

Complicities of Western Feminism

*A Case Study of – "Why Do They Hate
Us? The real war on women is in the
Middle East"*

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Character count: 107 841
Fall Semester 2015
Project Module: Cultural Encounters
Language: English

Abstract

هذا المشروع يحتوي دراسة دقيقة للمقالة منى الطحاوي بعنوان "لماذا يكرهوننا؟ الحرب الحقيقية على المرأة في الشرق الأوسط" من وجهة نظر نسوية ما بعد الاستعمار. سيقوم المشروع بمناقشة حرية المرأة وحقوقها، مع التركيز على مصر، والتي سيتم يتضح من خلال الممارسات الثقافية وهي تشويه الأعضاء التناسلية للإناث. سنقوم من خلال مفهوم شاندرا موهانتى 'تقاطع' ومفهوم إدوارد سعيد 'الاستشراق'، توضيح الحاجة إلى فهم متباينة الثقافات المختلفة، وكذلك الاستعلام بالمفاهيم الغربية مثل "الحرية" و "حقوق الإنسان".

Dette projekt er en kritisk eksamination af Mona Eltahawy's artikel "Why Do They Hate Us? The real war on women is in the Middle East" fra et postkolonialt feministisk perspektiv. Projektet vil diskutere kvinders frihed og rettigheder med fokus på Egypten, som vil blive eksemplificeret igennem den kulturelle praksis: kvindelig kønsomskæring. Vi vil igennem Chandra Mohanty's koncept: intersektionalitet og Edward Said's reartikulering af Orientalisme belyse nødvendigheden for en divergerende forståelse af forskellige kulturer, samt problematisere de Vestlige forståelser af koncepter såsom 'frihed' og 'rettigheder'.

Key words: Mona Eltahawy, MENA region, The Egyptian Revolution, Orientalism, Postcolonialism, Postcolonial Feminism, Western Feminism, Intersectionality, Female Genital Cutting, Human Rights

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Introduction

The rise of demonstrations throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which has later been termed the Arab Spring, had its point of departure in Tunisia late 2010. The Arab spring, took on a domino effect, and reached Egypt, no more than a month later. In the form of demonstrations, soon to be revolution, were brought forth by concepts of hope, reforms and calls for freedom. These calls were rooted in many of the MENA region's youth, leading to many who sacrificed their own life, for a better future. The passionate-driven sacrifices gave rise to much Western media attention that followed the progressions of political and social developments towards democracy closely. Was the MENA region finally breaking its long-time shell of oppression and lack of freedom?

A year after the outset of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, few goals of the revolution had been accomplished. In fact, nothing changed and in some instances things worsened, in terms of civilians' life that were lost in clashes with the military run state. Egyptian, journalist and feminist Mona Eltahawy, was present on the street of Mohammad Mahmoud in Cairo, where clashes between the Egyptian police and the revolutionaries had violently been taking place. Sexual harassments, gunshots and arrests stroke fear into the revolutionaries, though they continued fighting. Eltahawy being one of them was severely beaten, sexually harassed and arrested by the Egyptian police, which resulted in having both arms broken. Six months after the arrest, Eltahawy published her widely read and provocative article, "Why Do They Hate Us? The real war on women is in the Middle East" in the American news magazine *Foreign Policy*. Could this really be? Do Arab men really hate women? Or does such 'hatred' spring from dominating patriarchal societal structures within the MENA region? Moreover, what role does the 'West' and all its ideals of democracy, freedom and individuality play in places such as Egypt? We wondered.

We took our point of departure, in unlayering our curiosity through a postcolonial feminist framework through which we set out to investigate and critically reflect on how Eltahawy constructs the 'Arab world' and the 'Arab woman' by using Edward Said's re-articulation of Orientalism and Chandra Mohanty's concept of intersectionality. Our context being the Egyptian revolution which was, as above

stated, driven by calls for ‘freedom’ and ‘rights’, left us questioning what these concepts entail, and how they came to be interpreted as an integral aspect of the revolution and of the sought for ‘new’ Egyptian society. Such roots have proven to be driven by a historically established discourse of power, between the ‘West’ and its former colonies. Entailing that anything and everything that deals with the ‘West’ and the ‘East’, ranging from politics to social developments and cultural customs must be investigated through the historicism that gave rise to their specific positions. Doing so, one is able to question the apparent ‘givenness’ of our (Western) contemporary social, cultural and political understanding. As such this means that Eltahawy’s article must be placed in such contextual understanding, essentially entailing that the only proper way of investigating the article is through a postcolonial framework. As we mentioned above, given that Eltahawy focuses on gender we also incorporate a feminist perspective. This leads to our problem statement being:

How does Mona Eltahawy construct the ‘Arab World’ and the ‘Arab woman’ in her article “Why Do They Hate Us? The real war on women is in the Middle East”, and what are the implications of said constructions seen from a postcolonial feminist perspective?

To briefly explain, the problem that we then wish to address within this project, is first of all how the ‘Arab world’ and the ‘Arab woman’ are constructed in Mona Eltahawy’s article in *Foreign Policy*. Secondly, we will try to illuminate the various problems these constructions have for an understanding of the Middle Eastern space, and equally problematize their portrayal of the MENA region as a homogenous society. Through a deconstruction of Eltahawy’s article we will then examine and assess how the concepts of universal values and rights come into play, specifically in regards of Female Genital Cutting (FGC).

Method

In relation to our methods, we found inspiration from both Teun Van Dijk's version of critical discourse analysis (CDA) from 1993, and Roxanne L. Euben's comparative and hermeneutic method (CHM) to political theory and Islamic fundamentalism, in the book "*Enemy in the Mirror*" (1999). In the first subchapter, an explanation of how CDA plays a part in the methodological working of this project, will be presented. A more exemplified account of Euben's work and how a comparative approach is helpful will be highlighted, following the first subchapter. Finally, we give a critical reflection on the chosen theories, methods, case study, empirical data and terminology.

To start of, we found that both CDA and CHM could be useful, given that our project is firstly, based on a critical approach to the construction of the MENA region and of the 'Arab woman', and secondly, is driven by a fundamental yearn to understand the subtle differences, conceptions and positions that are outside the framework of Eltahawy's article. Even though a comparative method widens the analysis, because it not only takes difference into account, but accepts difference as a constitutional factor, it is still crucial to uptake a critical approach towards the phenomena that we are investigating. This means that in relation to investigating the discursive construction of the MENA region and of the 'Arab woman', we need to pay attention to how power and dominance are at play, and how these aspects are embedded in socio-political issues and questions of inequality. It is specifically therefore we incorporate CDA, seeing as this method tries to uncover the relationship between language and power, and how this relationship discursively constructs knowledge, through meaning making processes, such as, text and talk (Van Dijk 1993).

Even though we take a highly critical standpoint towards how Eltahawy's article discursively constructs the concept of the 'Arab world' and the 'Arab woman', it would be wrong of us to neglect that we do believe she has a valid point in her criticism. However, we do simultaneously read her statements as problematic, because they fail to do justice to the heterogeneity of such a vast place like the MENA region. Thus, a comparative hermeneutic approach allows us to try to depict the very different standpoints that constitute the MENA region and the position of women brought forth by the scientific articles that we incorporate in our analysis. As Euben writes "it is through comparisons that we are led to question the "naturalness" of our own perspective. Such questioning both presupposes and makes possible a critical distance toward everyday practices, a distance crucial to self-knowledge, learning about others, and making sense of the world in general" (Euben 1999:11). Translating this to our project, we therefore see it as an indispensable facet to try to understand the phenomena

we are investigating both from Eltahawy's perspective, but also from the people who critique her, from their own position. That means, to take their word as an actual reflection of reality, because this entails that we can ask critical questions about the apparent casualness of our own (Western) perspective.

CDA approach

The question at hand might be why we specifically chose CDA, over other methods of discourse analysis. To that, it seems appropriate to answer that CDA, because it takes a critical and a political standpoint to the issues it investigates, focusing the analysis on modes of inequality, domination and power (Van Dijk 1993:250), it seemed as the right form of discourse analysis to implement within our project. To elaborate further, we will use CDA as an analytical lens that can shed light on the discursive constructions of the 'Arab world' and the 'Arab woman', in Eltahawy's article, not only to understand how these are constructed through meaning making processes, but also to depict how they interplay with other forms of discourse that through interaction enact and maintain certain forms of knowledge as hegemonic entities (Van Dijk 1993:255).

As an important facet of this, Van Dijk mentions that it is power that constitutes domination, because power is synonymous with *control*. More specifically, control over social resources, modes of communication and further, having access to produce knowledge and influence public opinion. Thus because power gives access to these aspects, it therefore also entails having the ability to dictate social developments, and restrict the access to social resources for specific groups – hence creating domination (Van Dijk 1993: 254). However, even though that Van Dijk is right in assuming that power equals control in a physical sense, we would like to go beyond this. In this sense we understand power, not as a physical entity, but more so in a Foucauldian¹ sense. In brief, this means that we understand power not as something that people directly have, unlike Van Dijk's approach, but something that differentiates between accepted and unaccepted developments, narratives, norms and behaviours. In a sense it means understanding power, as a regulatory force that privileges specific knowledges and excludes others. This, in our view, is what gives specific subjects access to control societal developments. Alongside questioning control, CDA also questions the social positions that subjects uphold. It does this, because for the most part, these factors are intertwined, since

¹ A complete explanation of Foucault's academic career is beyond the scope of this project. His central idea of power, emanates not from one specific work, but rather is the point of the departure for Foucault's complete theoretical outlook. If one is interested in reading more about this, one can refer to: History of sexuality (1976), Discipline and Punishment (1975), The birth of the clinic (1963) and The order of things (1966).

higher social positions in most cases enables greater access to control. In this way, CDA needs to take into account *who* is playing a part in constructing discursive narratives that produce inequality, and how their, as an example, race, class, gender, education or national identity helps elucidate and cement those narratives within the social consciousness of society (Van Dijk 1993:254). Said differently, CDA is embedded in the study of social groups, their relationship to each other and the question of *privilege* which in turn means that its focus lies in the power-relations between the oppressed and the oppressor, and always framing the mode of analysis as top down domination, instead of bottom up resistance (Van Dijk: 1993:252). In essence it does this, because it wants to show how the people in power (the oppressors) produce, maintain and legitimate systems of inequality that are enacted through verbal, written, and bodily forms of communication that appropriate dominated groups, and are further cemented as rightful representations of them, within the social cognition of society (Van Dijk 1993:251)

The goal of incorporating aspects of CDA within our project, is therefore to question and critically account for, how Eltahawy's article plays a part in constructing specific understandings of the MENA region and of Arab women. In deconstructing her article, we hope to show how these representations are problematic due to their apparent naturalness, (seen from a Western perspective) that feed a global system of inequality, between the West and the MENA region. In our deconstructing approach, we will pay attention to linguistic styles of representation, and the political context it was written under. In relation to "Why Do They Hate Us?", this means that its gendered frame, becomes important to take into account. Understanding that this critique actually does not talk about men hating women, but about the anti-democratic developments of the middle east that is just covered through a gendered perspective, is important for the critique that we want to bring forth. However, as we already mentioned above, we do not want to de-emphasise the critique that Eltahawy makes, what we seek to do, is to nuance the debate. Lastly it needs to be pointed out that we do not think that Eltahawy personally buys into the dichotomy between understanding the West as implicit modern versus the non-West as implicit backwards. But we do however see her writings as problematic, in the sense that they feed an already cemented understanding of the Middle East as an anti-modern, and therefore as an anti-progress region.

Euben's comparative approach

In *Enemy in the Mirror* (1999) Roxanna Euben takes a somewhat different approach to understanding Islamic fundamentalism. Rather than engaging in the common condemnation of Islamic fundamentalism, because of its incompatibility with Western democracies, Euben seeks to account for what constitutes Islamic fundamentalism. In this way, she tries to uncover which political, social and cultural factors are in interplay in giving rise to the movement. In Euben's words she understands Islamic fundamentalism as such: "I argue that Qutb's political thought is an indictment not just of Western imperialism and colonialism, the corruption of Middle Eastern regimes, Arab secularist power, or modernity per se, but also of modern forms of sovereignty and the Western rationalist epistemology that justifies them" (Euben 1999:8). In this way, Euben actually seeks to understand Islamic fundamentalism on its own terms, because she sees it as important to *understand* the phenomena prior to *criticising* it. Euben's comparative approach can thus be exemplified as such: "Generally speaking, the project of comparative political theory introduces non-Western perspectives into familiar debates about the problems of living together, thus ensuring that 'political theory' is about human and not merely Western dilemmas" (Euben 1999:10).

It seems rather so, that at the heart of Euben's methodological considerations, lies a comparative approach that seeks, not only to expand knowledge, but also to generate critical reflections upon one's own position and culture. By understanding the variety of perspectives of phenomena and different positions that exist cross-culturally – unity can be achieved. In other words, it is only through a multimodal understanding of human behaviour, culture, society, religion etc. that we can seek to answer specific questions about ourselves and each other. And by doing this in a manifold way, we arrive at an understanding of human behaviour, political, social and cultural developments as perspectives, rather than assuming essentialist or even universal ways of life, as the correct ones. Furthermore, Euben also highlights that in relation to modernity, using CHM entails that we can move beyond the binary understanding of West as modern versus non-West as non-modern (Euben 1999:11). This means that the variety of perspectives that might critique modernity and Western philosophical traditions that come from historically colonised spaces should not be understood as anti-modern, but rather as attempts to define or even redefine what it means to live in the 'modern' world. Legitimizing the connection between the multiple Western and non-Western perspectives that define the world, inherently means that we allow voices from non-Western places, as genuine, and more importantly, normal and natural representations of different ways of life. By allowing their voices, we can reconstitute moral, ethical and

philosophical questions about how we, the Western world, define the world (Euben 1999:11-12).

Now, even though that allowing a variety of perspectives as completely legitimate ways of life seems as a rather appropriate outlook on the world, it can to some extent still be problematic. One of the issues being that one's comparative approach might be criticised for being too relativistic, and in so being legitimates practices that have staggering consequences for people around the world. However, these accusations are, in our opinion, somewhat misplaced, because the goal of working comparatively is not to ensure that religious, scientific, cultural, social, and political fundamentalism are accepted developments. Rather, understanding them from their point of departure, enables not only a stronger critique, but also diminishes presupposed virtues about their configuration and point of departure. As an example of this, we can refer to the paragraph in Eltahawy's article where she highlights the problems of FGC (Female Genital Cutting). So forth, working comparatively does not mean that we accept FGC as a legitimate cultural custom. Surely FGC should by all means be condemned, but understanding why FGC is practiced in the first place is a much more productive way of engaging in the investigation of cross-cultural difference, rather than assuming specificities about the custom. Moreover, understanding FGC within its own contextuality further entails that we can ask critical questions about our own (read: Western) presuppositions, because we are made aware that the Western way of constructing the world, is nothing more than an aspect among many. In Euben's words this translates as such: "Yet it is not my contention that, for example, Qutb provides a novel or viable way of configuring modern sovereignty or political action, or resources for a re-constitution of moral and existential meaning compatible with democratic principles and practices. I do argue that in introducing Qutb's non-Western perspective into our study of modernity, we may see previously unimagined connections to the Western canon of political theory, and, moreover, it may be that Qutb's answers actually transform the nature and focus of the questions themselves." (Euben 1999:12).

Our intent of working comparatively builds upon questioning the apparent rightness of doing something in particular and believing this as the truest way of life. Our comparative approach opens up our analysis because it includes a multitude of different standpoints that are not just the given Western reading of things or the critique of it, but both. And as such, we get to question the immediate, 'natural' state of affairs, showing that Western thought is to a great extent insufficient in understanding the variety of human behaviour. So forth, combining a comparative and a critical discourse approach means that we nuance the debate, ensuring that we do not fall prey to un-nuanced critique points of either side, but highlight the very

complexity of human behaviour. And in so doing, reflect upon the differences between Western-feminism and postcolonial feminism.

Selection of data

Our empirical data consists of Eltahawy's article "Why Do They Hate Us? The real war on women is in the Middle East". Our theoretical data on the other hand consist of an overarching postcolonial framework set forth by Edward Said and his re-conceptualisation of Orientalism. We thereby use Chandra Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak and Leila Ahmed to elucidate the divergent postcolonial feminist framework, which we use to critique and problematize the Western discourse Eltahawy bestows in her article. Much material about the 'Orient' has been written by Western scholars and the Orient has in that sense always been defined by the West, which is why we find it crucially important to incorporate postcolonial theory to prevent falling into a 'Western' discourse, since we all come from Western backgrounds and therefore possess Western ideals and preconceived ideals. The use of triangulation of data has therefore been important to us because we have chosen not to conduct our own data; conducting interviews was never the intention of this project. Instead we have chosen to focus on Eltahawy's article as our case to shed light on the monolithic images she puts forward of the MENA region within the article, thus reproducing Orientalism. Our methodological framework has set the foundation for a deconstruction of Eltahawy's article, which has provided us with a deeper understanding of how Eltahawy argues and which discourse she speaks from.

Our selection of data within the Context chapter consists mainly of personal memoirs from the Egyptian revolution in 2011. We use Wael Ghonim's testimony of the revolution as our main source to briefly describe the social media mobilisation of the revolution and its main goals. Furthermore, we decided to use a variety of Egyptian civil voices, which were present during the revolution, rather than focusing on scientific journals. This enhanced our ability to elucidate the consequences of the revolution, with a main focus on women's positions within the Tahrir square, instead of only focusing on facts of the event.

Critical methodological and theoretical reflections

The CDA method which we use to deconstruct Mona Eltahawy's article has been critiqued for being a 'circular' theory, because the relation between reader and discourse is too easily interpretive, due to ideological differences. CDA does acknowledge this concern, and thus showcases the discourse not only being analysed in a word-to-word practice, but entailing the reaction of how the discourse is perceived, accepted, acted upon, or ignored within societies,

as is seen with Eltahawy's article. What seems to be the issue, thus, is that even though the discourse embedded in the text is easily conveyed to the reader due to its choice of words, lexical relation between them, and incorporation of normative knowledge, the analyst still needs to dissect the discourse with extreme caution, because they can still ideologically influence the receiver of the deconstructed article. Thus entailing that, because CDA builds upon *interpretation*, however correctly or incorrectly it may reflect reality, it cannot escape the fact that it *is* an interpretive act (Breeze 2011:508-512). In relation to our project, we are then aware that our analysis is inescapably built around interpretation, and as such could have been structured differently if other people had written it, which means that our view is nothing more than a perspective upon a field of knowledge.

Terminology

MENA region

Our choice to refer to the region Eltahawy speaks of in her article, as *the MENA region* (Middle-East and North Africa) as opposed to the 'Arab world', is based on our aim not to centralize an entire area, in the sense that this would create a homogeneous understanding of it – when talking about the MENA region, an understanding of a geographical area is appropriate. While we examine and critique Eltahawy's tendency to fall into generalisations based on a black-and-white as well as Westernised views and values, it is especially important for us to take care to not reproduce similar problems by adopting a similar vocabulary or semantics.

FGC

Our choice of using Female Genital Cutting (FGC) instead of Female Genital Mutilation or Female Genital Circumcision throughout our project, is due to that by deploying the word 'cutting' it retrains neutrality without losing its severe tone, whereas the term FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) as used by Eltahawy in her article, sets a certain biased condemnation when describing the custom. It can be argued that we could have used the same terminology as Eltahawy, but seeing as we find that specific wording problematic in relation to our political stance in relation to the cultural custom, we decided to deploy a more neutral wording. However, we do acknowledge the problematic consequences this cultural custom has for the girls and women's health, both sexual and psychological.

Theory

Within this chapter we will elaborate on Edward Said's concept of Orientalism (1979) and exemplify how it interplays in postcolonial feminism. Seeing as Orientalism has influenced a great amount of scholars that focus their academic work on the power relation between the West and non-West, it seemed, to us, to be a key theoretical element to implement. Furthermore, we will clarify what postcolonial feminism entails, and what it tries to achieve, or rather, what its epistemological goal is.

Orientalism

Orientalism, according to Said, is based on the Orient and the Oriental subject being everything that Europe and the European is not. The distinction and essential difference between the East and West is emphasized. Orientalism, initiated by the West, paved the way for Europe's identity to be established as the opposite of the Orient, framing and constructing the Orient to be Europe's "cultural contestant, its deepest most recurring image of the other" (Said 1979:1). The Europe of the post-enlightenment era and colonial times created this dichotomy between itself and the other, which was done in several ways, which we will be explained later in more detail. We will also explain why it has survived throughout times, and what the consequences of the aforementioned distinction are.

Said states that Orientalism presents the cultural and ideological aspect of the "European invention" (Ibid) of the Orient. This is executed through academic institutions, publishing Orientalist academic papers and books, as well as imagery that present the Orient from the West's perspective. He states that Orientalism is a "style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological" (Said 1979:2) differentiation between the European and the Orient, and goes on to establish the distinction between what he refers to as the Occident and the Orient. This distinction or differentiation and everything it entails is the point of departure for several theorists and writers, describing the binary positions, and elaborating on behalf of the Orient. With this distinction one can recognize how Orientalism lives on. It is through the different scholars, thinkers and writers who have confirmed the distinction between Occident/Orient, and accepted it as a "mode of discourse" (Said 1979:2) that

the Orientalist thought is produced and reinforced, through institutionalised fields of study that are classified as Oriental studies. This fixes both the position of the West and of the Orient as unalterable entities of the Oriental discourse; namely Orientalism (Said 1979:4). Finally, Said describes the institutionalisation of the Orient and explains how it has become the West's way of dealing with 'the Orient'. This is done by "making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it..." (Said 1979:3), as well as shaping it, constructing it, and making decisions about what the Orient's characteristics are without actually involving the Orient itself. It is the encounters between the other and the Occident that reproduce Orientalism, and therefore, exclude the Orient in defining itself. Thus the geographical location of the Orient will always be defined by the discourse of Orientalism enabling the knowledge of the West, concerning the Orient, as the hegemonic form of knowledge.

According to Said, one cannot speak of Orientalism without bringing in the concepts of discourse and power, inspired by Foucault. He mentions that it is through the understanding of Orientalism as a discourse that one can understand the magnitude and the power it upholds, thus being able to shape and describe the other, essentially constructing it (Said 1979). This refers back to what we mentioned earlier; that Orientalism as a form of power, has been institutionalised, and therefore shapes how we talk, deal and describe 'the other'.

However, why has Orientalism had such a prominent impact on how the Occident deals with the other? Said mentions the example of an Occident encounter with the other, in an Egyptian context, where the Occident "spoke of her, she never represented her emotions..." (Said 1979:6). Said argues that in this encounter, as the other never represents herself, it is the Occident who has the space to describe her as he sees her. This, Said says, is merely an example of the bigger picture and the overall framework that dictate encounters like this, the "relative strength between East and West" (Ibid). He refers to Antonio Gramsci's "hegemony", the concept that explains how some cultural and ideological stances become more dominant than others. In relation to Said, these stances would be reflected as Europe's long history of self-identifying as superior, and therefore construing the opposite 'other' as its inferior reflector. This is in correlation with what Denys Hay wrote. According to him, Europe's identity is based on its oppositional position to the other, and this

consequently results in Orientalism being a hegemonic discourse, produced and managed by a European point of view. Said explains why Europe has such a position of being able to produce and manage Orientalism, this being due to Europe's "positional superiority" (Said 1979:7). The values and views of Europe and the Occident are present in every encounter, with the Occident as the superior and having the overruling point of view (Ibid).

Said discusses the consequences of this "positional superiority" of values and ideas through Orientalism as a hegemonic discourse (Said 1979:5). He argues that since Orientalism is a European power-produced conceptualisation, and considering that Europe has the possession of the "upper hand" (Said 1979:7), it is impossible to escape Orientalism as a discourse when dealing with or talking about the Orient, as this "body of theory and practice" (Said 1979:6) has been so embedded in institutions and our images of the other. The crucial consequence is the impact on the Orient itself. Orientalism does not only affect the West's interaction with the other, but also the other's interaction with itself. As a result, the other, or the Orient, is left as "not a free subject of thought or action" (Said 1979:3), having no agency to decide what the individual is, or which characteristics or thoughts they may possess, as whatever they say is, by default, inferior.

Postcolonial Feminist Theory

What became evident for us, while working with this project, was that postcolonial theory in itself was not going to be enough. Although the concept of Orientalism, re-coined by Said, opened our theoretical horizon, it still fails to take a significant feminist standpoint. We realised that since our project is anchored in the position of women across cultures, their differences and the implicit hierarchy between them, in relation to ethnicity, class and race, we had to incorporate theorists that specifically deal with these issues. Said's concept is certainly still of great use, but we found it important to emerge ourselves in academic material that specifically builds on Said's concept of e.g. 'otherness', yet interprets and implements it in a postcolonial *feminist* perspective.

Key Aspects of Postcolonial Feminism

Postcolonial feminist theory is of great value to us because it specifically focuses on the relationship between Western feminism and 'Third-world' feminism, and problematises this relationship as a process of domination, executed by the logic of Western feminism. At the heart of this theoretical framework lies that oppression is not solely based on gender perspectives, but is as much enacted through class, culture, religion and race in particular (Bulbeck 1998; Mohanty 1984). In other words, the oppression that women experience across the globe, cannot solely build on the experience of oppression as proposed by mainstream Western feminism – that is, understanding oppression as a system that subordinates the 'modern' and 'rational (female) subject' (Bulbeck 1998:13). Thus, we need to understand Western feminism as a product of its contextuality, namely that Western feminism is produced by Western philosophical traditions of "humanism, utilitarianism, Marxism and liberal individualism" which in turn produces Western (white) women's place in the world (Bulbeck 1998:13). Due to this Western understanding of what women are, it excludes women who fall outside of this category, for instance, religious women wearing a niqab or hijab, viewing these women as backwards and oppressed whereas Western women are liberated to act and dress as they please (Bulbeck 1998:14). The problem that postcolonial feminism tries to address, is that the very nature of Western feminism is built upon a collective female identity based on biological, social or psychological experiences (Bulbeck 1998:13), thus neglecting cultural, racial and religious difference as being significant elements for the experience of being a woman.

Furthermore, even though postmodernism and poststructuralism have uncrowned the universalising tendencies of Western rationalism, modernity and structuralism, by depicting that there is not one single reality, but a variety of them, these developments still pose problems, seen from a postcolonial feminist perspective. In greater detail, these developments tend to de-emphasise the struggle of the oppressed by acknowledging that in fact all humans are discursively constructed subjects that experience oppression, and therefore tend to give equal importance to all aspects of 'oppression' and 'resistance' (Bulbeck 1998:14). In other words, by simultaneously focusing on the experience of oppression executed by the dominant group, and

investigating why and how the dominant group executes oppression in the first place, it aligns both the oppressed and oppressor's struggles as equal processes of liberation, and neglects the very aspect of hierarchy between them. From this we can denote that even a postmodernist approach, which essentially questions the authority of Western knowledge, fails to encompass oppression of those who are outside the framework of Western discourse. That is, by taking a standpoint on language and how language constitutes power, it fails to acknowledge the materiality of the issue at hand. Gender performance and re-conceptualisation of words such as 'nigger' (Butler 1993), do not necessarily change the status quo, because these concepts are imbedded in a history of usages that the oppressed never controlled in the first place (Bulbeck 1998:14). As Aileen Moreton-Robinson says in Bulbeck's book, "Indigenous women can construct their subject position all they like but it will not necessarily shift the dominant discourse" (Bulbeck 1998:15).

We can therefore understand postcolonial feminism as an antithesis, not only to the universalizing tendencies of Western rationality, but also to postmodernist and post-structuralist movements within Western feminist discourse, since all the aforementioned movements operate with a shared conceptualisation of 'women' as a category that shares biological, social, or psychological experiences. The most important of all of this is a critique of these experiences as being solely based on the position of Western women, and thus do not represent the experiences of women outside of the Western framework. The forthcoming theoretical chapter will thus elaborate more on the central issues between Western feminism and postcolonial feminism through a review and theoretical explanation of Leila Ahmed's understanding of Islam, gender and women, Spivak's concepts such as 'epistemic violence' and her problematisation of what happens when the privileged speak on behalf of the silenced subaltern, and Mohanty's concept of intersectionality. This will eventually leave the reader with a good understanding of the ontological foundation of this project.

Women and Gender in Islam

During the British occupation in 1882, two discourses were flourishing within the Egyptian society; a) the growing cultural differences between social classes and b) the binary of coloniser and the colonised. Ahmed argues that these discourses are intertwined, and initiated a new discourse concerning the entangled relation between women and culture, which were to be elucidated within the discussion of the veil. Most of the Egyptian scholars and intellectuals during that time were influenced by a European education - either educated in Europe or by the European-style education adopted into Egyptian universities. This had produced an intellectual elite who applauded Western values, thus denouncing traditional thinking and called for a cultural and social transformation in society starting with unveiling (Ahmed 1992:45).

The British occupation brought wealth to the existing upper and upper-middle classes, who were supported socially and governmentally, by employing new reforms to becoming more modern (and thereby Westernised). On the contrary, the colonisation worsened the circumstances for the lower classes. One of the reasons for a broader gulf between classes, Ahmed argues, was the British slowing the development of education for the Egyptians due to political and financial reasons. Instead of responding to the call for advanced education, nor building more primary schools as the number of students attending school increased, the British colony instituted a tuition fee and continued to raise it to lower the enrolment (Ahmed 1992:147). This resulted in the lower classes having limited access to social mobility, thus not being able to further their position due to economical entrapment. Ahmed states that the gap between the upper and lower classes opened up the debate of the position of Westernisation in society. The upper class and the upper-middle classes applauding the influence and economic benefits the occupation had brought them, while leaving the lower and lower-middle classes feeling hostile towards the colonial powers. It also resulted, in the longer run, that the upper classes in Egypt viewed the lower classes as being backwards and ignorant due to their lack of understanding of the greatness the occupation had brought forth.

Leila Ahmed's analysis elucidates some of the contradictions the British colonisation had brought forth during the occupation. One prime example would be the irony of viewing the Egyptians as inferior and backwards, thus limiting their opportunities to attend school and acquire knowledge, thereby keeping the lower classes of society within the same position so that the colonisers can keep their moral justification of the occupation of advancing the inferior. The increasing tuition fee for attending school made it difficult for the Egyptian people to get educated, the colony thereby keeping the lower classes subjected to their position, and the upper classes flourishing in Western beliefs imposing by them on society. Leila Ahmed argues that the contemporary discourse of the hegemonic perspectives of Orient viewed as backwards and inferior - particularly portrayed by the utilisation of the veil - was established during the colonial times, as also explained by Edward Said. During the occupation Egyptian scholars reproduced the colonial discourse of oppressed and segregated women, owing to the Westernisation of the intellectual elite, who assumed that women's liberation would alter a transformation of societal structure in Muslim countries, and make them more civilised. Thus, the notion of women and women's oppression in Islam was not considered an issue until mid-and late nineteenth century after the colonies had established their power. These notions were now being revised as a result of women in the Western sphere questioning their positions within society. The colonial interest in women's position was produced through the paradigm of the Oriental other in Islam being viewed as backwards and inferior, and the colonisers' duty to counter the inferior by liberating them to become more modern and thereby Western (Ahmed 1992:150).

These views were strongly supported by Western feminism, according to which the Muslim woman should be liberated according to the standards of Victorian women, and their hegemonic thesis of what women are, should be, and look like; the notions of liberation consisting of, education for women, monogamy marriages, and options of divorce, as well as abolition of the veil. Ahmed describes the colonial view of Victorian womanhood as the ideal measure for civilisation, arguing that the belief of European racial superiority legitimised the colonisation of other nations with an androcentric science to further legitimise as evidence for the superiority of the West. This science also validated the patriarchal structures in Europe, positioning all women as inferior to men (Ahmed 1992:151), and thereby naturalising women's oppression

in Europe: in other words, leaving women unable to question their position due to it being innate. This argument is also voiced in Edward Said's explanation of 'positional superiority,' of the West's fundamental right to thrive and dominate the Orient because 'they' are not 'us'. (Said 1979:7)

Ahmed argues that the new colonial discourse centred on women considered veiling and segregation as intrinsic to Islam, and by parting from these backwards customs the Muslim societies would gradually become civilised like the West. This was highly encouraged by upper and upper-middle class Egyptians, whereas Western feminism further encouraged to leave all native customs and religious traditions behind and substitute them with Western values of freedom and liberation. Ahmed strongly opposes this and argues that Western women did not leave their cultural heritage because of witch-burnings, but instead criticised the society in which it happened thereby ridiculing the practice (Ahmed 1992:128), thereby calling for women to be critical towards the system. The discourse of the veil has its foundation within the colonies' perimeters, and has been reproduced and supported by the upper class and Western feminism who, in the struggle against the inferior, could legitimise the occupation. The veil was attacked by the colonial discourse as backwards, but it was also being pedestaled as a symbol of resistance against colonisation due to its religious (and national) significance that dignified and validated Islamic values and customs. The Egyptians did not see wearing a veil as a source of resistance; Ahmed states that it was actually – ironically enough - the colonial discourse announcing the wearing of the veil as a form of resistance against the hegemonic power. The discourse both gave the veil its connotation of subordination as well as its symbol of resistance; it continues to elucidate the struggle of cultures between classes, illustrated within the discourse of the veil. Thus, as presented by Edward Said, the Orient will always be recognised as backwards in comparison to the modern West - even with an upper Westernised class in Egypt, they would still be viewed as somewhat inferior due to the positional superiority the white Western male has. This would explain why Egyptian scholars were denouncing traditions of their country, to become fully accepted by Western society, although it would never be possible due to androcentric science and the presupposition of Western superiority. Ahmed argues that instead of abandoning the traditional customs and values of Islam, one needs to reject the patriarchal (for women) androcentric view dominating their culture, not only in

Muslim societies but also in general, and develop from this foundation, rather than from a discourse with no possibilities of being equal to the colonisers.

Can the Subaltern Speak?

We also came across Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* where Spivak raises some critical questions about giving silenced people a voice. She argues that it is often seen in (Western) others, e.g. intellectuals, speaking on behalf of the silenced. Even though these intellectuals have good intentions, the outcome is often a repetition of colonialism seen in terms of the discourse and power relation. She raises doubt whether the third world can ever be investigated independently from a colonial discourse. Thus, it will always be 'us' (the Westerners) investigating 'them' (the others) and by doing so, defining what the 'others' are. This is in interplay with Said's discourse of Orientalism, in the sense that knowledge is produced accordingly from the outlook of the West. In other words, a white man telling another white man about the (poor) coloured people.

Furthermore, Spivak argues that the Subaltern will never be able to speak. Regarding this, she highlights several important factors. First of all, she argues that the subaltern is to some extent born outside the power relations. What she is arguing for will be elaborated on further. Second of all, Spivak also points out that the West has always seen the third world as having potential to change, but to change towards its own developments and ideals. To illustrate this Spivak gives an example from India, where the British colonisers forbade the Indian practice of Sati. Sati refers to the practice where widows commit suicide at their husband's funeral pyre. The British went to the local Hindu leaders to discuss this, because from their (Western) perspective, this was incompatible with their values. They ended up banning the practice.

This example illustrates the aforementioned power relation between the West and the non-West, hence the women were not asked how they felt about the practice prior to claiming that it was an oppressive practice. This example also illustrates how the West strives to 'fix' the third world, seen from its own standpoint. The British, in their own understanding, did this with good intentions. They wanted to save these women and believed that by outlawing sati, they were improving the social

developments in India. What they did not understand, however, was that this practice served the purpose of ensuring the sons to inherit. It becomes apparent that the English colonisers, by imposing values of right and wrong on Indian culture(s), did not understand important and integral aspects of said culture(s) (Spivak 1988:93-95).

To this, Chandra Mohanty equally says that “Western feminist writing on women in the third world must be considered in the context of the global hegemony of Western scholarship—i.e., the production, publication, distribution and consumption of information and ideas. Marginal or not, this writing has political effects and implications beyond the immediate feminist or disciplinary audience” (Mohanty 1984:336). In other words, the lack of understanding other cultures on their own terms can lead to wrong interpretations, which can have substantial consequences for the investigated cultures. As mentioned above, this is in line with what Spivak argues as well.

As a second point, Spivak also points out that the problem of investigating different cultures is created because ‘universal’ (read: Western) concepts pave the framework of the investigation (Spivak 1988:74-75). This is further supported by Mohanty, as she claims that there cannot be any apolitical study (Mohanty 1984:334). This will be elaborated further within the chapter on intersectionality. Another important term in Spivak’s text is ‘epistemic violence’, which is a term by Michel Foucault that Spivak has adopted and developed. Epistemic violence refers to the harm done to subjects through discourse. In Spivak’s case the subject is the subaltern. She uses said concept to illustrate both how the subaltern is being silenced, as in the aforementioned example, but also how the non-Western ways of preserving, understanding and knowing the world are overruled by the colonial powers and the dominating Western worldview. An example of this is how the British categorised themselves as civilised and Indians as savages (Spivak 1988:75-79).

Another important concept that Spivak points out is essentialism, the belief that some people share common unchanging essential traits and values that secures their membership in a category. Spivak uses essentialism to critique how some intellectuals have ‘romanticised’ the other. Her point is that by essentialising the subaltern, the colonising discourses reproduce themselves, even though their point of departure is to

critique the Western framework. In order to replace this romanticising, one needs to understand how group identity is formed in relation to 'other' groups and the differences within these different groups. As Spivak argues there is no true 'other', as this 'other' only exists within discourse (Spivak 1988:75-78).

In other words, the material subject that is named the 'other' always exists outside of discourse, but it is what that material subject *represents* that creates its meaning. In this way, 'the other' can be construed as a semantic representation of a specific social and cultural behaviour and identity.

Even though Western intellectuals strive to better the conditions of the 'other' by granting them a voice to speak for themselves and thus influence the discourse of the 'other', Spivak presents two problems followed regarding this. First of all, she brings forth a dependency from Western intellectuals to "speak for" the subaltern's conditions, rather than letting them speak for themselves (Spivak 1988:80-85). Moreover, she identifies a logocentric assumption of the subaltern as a homogenous people with cultural consensus, instead of a heterogeneous people with cultural differences (Spivak 1988:79). This essential homogenous view of the 'other' and a lack in understanding the differing culture and ways of perceiving the world are some of the reasons for why Spivak takes a critical standpoint towards Western intellectuals granting a voice to the 'other'. Moreover, she points out how knowledge is never neutral or innocent. It expresses the values and interest of its producers, where Spivak always sees an economic interest. This means that the discourses created about the 'other' by the West always imply an economic interest (Spivak 1988:75-76).

Mohanty's Intersectionality

Following in the steps of Spivak, but in a more feminist framework, Mohanty argues in *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse* (1984) that there is clear appropriation and colonisation of third-world women, from a Western feminist perspective (Mohanty 1984). The overall foundation of her article entails critiquing the common perception of women as a single monolithic entity that exist within Western feminist discourse, building on the same ideals that Spivak highlights in the aforementioned chapter. However, this is not to say that Western feminist

discourse is one and the same, regardless of its various political interests and goals. On the contrary, every facet of feminist discourse, no matter how diverse it may seem in appearance and political perception, still shares the same ideological foundation, and therefore codifies women between 'Western' and 'non-Western'. In Mohanty's words, it is therefore "possible to trace a coherence of effects resulting from the implicit assumption of "the West" (in all its complexities and contradictions) as the primary referent in theory and praxis" (Mohanty 1984:334). This is again, in line with the 'universal' (read: Western) tendencies that Spivak critiques. Exemplified further, it therefore becomes evident that there is an implicit and paradoxical construction of 'otherness' within Western feminist discourse that takes place by constructing women as a homogenous group that organizes itself as 'global sisterhood' and experiences 'shared oppression (as defined by the West)'. In addition, this is done by analysing such concepts ahistorically and cross-culturally. Furthermore, the construction of 'otherness' is paradoxical hence it entails difference between women, when simultaneously claiming that women are 'global sisters'.

One of the major drawbacks of thinking of women as 'global sisters' is that it removes complexity, historicity and privilege from the equation. 'Women' are not just women as envisioned by the 'West'. Contrary, their positions differ extremely, within a wide array of societal and cultural settings. Mohanty thus claims that in order to fully understand the problems that 'women' face, we need to expand our analysis, in order to capture the different power-produced categories and socially and culturally created positions that women inhabit (Mohanty 1984:346). Our analysis must then be comprised of understanding the heterogeneity of 'women' through an intersectional lens. Essentially this means that significant attention has to be put into various categories, such as, class, religion, gender, race, age, etc. and see how these interplay in creating systems of inequality, rather than assuming that 'women' are one and the same across the globe. Furthermore, as an important aspect of doing this type of analysis, we constantly need to keep Spivak's concern of speaking of the 'other' in specific ways, in mind, seeing as one might fall prey to generalising or even essentialising tendencies, even though the approach is of an intersectional nature. In other words, this means that an intersectional approach does not in itself combat essentialising propensities, seeing as within every analysed 'intersection' generalisations might occur.

However, a complete neglect of an intersectional approach is clearly problematic, for Western feminism thus disregards the importance of the asymmetrical power-relations between West and Non-Western societies, economies and cultures, and therefore sees its own standpoint as unquestionably right (Mohanty 1984:334). Western feminism thus discounts that knowledge production is not an apolitical practice that enhances the know-how of specific subjects and areas of study. It is, on the contrary, a *discursive* practice that is ideologically composed by its contextuality (Ibid). In this light, Western feminism cannot be understood as a meta-theoretical framework that imposes universal concepts of female oppression, specific moral conducts, and sets forth exact strategies to combat said oppression; hence its mere existence is to be found in relations of power, between ideologies, and virtues that compose its 'West-centric' perception of the world. Taking this further, Mohanty simultaneously argues that patriarchy as a unified and coherent global phenomenon, is fabled (Mohanty 1984:335). Instead, our analytical approach towards the concept of patriarchy must be contextual – culturally and historically embedded; not ubiquitously understood (Ibid).

As such, Mohanty powerfully shows the problems of disregarding this particular method in her critique of Cutrufelli's research on marital exchange in the Bemba community of Zambia. Here Cutrufelli claims that prior to colonisation, Bemba women were protected under tribal laws, hence the soon-to-be husband had to live and work with his bride's family. The moment, the girl enters puberty, she goes through an initiation process, and from this point on, the newlyweds can move to their own home. After the colonisation of Zambia, the marital ritual changed, Cutrufelli argues. Now, the soon-to-be husband was able to remove the girl from her family much earlier, in exchange for money. Cutrufelli's conclusion is thus that colonisation eroded and changed the marital exchange for the worse, leaving Bemba women and girls unprotected. As follows, Mohanty points out that Cutrufelli falls in several pitfalls in claiming this. First of all, she speaks of Bemba woman as a homogeneous entity, which in turn, removes all cultural complexity of their tribal way of life. It neglects the possible internal hierarchies within the Bemba community, and therefore also fails to encompass, if Bemba women were indeed protected under tribal laws or not, prior to colonisation. Accordingly, Mohanty points out that in order to strengthen the analysis, it must simultaneously show why some women are valued more than

others within the Bemba community (initiated vs. non-initiated girls) – it is thus clear that Bemba women, within their own small community, are anything but homogenous.

As already mentioned, we can thus derive, that Mohanty's concept of Intersectionality is a crucial and integral part of this research; neglecting it entails a rigid definition of 'women' and their 'apparent' oppression as only being a limitation of 'freedom and sexual constriction' victimized by a global patriarchal system. Furthermore, the construction of the non-West as something that is inferior to the supremacy of Western development and ideology (Spivak 1988; Said 1979) reinforces the construction of the above mentioned to be much bigger of a problem in the non-West. In other words, it identifies the third world women as being more subordinated than Western women, due to the reinforcement of the ideological and homogenous understanding of 'women', 'oppression' and of the unbalanced power-relation between the West and non-West. As Mohanty says:

"I argue that as a result of the two modes—or, rather, frames—of analysis described above, a homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group is assumed, which, in turn, produces the image of an "average third world woman." This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being "third world" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions. The distinction between Western feminist re-presentation of women in the third world, and Western feminist self-representation is a distinction of the same order as that made by some Marxists between the "maintenance" function of the housewife and the real "productive" role of wage labor" (Mohanty 1984:337).

Furthermore, Mohanty claims that the descriptive tools and strategies taken upon by a wide array of feminist writings concerning developing countries, not only serve a descriptive understanding; they forge a political reality of that given space. It is further important to stress that Western feminist discourse should not be understood as a practice that can only be enacted by feminists who culturally perceive themselves

as Westerners. Instead, Western feminist discourse is a mode of power, a construction of knowledge that can be claimed by anyone, as long as the methodologies and ideologies of Western feminism are enacted within research (Mohanty 1984:336).

In other words, as long as the abovementioned analytical strategies are called upon, one is working within the paradigm of conventional Western feminism. To such strategies, Mohanty mentions three specific methods. One of them, she argues, understands concepts such as, 'oppression', 'sexual division of labour', 'sexual control', etc. as universal – removing the historicity and actualisation within their own space. Again this is in line with what Spivak claims as a fundamental problem that exists between the subaltern space and the West. Moreover, the following two methods make claims about the generalisability of the issue through statistics and reinforces the asymmetrical power-relation between the West and non-West, therefore it does not claim its political foundation. The methodological approach Mohanty calls for should instead be imbedded in the social field of the given space one is investigating, hence this entails taking into account the complexities and possible contradictions that exist. In Mohanty's words it can be explained as such: "It is only by understanding the contradictions inherent in women's location within various structures that effective political action and challenges can be devised" (Mohanty 1984:346). In other words, overlooking this aspect, in essence, entails that the understanding of 'women' as a non-contingent group that is globally oppressed becomes cemented in our social consciousness. The danger of this specific categorisation is that the concept of 'global sisterhood' and 'women' become materialised facts – now the mode of inquiry is comprised of depicting how these facts play out in specific contexts, essentially reproducing the unequal and binary positions between the West and non-West (Mohanty 1984:340).

Summary

Summarizing both Orientalism and postcolonial feminist theory, we see interdependent theoretical outlooks. For Said, Mohanty, Ahmed and Spivak, it is evident that they all operate within a framework that sees the production of knowledge as an inherent political practice, constituting and maintaining the unequal power balances between the 'modern' West, and the 'backwards' non-West.

Specifically, Spivak and Said argue that the discourse of Orientalism, because it is a mode of power, is inescapable; meaning that colonial processes will always interplay in our understanding of 'the other', but simultaneously also on 'the others' understanding of each other. Contrarily, Mohanty argues that 'the other' *can* speak, as long as intersectionality is taken into consideration. However, what is strikingly clear for all of them, is a fundamental critique of the workings of (Western) power that are enabled through a conceptualisation of Western 'modernity', 'rationality' and 'individuality', as universal concepts that are hegemonic and therefore constitute the social, cultural and economic development of the West, and as the foundation for the world order. In essence, they critique the conceptualisation that Westernisation equals progress. From this point on, we can move into our analysis, to depict what the actual consequences of this asymmetrical power-relation entail for the non-West.

Analysis

Our intention of using the article "Why Do They Hate Us? The real war on women in the Middle East" by Mona Eltahawy, as we mentioned before, is to show how Eltahawy through a specific vocabulary constructs a specific understanding of the Middle East and North Africa (the MENA region). Going through all the political implications that Eltahawy portrays is, due to time constraints, beyond the scope of this project. As a limitation we have only chosen to focus on how the concept of 'political freedom' in different ways plays a part in Eltahawy's construction of the MENA region as a homogeneous, backwards and primitive space. The concept of 'political freedom' will in relation to the controversial practice of female genital cutting (FGC) further be examined in the discussion chapter, which will be based on the discrepancy between the variety of perspectives about and within the MENA region. In order to provide a thorough analysis of the generalisations that Eltahawy enacts within her article, we must also first understand the context it was written under, as this will not only pinpoint how her ideas came to be, but also what her ideas came to represent for her Western audience, when put in relation to the political, social and cultural developments of Egypt anno 2011. What follows from here is then an explanation of the Egyptian uprisings, what lead to them and in what state post-revolutionary Egypt found itself right after the uprisings. As a second point, this leads us to a brief explanation of Eltahawy's article, and lastly our analytical task will begin.

Context

The demonstrations and uprisings that led to the now known Egyptian Revolution of the 25th January 2011, was a result of anger, frustration and injustice that had been accumulating for over 30 years (Ghonim 2012; Eltahawy 2015:24). It had been slowly gaining momentum already since 2004, with different political activist organisations emerging and demonstrations with numbers as few as a hundred. The Egyptian state security had different tactics to tone down any political activism. That included using the emergency law, which gave the state security forces the right to arrest any Egyptian citizen with the suspicion that he might be a danger to national interest (Ghonim 2012:2). Though quite vague in its formation, the law, however, served the

purpose of striking fear into the Egyptian people, so they would not dare to challenge the status quo. That mentality spiralled and manifested itself in several entities in the Egyptian society. Local individuals would not dare speak of politics or opposition (Ghonim 2012:3), this silencing both the older and younger generations for years. The absence of any political opposition to the then Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP), for 30 years, left the population feeling helpless and hopeless for any alternatives (Ghonim 2012:39).

The youth soon recognized that change must come from them. This bottom-up approach ultimately led to their awareness of a self-led uprising (Ghonim 2012:57). Pictures began circulating the internet of a young man, named Khaled Said, who was brutally beaten by the police. This sparked national outrage regarding the extent the police and state security's brutality could reach. The creation of the Facebook page in solidarity with Khalid Said, and his symbol of what the Egyptian youth might endure created the "voice of those who despised the deterioration of Egypt, particularly as far as human rights were concerned" (Ghonim 2012:66). This ultimately led to the Facebook event with the title "January 25: Revolution Against torture, Poverty, Corruption and Unemployment", with the aim of changing and challenging the status quo of the political apparatus, and all the bodies in which it resides in. It would eventually lead to the revolution that was "without a leader and without an organizing body" (Ghonim 2012:139), establishing a rift with the dominating cultural codes of pre-revolutionary Egypt. During the uprisings, no one was a stranger; everyone was welcome, and everyone had a voice (Shokr 2012:45). Those who participated were "from different social classes, genders, age brackets and educational backgrounds" (Ghonim 2012:213), viewing themselves "as the harmonious nation based on religious, gender and social class equality" (El Sadaawi 2011 in Kadry 2014:4). As such, the encampment of the epitome of historical protest in Egyptian society (Kamal 2012:152), the Tahrir square, gave rise to an active civil society, which would evolve into a self-organising organism, where the mundane differences that normally dictated the busy life of Cairo were replaced by unity, collectivity and equality (Shokr 2012:42). As Ahmad Shokr, a participant of the occupation of Tahrir, later mentions: "Daily struggles to hold the space and feed its inhabitants, without the disciplined mechanism of an organised state, were exercised in democratic process" (Shokr 2012:44). During the 18 days, Tahrir square thus became a symbol for political and

social action; problems within the encampment were not only solved step-by-step, different demands of freedom were also negotiated. Some demanded the desistance of police violence, others demanded non-corrupted elections, and again others demanded social and economic stability and improvement (Ibid). While the common destination was reaching freedom, this freedom presented itself in different ways for different individuals. In short, the people gathered at Tahrir square had arrived with the same goal, but with diverse methods in regards of reaching it. The unification of the Egyptian people within as well as beyond the square, created a sensational and nationalistic atmosphere, entailing that the primary envisions of Mubarak's resignation from the presidency, and a demand for social and economic reform, which were some of the foundations for the uprisings, drowned in national joy and pride. The tone of the uprisings thus changed from a specific political reality with political goals towards patriotism, entailing that the chanting became cheerful but to a certain extent unaimed (Ibid).

On the 11th of February 2011, a televised national announcement surfaced saying: "president Muhammad Hosni Mubarak has decided to give up the office of the president of the republic and instructed the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to manage the affairs of the country" (Ghonim 2012:289). What occurred in Tahrir square during the 18 days, was presented as an alternative view of the nation, where women and men were fighting side by side, and the deconstruction of social taboos of womanhood were dismissed (Kadry 2014). It was a time and place where gender equality was achievable, as argued by Marnia Lazreg stating "the leap of faith that a revolution will naturally produce enhanced gender equality" (Lazreg 1994:118, cited in Kadry 2014:6). The main aim of the revolution was not necessarily the advancement of women's rights, but it did become a factor in the political agenda of Egyptian feminist activists, mobilising the, at the time, already established fight for equality – something that pre-dated the happenings on Tahrir square.

After the revolution in January 2011, despite the joyful chanting for liberation, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, continued to rule Egypt, showcasing that Mubarak was just a figure for a wider, deteriorating and corrupt system that had succeeded in infiltrating all systems and institutions of the country (Ghonim 2012:147; Mostafa 2015:120). This meant that for many 'revolutionaries' the idea of

a governmental system, carried by social justice, was and still is in the making (Mostafa 2015:120). The making of that project would later come to exclude a part of the revolutionaries: women. An example of such exclusion would be the rewritten constitution of 2012 (Kamal 2013:156). What seemed to be the biggest problem with the new constitution was that even though it should have mirrored the spirit of the revolution, it still excluded women's and other oppositional groups' voices (Ibid). As a reaction to this, and to the persistent violence of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), which included the arrests of youth and female demonstrators being subjected to virginity tests (Eltahawy 2015:17; Kadry 2014:4), and to herself being subjected to sexual assault by SCAF, Mona Eltahawy published her article for *Foreign Policy*, under the title "Why Do They Hate Us? The real war on women is in the Middle East". In the article, Eltahawy argues that women have to fight both the dictator figure of the state, but also the dictator of the home (Eltahawy 2015:24). Thus, Eltahawy puts forward the fight for women's rights, to be one of the pillars to pave the way to 'freedom'.

Why Do They Hate Us? - Case Study

In her article, Eltahawy calls upon Alifa Rifaat's short story *In Distant Views of the Minaret*. In short, the story revolves around the life of an unnamed woman who is succumbed to the sexual pleasures of her husband, and by being so, is unable to fulfil her own. After the sexual act, she loses herself in prayer – something much more satisfying than the sexual 'pleasure'. At some point after making coffee for her husband, she finds him dead in their bed, but is surprisingly unmoved by this finding. It is in such a way that Eltahawy sheds light on critical issues surrounding women in the MENA region. By amalgamating men, women and their relationship within a religious and cultural context, which few are able to distinguish between, the tone of a 'toxic mix' of culture and religion is set as the foundation for why men hate women. The problems that Eltahawy addresses extend across culture and countries within the MENA region. Some of them include the widely spread custom of female genital cutting (FGC) in Egypt, the ban in Saudi Arabia which prevents women from driving and the 55% illiteracy rate of women in Yemen.

What all the above stated factors point to, according to Eltahawy, is the oppression of women. Eltahawy describes Islamist parties having a shared value (the oppression of women), and them gaining power in parliamentary elections, will continue to fuel that hatred. She thereby addresses women's as well as her own position during the Egyptian revolution, fighting, alongside men, for freedom and equal rights. She, thus, takes a critical point of departure toward the state police's 'virginity tests' of female activist participants as well as the sexual harassment and assaults that took place post-January 25th, of which Eltahawy was also a victim. As such, Eltahawy calls for a new revolution of thought to bring change into the Egyptian society, which will only be possible by toppling the 'Mubarak's' in households. Eltahawy concludes her article by saying:

"We are more than our headscarves and our hymens. Listen to those of us fighting. Amplify the voices of the region and poke the hatred in its eye. There was a time when being an Islamist was the most vulnerable political position in Egypt and Tunisia. Understand that now it very well might be Woman. As it always has been." (Eltahawy 2012:n.p.).

Analytical Discussion

What is interesting about Eltahawy's article, is not so much what it conveys. Such information has been widely known within the critical postcolonial Western as well as the Egyptian sphere. People such as Nawal El-Saadawi have for many years critiqued the asymmetrical positioning of women contra men within Egyptian society. But that does not answer the question of why Eltahawy's article reached a critically acclaimed status within the mainstream Western media.

The Vacuum

To answer that question, it proves important to take two developments into consideration that in combination would lead to Eltahawy's fame-like status. The first of these developments is that the coverage of the Egyptian 'revolution' by mainstream Western media, through Facebook and Twitter, in itself leads to a sensationalised perception of the revolution as an 'all-of-a-sudden' development which strove towards the standards of Western democracies in terms of civil liberties. This is not to say that Western media partook in a specific pro-democratic framing of the

happenings within Tahrir. At least it was stated as such by several major news outlets, including the BBC, which published a report on their impartial coverage of the ‘revolution’ (Ramadan 2014:4-5).

However, we argue that the mere act of covering the developments within Tahrir spiralled into an already established discourse of ‘democracy’ within the West as the universal model of governance, this thus being the reason for the sensationalisation of the developments. It seems rather paradoxical that this was the way the ‘revolution’ became construed in the mind of the average Western citizen, given that protests within Egyptian society are hardly a new invention. In fact, Egyptian society has on several occasions protested against inequality and injustice. Three of such examples are the 1919 revolution against the British occupation (Mazloun 2014:210; Ahmed 1992:172-174), the 1952 abolishment of the kingdom (Abu-Laban 1967:179; Kamal 2014:151; Ahmed 1992:203-204) and the 2003 protest against military intervention in Iraq (Shokr 2012:41).

The second reason is that due to the rather spontaneous and (un)structured political space within the Tahrir moment, (which as we highlighted in the context chapter, welcomed people from all strata of society to fight the regime) would for this exact same reason – a fundamental diverse understanding of how to combat the regime or what ‘the regime’ actually was – leave a societal vacuum. This vacuum of ‘where-do-we-go-from-here’ would thus be filled with a variety of different political agendas concerning the future of post-revolutionary Egypt put forth by various people; religious, liberal and even just common civil voices.

The atmosphere of a ‘need-for-social-change’ which was established during the uprisings, became, after the downfall of Mubarak, a political space of ideological contestation, because it left both the Egyptian society and its political system aimless. The ‘need-for-change’ left people hungry for more, but what the whole of society was unable to resolve was what this ‘more’ exactly would entail or how it should be envisioned. In relation to the aforementioned vacuum, we argue that it was specifically because of said vacuum that Eltahawy, who was just one voice among many looking for a ‘new Egypt’, would construe the social developments within the

revolution, as a foundation for furthering a specific feminist agenda. At the heart of Eltahawy's agenda, lie 'women' as a social category:

“So: Yes, women all over the world have problems; yes, the United States has yet to elect a female president; and yes, women continue to be objectified in many “Western” countries (I live in one of them). That’s where the conversation usually ends when you try to discuss why Arab societies hate women. But let’s put aside what the United States does or doesn’t do to women. Name me an Arab country, and I’ll recite a litany of abuses fueled by a toxic mix of culture and religion that few seem willing or able to disentangle lest they blaspheme or offend. When more than 90 percent of ever-married women in Egypt — including my mother and all but one of her six sisters — have had their genitals cut in the name of modesty, then surely we must all blaspheme.” (Eltahawy 2012:n.p.)

Western Feminism and the Western Philosophy of I

Referring to the above stated quote, Eltahawy's article thus portrays a harrowing misogyny within the Arab world – a hatred and oppression towards women exercised by cynical societies. As Eltahawy writes, inequality is ever-present in Western countries such as the United States as well, but she wishes to draw attention to the situation in the MENA region, as she describes the on-going "abuses fuelled by a toxic mix of culture and religion that few seem willing or able to disentangle lest they blaspheme or offend" (Eltahawy 2012:n.p.). It is, indeed, the religious connection to and justification of these narratives that makes the situation evidently problematic. Thus from the very beginning, Eltahawy invokes the long-lasting image of the 'Arab world' as a place of inferiority and primitiveness due to its 'traditional' approach to religion. Eltahawy then, intentionally or not, reproduces specific ways of viewing 'Arab' societies as places that are inherently ethically and morally underdeveloped, compared to the 'modern' West. This may not be in line with Eltahawy's own views, but nonetheless it is how it ends up being communicated. The inferior construction of the 'MENA region' might at first glance seem rather paradoxical, given that Eltahawy actually also critiques Western societies for their objectification of the female subject. What seems to be the main difference, is that her way of constructing the differences in objectification are, within the MENA region, founded upon religion as the bedrock for it, while not providing a specific reason within Western societies.

The combination of culture and religion as the foundation for the misogyny in the MENA region is not only a generalisation, but it also oversimplifies an image of the West, as being superior since subordination within the West is not based on such concepts. What Eltahawy's gender perspective then entails, as she speaks about women and the asymmetrical relationship between women and men, is that the abovementioned dichotomy is further cemented by her focus and interpretation of the abuses that Arab women experience in the MENA region. Eltahawy's argumentative style is born out of a Western feminist approach which, according to Nancy J. Hirschmann, consists of an ideological preoccupation with an understanding of inequality between men and women based on the construction and enactment of gendered identities as deterministic (Hirschmann 1997:463). An example of this framework can be found in the following quote:

“When more than 90 percent of ever-married women in Egypt — including my mother and all but one of her six sisters — have had their genitals cut in the name of modesty, then surely we must all blaspheme” (Eltahawy 2012:n.p.).

By “blaspheme”, Eltahawy systematically links female genital cutting to a religious practice. This is further shown through her referring to 90% of Egyptian women going through the custom of FGC, thus she paints a picture of Egypt, as a country where Islam is a dominant religion, which shapes the society's practices and customs, but by doing so Eltahawy forgets to mention that the 90% also includes Christian communities (Ahmed 1992:175-176). So Forth, by neglecting this information, the understanding of Islam as a fundamentally backwards religion is strengthened, because it is portrayed as the only religion that viciously mutilates women. Furthermore, through irony (which is shown through the “sure we must all blaspheme”) Eltahawy indirectly urges towards opposing religious practices that systematically subordinate women (such as when women are subjected to the custom of FGC). By writing so, Eltahawy reproduces the foundational approach of feminism as encapsulated by the West; namely a movement which is based upon questioning the structural inequality between men and women, where the base for such inequality emanates from the cultural and social construction of understanding gender as essentialistic.

In other words, the inequality that women experience is produced because they *are* women – or because they are constructed to be women through categorisation of biology. As a foundation, it seems that Western Feminism thus appears to be encapsulated, founded upon and driven by Western philosophical traditions of individuality, which have an immense focus on the ‘I’ as the departure of human thinking. As Christine Delphy (2015) states, this ‘I’ has no materiality to it: Descartes’ *I think, therefore I am* sums this up perfectly. Yes, Descartes can think, but nowhere does Descartes account for the social relations that would grant him the ability to formulate that sentence (Delphy 2015:4-6). As such, the subject of Descartes is one which is detached from the social environment that produces it, entailing that ‘humanness’ is inherently an internal process, detached from its environment, which, in turn, means that Western philosophy is carried by such a foundation (Ibid). As a further development, Western philosophy would move into the realm of existentialism. Philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, despite their religious standpoints, embodied the encapsulation of Descartes’ ‘I’, championing, above all else, the freedom to choose and to dictate one’s own life however one may please. Arguably so, it can, as mentioned, then be claimed that it is such a philosophical tradition that Western feminism derives from, due to its focus upon ensuring both the individual (private) and collective (public) rights of women (read: political freedom – this will be elaborated upon in the next chapter), entailing that at its theoretical foundation lies a preoccupation with the internal well-being of the female subject, but at the same time failing to take a materialist, cultural and social approach towards said well-being. Even if a materialist approach were at some point taken, it would be approached within the context of Western social and cultural development, which essentially emanates from the same philosophical tradition of the ‘I’.

It is indeed the internal composition of the female subject that appears to drive Eltahawy’s argumentative force. However, this outlook is problematic for various reasons. Even though it might be correct that the systematic inequality and domination that the internal female subject experiences, are processes that are produced by the discursively constructed categories of gender, claiming that this is the case for all women cannot serve as an explanation, when considering that the foundation for such an understanding is based within a specific contextual and

historical setting. In other words, the preoccupation with the 'I' emanating from Western philosophy and enacted within a Western feminist discourse cannot be generalised to cover the position of all women within the heterogeneous cultures of the world. As Chandra Mohanty mentions, Western feminist discourse needs to be understood within the framework of Western knowledge creation and consumption, and not as a universal encapsulation of an essential way of constructing the world (Mohanty 1984:334). Using Mohanty as a point of departure, it proves to be that Eltahawy forgets to take into account that her understanding of 'subordination' is a generalisation which manifests 'women' as a monolithic entity that can only experience subordination, related to their gender, thus not taking into account that subordination is as much an intersectional process of being classified through ethnicity, religious-cultural identity, class etc.

By framing subordination in a gendered perspective and calling for its eradication within Arab societies, Eltahawy neglects the colonial history of, in relation to the abovementioned quote, Egypt. By doing so, Eltahawy therefore neglects that views put forth by a conventional Western outlook (such as Western feminism) to a great extent are viewed as modern forms of imperialism by the members of the societies in question (Rubinstein & Lane 1996:38). This, in turn, reproduces the long lasting asymmetrical power-relations between the former colonising and colonised nations. Conjuring this back to Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Mohanty, means that Eltahawy's synthesis of all 'women' under the banner of 'global sisterhood', as exemplified in the following quote:

"What all this means is that when it comes to the status of women in the Middle East, it's not better than you think. It's much, much worse. Even after these "revolutions," all is more or less considered well with the world as long as women are covered up, anchored to the home, denied the simple mobility of getting into their own cars, forced to get permission from men to travel, and unable to marry without a male guardian's blessing — or divorce either" (Eltahawy 2012:n.p.)

is a reproduction of an assumption of 'the subaltern' as a homogenous group with cultural consensus, instead of a heterogeneous group with vast cultural differences. It is also a reproduction of a dichotomy that constructs non-Western women within the

universal (read: Western) conception of ‘women’, neglecting that ‘women’ is a vast category entailing many different subject positions.

To further elaborate on the above stated quote, the processes of ‘being anchored to the home’, ‘denied mobility’, ‘forced to get permission from men to travel’ and ‘unable to marry without a male guardian’s blessing’ are surely true for some Arab societies (Ahmed 1992:231) - but arguing that this is the case for an entire region, is severely misguided. As an example, *Time* published an article in 2008 about a female-only taxi company (Bricker 2008:n.p) in Iran, where women can clearly drive. As another example regarding Iran, we can also mention that during the Iranian revolution in 1979, Iranian middle-class women would wear the veil in support of lower class women (Mohanty 1984:347), but also as an opposition towards Western influence (Ahmed 1992:165). And as the most recent development, Saudi women were able to vote in the 12th of December 2015 local elections. Not only did women vote, but between nine and seventeen women were also elected into public office (BBC 2015:n.p; Ian Black 2015:n.p). Does this mean that all Arab societies protect the rights of women? Hardly. In contemporary Iran women are demanded by law to veil, and in Saudi-Arabia women are still restricted from driving. This shows that there indeed is some truth to Eltahawy’s claims. However, in relation to the veil it is important to highlight that its history is not one solely dictated by oppression (Ahmed 1992). Therefore, to claim that the only positions women can obtain within the MENA region are as the above suggested, is a staggering generalisation, despite the situation being problematic otherwise. We are thus made aware that the MENA region is anything but homogeneous, and we see that cultural artefacts, social and cultural positions are contested, negotiated and re-articulated. It is also clear that members of the societies in question, within Eltahawy’s article, are not as reductionist as they appear. In following the thoughts of Mohanty, we may call out the generalisations for what they are: presuppositions.

Concepts of Freedom

“We have no freedoms because they hate us(…)” (Eltahawy 2012:n.p.).

Building upon the Western feminist approach that has been presented in the former chapter, it seems that the concept of freedom is the foundation for Eltahawy’s

argumentation. However, this comes to show rather vaguely due to being covered in a gendered perspective. By using words such as ‘we’ and ‘us’, Eltahawy positions all Arab women, including herself, within the category of ‘global sisters’, due to the category’s gendered semantic, as highlighted earlier. Moreover, Eltahawy also uses the word ‘they’, which in relation to the ‘us’ (Arab women) must indicate that the ‘they’ are Arab men. What further constitutes this relationship then, is that it is built upon inequality between the two positions provided, because it invokes the concept of ‘political freedom’ as a binding element, and because such element is essentially based on the Western perspective of inequality between genders (Hirschmann 1997:463). Thus Eltahawy’s usage of ‘freedom’ is at the heart of her article, specifically because it argues that it is problematic that women, as an indisputable fact, are prohibited from expressing their gendered and sexual agency:

“Yet we never hear how a later marriage age affects women. Do women have sex drives or not? Apparently, the Arab jury is still out on the basics of human biology” (Eltahawy 2012:n.p).

Moreover, this is also shown in the quote further above regarding women being ‘anchored to the home’, ‘denied mobility’ etc. Since these are restrictive factors of movement, they only further cement Eltahawy’s point of departure to be anchored around ‘freedom’. Two things can then be said about the concept of ‘freedom’. First of all by focusing upon the restriction of women’s agency, Eltahawy unintentionally feeds an Oriental discourse, because she reproduces and reinforces the image of the stereotypical, ‘freedom lacking Arab woman’, which, in turn, cements and re-endorses the West’s encapsulation of being the imagery of said lacking concept.

Second of all, the concept of ‘political freedom’ emerges from a political tradition radiating from the overarching concept of ‘human rights’. Eltahawy’s employment of ‘sexual revolution’ and ‘basic rights’ can thus be said to be linked to the concept of political freedom, because when dissecting Diane Richardson’s text “Constructing Sexual Citizenship” (2000), one is made aware that social policies on sexuality have, as a prime focus, the concept of ‘rights’ (read: political freedom) as a point of departure. To return to our former argument, it therefore becomes important to highlight that the concept of human rights was, according to Jack Donnelly, created out of specific social, economic and political developments within the West (Donnelly 2007:287).

Essentially this means that the comprehension of ‘freedom’ that has underlined Eltahawy’s arguments against the misogyny within the MENA region has its foundation in a long tradition of Western philosophy (of which Western feminism springs from). Eltahawy’s call for sexual and political freedom is thus nothing more than a development of the aforementioned philosophical concept, within a feminist sphere. Hence what seems to be the foundation for the asymmetrical power-relation between the West and the MENA region is *exactly* the concept of freedom, and how to interpret it. This fundamental discrepancy comes to show in various disputes regarding cross-cultural understanding such as female genital cutting. To this Eltahawy states:

“I’m staying mainstream with Qaradawi, who commands a huge audience on and off the satellite channels. Although he says Female Genital Cutting (which he calls “circumcision,” a common euphemism that tries to put the practice on a par with male circumcision) is not “obligatory,” you will also find this priceless observation in one of his books: “I personally support this under the current circumstances in the modern world. Anyone who thinks that circumcision is the best way to protect his daughters should do it,” he wrote, adding, “The moderate opinion is in favor of practicing circumcision to reduce temptation.” So even among “moderates,” girls’ genitals are cut to ensure their desire is nipped in the bud — pun fully intended.” (Eltahawy 2012:n.p.).

By summoning the voice of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Al-Jazeera TV host and rather popular Islamic cleric who accepts the practice of FGC, Eltahawy paints a picture of the practice as a common and needed procedure within the institutionalisation of Islam. Eltahawy’s use of the word ‘mutilation’ put in relation to the highlighted quotes of Qaradawi, who states that the practice should be performed in order to ‘reduce temptation’ and to ‘protect [...] daughters’, creates an ideological clash between Eltahawy’s and Qaradawi’s rhetoric. ‘Mutilation’ in relation to Eltahawy is then understood as a limiting and suppressive act on women’s sexuality, because it is exercised specifically to ‘reduce temptation’.

As we have highlighted earlier, the main focal point of a Western feminist discourse is to ensure that gendered identities are not, firstly, construed as essential and, secondly, do not lead to processes of domination and inequality within a societal

context, thus securing the 'freedom' to self-define (Butler 1993; Cixous 1976; De Beauvoir 1949). Thus Eltahawy rightly so places the practice of FGC as incompatible with the emancipating movements of a Western feminist discourse, because, as mentioned earlier, it is interpreted as a process of controlling the sexuality of women, from a social, cultural and political aspect, and therefore limiting the agency of women to self-designate (this will be discussed further below). As a second point of departure, it is problematic that Eltahawy only uses a well known Islamic cleric as the voice of support and legitimation of FGC, since several scholars have stated that the foundation for the practice of FGC is difficult to place, because even though it is practiced in Egypt, it is not only an Islamic religious tradition, since it generally takes place throughout the whole continent of Africa which both includes Islamic and Christian communities (Ahmed 1992:175-176). Furthermore, the practice also exists in Russia and South America (Kassamali 1998; Rubinstein & Lane 1996; Abusharaf 2001). Therefore, even though Eltahawy is right in concluding that FGC is practiced within the Arab world, it is illogical to argue that there might be a primordial relation between Islam and FGC. Furthermore, arguing in this manner feeds an already established discourse of understanding the MENA region as fundamentally backwards, which again leads to a generalisation.

However, even though we undoubtedly agree with Eltahawy in the sense that FGC is an unacceptable practice, we feel reluctant to bluntly discard the practice without a case-sensitive approach. Does FGC suppress women's sexuality? Is it a patriarchal infused practice? Certainly. However, if the goal is to move beyond such practice, then we must take the people that we, the West including Eltahawy, so desperately want to save, into account. Doing so means, that our Western understanding of FGC as a fundamental 'evil' practice that is called upon to ensure that the sexuality of women remain 'stainless', is accompanied by an understanding that this practice is equally important for the collective social and cultural identity for many women within the cultures we want to 'save' (Kassamali 1998:47; James 1988).

The simplistic way Eltahawy argues against the practice to a great extent furthers the dichotomy of understanding men as fundamentally evil and women as fundamentally victims of a patriarchal society. Thus Eltahawy forgets to show that women, according to Kassamali, are not forced to practice FGC on their daughters to

sadistically ‘mutilate’ them, rather, they choose to engage in the custom of FGC as a way of including their daughters within the norms of society. As two other researchers highlight during their fieldwork in rural Egypt, when the rural women encountered one of the researchers and heard she was not circumcised, “their response was disgust mixed with joking laughter. They wondered how she could have thus gotten married and questioned how her mother could have neglected such an important part of her preparation for womanhood.” (Lane & Rubinstein 1996:35). If this quote truly exemplifies the differences in interpreting the practice of FGC, what does condemnation then serve without a basic understanding of why it is practiced in the first place?

Now what furthermore seems to characterise the debate surrounding FGC, appears to be the methods for eradicating it (even the word eradicate places a negative connotation on its object). The writing of female genital cutting in the 2008 “*UN Resolution on FGM*” as a “serious threat to the health, of women and girls, including their psychological, sexual and reproductive health” (U.N. commission on the status of women 2008:2) is disagreeably tied to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights because it falls under the category of article five ²(U.N. Universal Dec. art. 5 1948). However, as we highlighted earlier, the declaration of human rights is, according to Jack Donnelly, a construction of Western thought, because what gave rise to the ideas that would shape the declaration were developed within the West (Donnelly 2007:287). Hence the ‘universality’ of human rights is questionable, specifically because the virtues that define our ‘rights’ as humans are constructed through a specific paradigm of thought, that, for that exact same reason, cannot encompass the diversity of human behaviour.

Contrarily, the Declaration of Human Rights encompasses all humans within the ideologically Western umbrella that shapes it – proving that it is impossible to go beyond the practice of FGC through a methodological approach enacted by the virtue of these Westernised ‘rights’ - at least as it stands at the moment. However, a relativistic approach does not serve as a more suitable alternative either, because we do believe that human beings (women) carry a fundamental value that needs to be

² Article 5 ” No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”

protected. It is exactly that drive that makes us critique the current foundation of the Declaration of Human Rights, because its foundation does not allow for a complete overarching protection of humans. Bringing this back to FGC, we can thus not neglect that much has been done in the name of ‘rights’ to move beyond the practice. An example of this can be shown by the international pressure that Kenya has been put under to abolish the practice, after signing the Convention on the *Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (James 1988:1040) and the ban of FGC in Egypt in 2008. However, is signing a document and banning the custom really an insurance that the custom will be eradicated, when the methods for applying the pressure and the ban are constructed, maintained and enforced by a fundamental lack of mutual understanding? This is, arguably, the case when Western scholars disacknowledge the work of native activists who speak out against the custom. The fundamental lack of understanding thus leads to interpreting the neo-colonial ‘good intentions’ of the West as cultural domination, which paradoxically enough reinforces the custom (FGC) as an intrinsic value of the societies in question (Lane & Rubinstein 1996:38; Kassamali 1998:54). As a further consequence, making the practice illegal, without a sensitive cultural understanding, means that the process of FGC becomes gentrified, leaving only the wealthy with the possibility of ensuring the custom is executed under sterile conditions, seeing as a ban would not actually ensure that the custom be abolished. We argue that in order to move beyond such backlash, and to construct ‘universal’ human rights that would live up to the name, we, the West, need to listen to and respect the ones outside of our framework, as, as Euben highlighted, it is only through comparison that we can arrive at the bigger overarching questions that are so troublesome to us humans (Euben 1999:11).

Bringing the above stated back to our case, we conclude that, through taking an approach emerging from the concept of rights, a Western construct, in solving an issue, Eltahawy fails to move beyond the problems she acknowledges, and thus refrains from, in fact, resolving them, as her approach does not succeed in allowing a meaningful discussion concerned with what ‘women’s rights’ should include. Therefore, the article, even if removed of its more prominent shortcomings of sensationalism, arguably aggressive tone and generalisations, cannot avoid running into a cul-de-sac in its argumentation. Instead, it must be concluded that Eltahawy,

despite her best intentions, actually ends up reinforcing the stereotypes she so wishes to dismantle

Conclusion

The intention of this project has been to uncover how Eltahawy constructs the ‘Arab world’ and the ‘Arab woman’, through our theoretical foundation of Said’s rearticulation of Orientalism and Mohanty’s concept of intersectionality. As a departure from this, we sought to find what possible consequences there could be in Eltahawy’s way of constructing the ‘Arab world’, examined through a postcolonial feminist and a comparative perspective, hence these two aspects would in combination make it possible to move beyond a simple and uniform criticism of Eltahawy’s article. Our dissection of Eltahawy’s article has shown that her argumentative base emanates from a long tradition of Western philosophy, which has developed a wide array of political and academic schools of thought, such as Western feminism. The concept of the individualised ‘I’ and its neglectable freedom is what paves the way for the entire article, and as such Eltahawy’s unintentional Western feminist rhetoric, by being so extensively caught up in furthering women’s rights through the established institutions that are concerned with human rights (Westernised way of understanding what good human life entails), paradoxically enough ends up framing an entire region as ‘backwards’ and ‘in-need-of-saviour’. This is due to the historicism that defined (and continues to do so) the former colonised and colonising spaces. It seems rather impossible to move beyond this dichotomous discourse, as it appears to be prone to reproduction, even through the best of intentions to disentangle it (Said 1978).

We can thus conclude that, beneath Eltahawy’s to some extent accurate and immediate criticism lies a bigger problem. This is not to say that Eltahawy’s article is not important. It has to a great extent generated consciousness about women in the MENA region and should above all else be understood as a call for change out of frustration. However, despite Eltahawy’s good intentions, the problem that lies as a foundation for her article appears to be that Eltahawy’s gender framed argumentation springs from a fundamental and methodologically flawed structure. This is evident when e.g. moving beyond cultural customs that are hazardous for the health of humans, because said structure is, even though it is interpreted as universal, constructed by virtues that are produced through Western philosophical traditions, and therefore anything but universal. By continuing to operate through this

institutionalised foundation of humanness, we essentially end up doing more harm than good, because we are unable move beyond an ethnocentric outlook, and thus incapable of engaging in meaningful and case-sensitive cross-cultural understandings. In relation to the case of feminism this means that exported Western feminism will time and again fail to achieve the protection of women when applied in a historical context that is born outside of its framework. In order to fully realise emancipating movements and to move beyond the dichotomy of cultural relativity and cultural universality, home-grown feminism is what is needed. Building upon this we can conclude that, the lack of truthful cultural understanding completely neglects the meaningful work that is done by native activists, and thus further cements a discourse of power between the ‘saving’ and ‘in-need-of-saviour’ nations. We can thus derive from the above stated that we need to re-question and thereby re-think new methods for constructing a global juridical system that would protect the well-being of humans, essentially meaning that the Declaration of Human Rights and the activism that emanates from it, need to be re-imagined.

Additional Reflections

Throughout the process of this research, certain questions and ideas have arisen. We must acknowledge, that there is a structural problem in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – as it already suggests its misplaced universality in its title. As the West continues to struggle in understanding the non-West, we see that a dialogue is needed, as the dialogue of encapsulating the issue has, thus far, been initiated by the West and to the West, leaving additional perspectives out. While most nations would certainly agree with the value of, say, ‘freedom’, a more careful approach in defining the means of the concept would need to be taken. Perhaps our view regarding the universal rights could to an extent be construed as relative universality? More contextual understanding would be needed in constituting universal rights – if this is even truly possible. FGC being banned did not eliminate the practice, as the banning did not appear properly justified. As a result, the custom continues to exist, though now more hidden. The practice of human rights should not, by any means, violate the well-being of the people it targets, but the methods in securing this are hardly as quick or simple as we may currently believe.

Informing the people in question is more appropriate and necessary, as is the aim to communicate with them using their own discourse. In other words, a proper human rights foundation would seek to work from *within*, rather than from the outside. Entailing that cultural customs, must be sought to be challenged from their own contextual framework. Such an example is the Moroccan government which started the initiative of Morchidat in 2006, in which female religious leaders are taught the Islamic tradition. Following this, the newly educated women in the practices of Islam travel to the outskirts of the country and not only try to educate rural women, they also speak with these women. Their goal is thus to highlight the problems of e.g. child marriage and women's insufficient education *through* an Islamic framework. By using the women's own discourse, rhetoric and understanding, the Morchidat are challenging patriarchal and misogynistic views on women, that women themselves are the victims and executors of. Such a case-sensitive approach is what is needed, since cultural practices have existed in cultures for centuries. Change and development therefore happens through generations, not overnight.

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