially old-fashioned. One rarely sees a Yemeni woman outdoors bare-headed, and in the capital, Sana'a, most women cover their faces in public. Yet outward appearances can be misleading. While it is tempting to assume that women "still" veil because "tradition" tells them to, it is simply wrong to conclude that "traditionally" all women were secluded in their homes, or that how they dress now tells us much about their political and economic status. Clothes do not make the woman: lives are shaped by political currents and economic realities.

The public roles and civil rights of Yemeni women have been conditioned by the vicissitudes of national politics, with important differences between North and South.¹ Even in the more conservative North, by the 1970s permissive legislation afforded rights of pregnancy leave, voting, driving, travel, property ownership, and public office, and several women gained real national prominence as television broadcasters. Yet only the brightest daughters of educated parents could read. Through the 1980s, the overwhelming majority of urban females left school after a couple of years to become homemakers. Their country cousins, busy from dawn to dusk tending dairy cows, drawing water, collecting fuel and fodder, harvesting crops, and processing food, found respite only in the customary forty-day rest after childbirth or in old age.² Women's economic participation in the agrarian economy was

substantial, and intensified due to massive male migration; but their participation in the modern sector was minuscule.³

After its 1962 republican revolution, North Yemen witnessed the popularization of veiling as the emerging bourgeoisie imitated the prim-and-proper “ladies” of the old gentry of the *sayyid* strata, symbolized by a particular style of full formal black veil called the *sharshaf*. Customarily, women dressed for the climate and for work, with wraps serving as pockets, sunscreen, and dust protection. In the steamy Tihama coast along the Red Sea, where Arabia meets Africa, women wore bright skirts and skimpy halter-tops, layered with a sheer, breezy caftan for going out; in the southern uplands, full, filmy shifts with a bright scarf loosely wrapped about the head, perhaps with a silk *abayia* for the city. In the cooler Zaydi highlands women wore wide *sirwal* pants beneath a fitted caftan, with a long scarf tied tightly in such a way that a *lithma* could be lowered beneath the chin or raised over the nose and mouth, all covered by the item Americans call an India-print bedspread. (Shafa’i males typically wear a *futah* or sarong, whereas Zaydis prefer a white *thawb*, both with a sports jacket; most men cover their heads and, like the movie images of American cowboys, sometimes their faces.) The *sharshaf*, which rather resembles a nun’s habit, traditionally signified elite women dressed up for afternoon tea. As society changed, however, many women thought in terms of the liberty to *sharshaf*, because wearing the veil symbolized relief from hard labor, dignity in the marketplace, freedom to study, and equality with the old elite. As they moved to the cities, or as their own communities urbanized, as they were exposed to an opulent Saudi style of hypermodesty, and as they entered school, the new generation of Northern girls adopted the *sharshaf*, even in Tihami cities where the heat makes them insufferable. Folk dresses became associated with old age and ignorance.

In South Yemen, by contrast, or at least in the formerly British colonial port city of Aden, where revolutionaries established the Arab world’s only Marxist regime (the People’s Democratic Republic or PDRY), women enjoyed rights unrivaled in the region. Females represented roughly a third of all Adeni students, teachers, medical personnel, civil servants, and factory workers and a visible minority among lawyers, judges, directors, administrators, middle-level party cadre, and parliamentarians. Courts granted mothers custody of children and the marital home in event of divorce.⁴ As in the Northern hinterland, however, provincial dress and behavior varied considerably by region: for instance, the tribeswomen of the Mahra mountains were far more assertive and active than the demure housebound *sayyidat* of Hadrami towns.

Under the unity arrangements in effect between 1990 and 1994, Southern women, especially Adenis who moved to Sana'a, felt their freedoms slipping away. For instance, some husbands obtained "quickie" divorces or second-marriage licenses. Northern women, by contrast, experienced newfound political power. Ten female PDRY parliamentary delegates continued to serve in the first unity parliament. Over protests from some conservative jurists, a woman was appointed, albeit temporarily, to the fifteen-member Supreme Court. Others served in Aden courts. One woman was named to the seventeen-person Supreme Elections Committee. Fifty women, mostly independent urban intellectuals, ran amidst over 3,000 males in the 1993 parliamentary elections. Only two won seats in 1993, both in Southern constituencies, and some women candidates, like some male counterparts, experienced personal harassment during the campaign. Nonetheless widespread acceptance of universal adult suffrage was demonstrated by the fact that the neo-conservative *Islah* party, standard-bearer for the religious right, conducted a special female voter-registration drive. Other women were named deputy minister of information, dean of education, and directors of various agencies. A survey found about two thousand professionally qualified women in education, health, communications, law, business, and other fields.

Unity brought some compromises in urban fashion. Adenis who came to Sana'a, whether in 1986 or 1990, almost inevitably donned a scarf and either an abayia or a European raincoat. It became fashionable for Sana'ani students to wear what they call hijab, a headscarf wrapped or tied under the chin with a modern long black silk coatdress over jeans, Paris fashions, or knock-offs. The appearance in cities of Egyptian-style "coiffure" shops reflected a trend toward hairstyling instead of wearing bright scarves for women's parties or evenings at home. The increasing politicization of sartorial issues was amplified by the stridence of emphatically sharshafed activists within the neo-Islamist movement, some of them effective public orators from beneath a full black face-veil. They contend that Muslim women and girls have rights to separate education, to financial support and legal mediation from male relatives, and to insert stipulations in the marriage contract.

Beneath their shabby polyester sharshafs, ordinary women worried about economics, not fashion. In the deep recession precipitated by the return of Yemeni migrants from Saudi Arabia and the loss of the bulk of its foreign aid due to the Gulf War, exacerbated by low oil prices and bad public management, the growing urban underclass and the increasingly impoverished rural majority's standards of living have declined. Among the burgeoning urban population, most women were uprooted from productive roles in their

natal communities to nuclear households entirely dependent on spousal earning capacity and spending decisions. Alienated from both their families and the means of production, they are typically at the mercy of a matched-mate who is himself powerless except within the domestic domain. Their sisters and cousins who remain in farming villages bear the increased burden of maintaining cottage gardens, domestic livestock, and aging parents, all the more so if they send their daughters to school.

The majority of women neither vote nor want to talk politics, which they regard with justifiable skepticism as a violent male domain. Their conversation dwells on marriage, childbirth, and, increasingly, the loss of earnings, joblessness, high inflation, overburdened underfinanced social services, and diminishing returns from traditional agriculture and crafts. By the time parliamentary elections were held in April 1993, the most pressing issue among Southerners was the price of milk, which had quadrupled since unity. A year later, Sana'ani families who had always purchased bulk quantities of grain wholesale were reduced to purchasing flour by the kilo from the corner retailer. Meat, once a luncheon staple, was now reserved for special holidays.⁵

By 1994, the fiscal crisis of the state only exacerbated political competition between the military faction that had governed the former North Yemen and the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) that had ruled the PDRY. Eventually, the bipolar partisan competition erupted into a civil war wherein the former Northern army defeated what remained of PDRY forces. Socialist leaders went into exile. Although civilian casualties were relatively light, thousands of families were displaced to temporary shelters, and hundreds of thousands were terrorized by the sounds and sights of bombs, missiles, and gunfire, and by the suspension of electricity, water, and normal life. Women wept, and nowhere more bitterly than in Aden, site of so many episodes of urban warfare in the past generation.

The defeat of the separatist leadership of the Yemeni Socialist Party may have delighted freemarketeers, but it was bad news for advocates of female rights in Yemen, for a rightist coalition comprised of the military and neo-conservatives triumphed. In the aftermath of the war progressive male journalists, professors, and party leaders were mugged or abducted by plainclothes security officers; newspapers were shut down or given new editors; socialist establishments, "coiffures," and even some southern saints' tombs were vandalized; and the constitution was amended to retract many of the rights and liberties granted after unification. One amendment specified that "women are the sisters of men," and new personal status and criminal statutes reduced women to legal wards of male kin. Although women were still

guaranteed electoral suffrage and a token judicial and ministerial role, wives required their husbands' permission to work, to travel abroad, or to divorce, and in court a woman's testimony counted only half as much as a man's.

The Islamist dimension of these developments is distinctively modern and untraditional. Neofundamentalist ideologues identify themselves as Wahhabi or *salafi* (puritan), and they explicitly eschew popular Yemeni practices of Zaydi Islam in the northern highlands and the majority Shafa'i Sunni sect in the rest of the country. This is why salafis attacked Shafa'i mosques and shrines after the civil war and Wahhabis fought for control of Zaydi parochial schools. The neo-Islamists within and beyond Islah condemn many customs including sayyid privileges, traditional wedding celebrations, popular forms of feminine adornment, and the curricula of prerevolutionary Qur'anic institutes. Their campaigns for feminine seclusion are one aspect of a broader, radical agenda that draws more inspiration from the schools of Islamic learning established in Pakistan to support the Afghan jihad than from Yemeni religious scholarship, practice, or belief. Within Yemen, this extremist group is known as "Afghan Arabs." One example of their absurd pronouncements (laughable to most Yemenis) is that it is *haram* (sinful) for females to milk cows because of the purportedly vulgar hand movement.

The plight of women and their families in the late 1990s was not unlike that of popular classes in many Latin American countries in a period of military-market fascism in the '70s and early '80s; there extrajudicial violence against men and threat of sexual censure against women were part of an apparatus of control in a system where officers helped themselves to both public and private sectors amidst inflation and economic reform imposed by foreign creditors. Privatization of the assets of a socialist state and of social services, including hospitals, utilities, and higher education, enriches the private holdings of a military class while impoverishing the masses drawn to the city by the false lure of civil service sinecures. Currency devaluation, investor incentives, and open markets satisfy foreign creditors that "reforms" are underway, and declining standards of living for the majority of the population are regarded as the necessary medicine. In Yemen, as elsewhere in the Arab world, the encouragement of neo-Islamic groups was one element of a decades long struggle by military leaders against all forms of socialism, communism, and left liberalism. The seemingly final repudiation of socialism in Yemen has been accompanied by a wave of radical neofundamentalism, albeit less violent than in Algeria, Afghanistan, the Occupied Territories, or Egypt. In the peninsula generally, neofundamentalist Islam — whether Wahhabi, Shi'a, salafi, or another version — is now the main challenge to

authoritarian states. Yemen is exceptional in that social conditions are much worse than elsewhere in the Arabian peninsula.

Nonviolent Islamist messages have considerable appeal among women. A physician from Aden recalled having partied in public on New Year's eve of 1986, which turned out to be the eve of a vicious bloodletting among the YSP elite. Concluding that "our lord was displeased," she said, university women began wearing hijab. As already noted, the Yemeni conservative party, Islah, conducted female voter registration and participation drives in both the 1993 and 1997 parliamentary elections. In the current environment of economic austerity, newly founded Islamic charities have offered a social safety net specifically designed to catch girls and young brides. To the typical Yemeni woman voter, who is a devoted mother, semiliterate, informally employed, overworked, highly vulnerable, and politically alienated, the Qur'an readings and paternalistic protections offered by some of the father figures in Islah (as distinct from the youthful militant "Afghan Arabs") have a certain appeal. Many seek solace and an "escape from freedom" in prayer, piety, and obedience. Moreover, the harassment of young men who hang out on the streets, typically unemployed migrant-returnees, who are more often rude than religious, has gotten so troublesome that many African and Western women wear the hijab, too.

Most women are more vulnerable than they have ever been. Whereas in the past bride-price provided some insurance of a wife's longterm material and physical wellbeing, nowadays more parents are tempted to "sell" their daughters to old men or military officers. Young brides who fall in love with their grooms may quickly squander their wedding gifts on day-to-day marital household expenses.⁶ Health care personnel observe the greater frequency of still undocumented cases of spousal abuse among women too far from their parents to run home, although doctors realize that only the most egregious gunshot and knife wounds reach the hospital. Women who have never had their eyesight checked or their tooth-cavities filled are unlikely to practice gynecological birth control, but hospitalization for emergencies and widespread immunization against early childhood diseases have boosted live births while reducing infant mortality. The result by 1996 was the world's highest rate of natural population growth, 3.7 percent. Whereas when their mothers married they typically moved from one extended family to another nearby to raise five or six children among twenty cousins, sharing farm and nursery duties with mothers- and sisters-in-law, the typical woman of this generation is blessed with eight or nine children by her thirtieth birthday and struggles to raise them alone on whatever money her husband brings home.

Whereas her mother and grandmother were productive in agriculture, husbandry, and crafts, the modern Yemeni woman is a housewife, specialized in reproduction and struggling against rapid inflation in the costs of utilities, grain, and rent that leave precious little for meat, transport, medical care, or vocational training.

The combined pressures of antisocialist policies specifically including repudiation of women's rights, of economic austerity and recession, and of violence against critics of the regime certainly augur ill for women generally. And yet Yemeni women do indeed enjoy political rights and ordinary personal liberties denied to their more affluent sisters in the Gulf, none of whom are allowed to vote, and many of whom face much stricter legal restrictions on their public comportment or employment. The female franchise was reaffirmed in Yemen's 1997 parliamentary elections, when women accounted for a quarter of the electorate. Twenty-three women ran for election, but more of them were party candidates. Whereas in 1993 only two parties, the Socialists and the Ba'ath, ran women candidates, now seven out of the eight parties — the exception being the Islah — ran women for parliament. Again two women entered parliament, again both from the South, but this time backed by Sana'a. While about a dozen female judges remained on the bench in southern courts, several female law graduates became practicing attorneys. Others were promoted to the rank (although not the position) of minister. A move toward gender-segregated colleges notwithstanding, women compete with men in most faculties.

For the several dozen women prominent in public life, then, success depends more on one's relationship to the national leadership than on gender as such. Women in powerful families enjoy the privileges, if not the direct political prowess, of the ruling class. For others politically active "in their own right," the possibilities are not necessarily less than civilian male counterparts of comparable family, education, wealth, and age. The current litmus test of "support for unity" is the same for both genders. Conversely, however, some are doubly victimized, by gender and by politics. Southern women suffer special indignities from northern soldiers whose indoctrination includes anticommunist propaganda about sexual promiscuity under the PDRY.

Western and northern Arab feminist advocacy through assistance programs for women operates obliquely in this environment. Mother and child health programs, for instance, offer essential medical services on a "cost-recovery" basis that may make them more expensive than comparable programs offered through Yemeni religious charities. Funds and training for microenterprises encourage marginally remunerative housewifery skills like

needlecraft and food production, again no different from the neo-Islamist programs for girls, and short of traditional productive contributions. The availability of international funds for projects involving women in the electoral process is an inducement for Yemenis to found women's associations and for the government to guarantee a female voice inside parliament, but the lion's share of foreign money for these initiatives goes to a handful of English-speaking politicians. Western support for privatization, marketization, and other "post-socialist" reforms unwittingly fortifies those who associate gender equity with communism. American concern for the stability of the misogynist Saudi monarchy (not to mention their joint backing for the Afghan jihad) is at odds with statements and efforts on behalf of electoral participation by Yemeni women, for Riyadh contends that voting generally, female suffrage, is anti-Islamic, and spends good money broadcasting this message. Finally, the European, North American, or Mediterranean Arab visitors who address women's liberation in Yemen from a fashion perspective, as if there were a "right" to Western-style clothes, are puzzled by local women's responses. More than any of these things, Yemeni women are concerned about welfare and violence.

Some rather dire circumstances notwithstanding, South Arabian womanhood is not entirely helpless. Folk historiography reveres Queen Bilqis of Sheba (Saba') and the medieval Queen Arwa as its best-loved, wisest leaders. The courts do offer some legal protections under contract and property law.⁷ The PDRY legacy cannot be wholly obliterated. The unified republic is committed to feminine electoral rights. Yemeni males are far more victim to physical violence and political repression than females, and their political and civil rights are also insecure. Given a certain brutality in the public political sphere and the economy, "withdrawal" — veiling, political alienation, dropping out of school, consenting to polygamous marriage, socializing only with women — may represent deliberate choices. Yet more and more females, especially but not exclusively those from families with wealth, power, and prestige, are finishing secondary school, graduating from the universities, pursuing careers, joining parties and civic associations, and entering the public sphere. Equally important the men who head all three main political tendencies — the Socialists, the Islamists, and the governing party — recognize the political advantages of empowering women politically: to distinguish Yemen as more progressive and republican than the neighboring monarchies, and to cultivate a voting constituency among the unarmed half of the population. Given its political and economic difficulties, Yemen would do well to do well by its women.