Title
Equity Not Equality: The Gender Discourse of an Egyptian Activist

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Introduction

Since its inception in 1928, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has played a large role in shaping Egyptian politics and society. The 2011 toppling of Hosni Mubarak and the opening up of the political system has led to an increased presence of the movement, with representatives forming a majority in parliament and even winning the powerful presidency. Observers and analysts within and without Egypt continue to have questions about the movement and its motives and perspectives. Fairly or not, the question of the Brotherhood’s stance on women and questions of gender are at the forefront of the debate. Encouraged by the former regime’s propaganda against the opposition movement, as well as the group’s conservative approach, many critics fear that the brotherhood’s ascent will result in a decrease of women’s rights and political participation.

This paper seeks to explore this question through examining the work of one of the movement’s former leaders: Zainab al-Ghazali. Al-Ghazali has bedeviled many observers, as her work within the movement seems to contradict her rhetoric on the role of women within society. While she thrived in the male-dominated sphere of political leadership, she encouraged Muslim women to return to the home and maintain the base of Islamic society: the family. An examination of al-Ghazali’s texts reveals support for women’s rights and participation, but not with the goal of achieving gender equality. Her discourse also displays a connection between conservative gender norms and the postcolonial question of indigenous sovereignty. Understanding this interplay of ideologies not only sheds light on al-Ghazali’s discourse, but also on the ideological roots of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Arriving at Al-Ghazali

Before examining the perspectives of al-Ghazali, it would serve us to briefly discuss the gender discourse in Egypt that proceeded and surrounded al-Ghazali. The Egyptian women’s movement is most commonly associated with Huda Sha’wari, the founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU).
Sha’rawi and other women activists were heavily involved in the Wafd Revolution of 1919, which resulted in increased autonomy from British rule. Despite the critical role played by Egyptian women in the nationalist agitation, they were ultimately denied their demand for suffrage and political representation. In an effort continue the struggle for women’s rights, Sha’rawi established the EFU in 1923. While the nationalist struggle had been achieved, the women of the EFU refused to give up their fight to erase their disadvantaged status. The group’s emphasis on equality in both the private and public spheres is demonstrative of their approach, which was highly modeled after women’s movements in Europe. While this adoption of a western tone may have been welcomed by much of the elite, it was the reason why others rejected Sha’rawi. While Sha’rawi and her followers claimed that they were merely fighting for their “usurped Islamic rights,” many critics disdained the EFU’s apotheosis of European gender norms and practice.

One such critic of this western imitation and gender equality was Zainab al-Ghazali, who was an early member of the EFU. Her decision to leave the organization was based on her dislike of the organization’s western leanings and its disregard for what she believed to be Islamic gender norms, which encouraged separate but equally important roles for men and women. She objected to the EFU’s use of foreign models and disdain for indigenous culture. Al-Ghazali accused the EFU of aping the west, invoking a common accusation during the post-colonial era. Al-Ghazali’s disdain of western feminism is searing throughout her work, and her conflation of colonial politics with gender norms is clear through her insistence that women’s rights be secured through Islam alone.

**Nahwa Bait Muslim: Toward a Muslim Household**

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Zainab al-Ghazali worked as an editor for the Muslim Brotherhood’s periodical, *al Da’wah*, where she managed a column entitled “Nahwa Bait Muslim” or
As the name indicates, her column provided readers with advice on how to live life more piously. Analysis of two articles, “The Muslim Woman” and “The Muslim Woman and the Liberation of Jerusalem” provides insight into al-Ghazali’s view of the role of women in Islamic Society. While she tackles a diverse set of topics, throughout these writings she is consistent on the following three points: the Muslim woman is fundamental to the success of Islamic society; she must fulfill her responsibilities in Islamic da’wah; and she must reject any remnants of western imperialism that remain after the collapse of the formal colonial apparatus.

In an issue from January 1981, al-Ghazali wrote an article entitled, “al-Mara al-Muslima” or “The Muslim Woman.” This article is an illustrative example of al-Ghazali’s belief in the battle between the feminist imperialists of the West who aim to “liberate” Muslim women, and the Islamic nationalists who defend their women and their sovereignty. Al-Ghazali is appalled at the number of Muslim women who have been led astray by feminist propaganda, and who have replaced their religion with a false ideology propagated by the West. She confronts the Muslim women who desire to work outside the home and who attempt to juggle the responsibilities of parenting and working. She accuses such women of blindly dragging down society with their dereliction. Referring to the EFU, al-Ghazali argues that while such women believe themselves to be in a state of awakening, they are in fact clouded by western deceit. Of the feminist movement that took hold in Egypt, al-Ghazali asks if it is achieving greatness or wreaking havoc.

“Is it for her to raise up her house, her children, and her husband to the peak of understanding and to a better social standing? Or, is this movement dissolving the Muslim woman in her imitation of the western woman who is lost and who has become an object of pleasure, unprotected, and whose home is unguarded, and whose privacy has been violated!”

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1 Unless stated otherwise, all translations are original

2 Arabic for “call” or “mission.” Used by members of the Muslim Brotherhood to describe Islamist activism
In al-Ghazali’s opinion, the movement that had claimed to advance society and improve the status of women had, in fact, produced the opposite effect. The imitation of the West in politics, behavior, and dress, had poisoned the community and condemned Muslims to the same unfortunate lot of western, secular atheists. Feminism, as a western import, was destroying the very fabric of Muslim society.

Al-Ghazali is not satisfied with merely criticizing the westernized feminist movement, but goes on to offer advice as to how Egyptian women can manage the disastrous effects of this “foreign” phenomenon. In order to neutralize the deleterious effects of western feminism, al-Ghazali decrees that the Muslim community must return to its Islamic roots, and women should model themselves after the Qur’anic heroines of Hawwa—wife of Adam, Khadija, ‘Aisha, Fatima, Miriam, the Queen of Sheeba, and the wife of Pharaoh in the story of Moses. These women are all considered righteous and pious within Islamic traditions, and therefore models of imitation for Muslim women today. However, as Barbara Stowasser explores in her book, “Women in the Qur’an, Traditions, and Interpretations,” these women represent various paradigms for Muslim women. With this wide spectrum of female archetypes that Muslim women can choose to emulate, it is clear that there is not, nor has there ever been, one “proper” role for the Muslim woman in Islamic traditions. Therefore, al-Ghazali’s command is more of a starting point for an Islamist discourse that approaches feminism through an indigenous lens.

In “al-Mara al-Muslima wa-Tahreer al-Quds” or “The Muslim Woman and the Liberation of Jerusalem” al-Ghazali discusses the role of women in the “liberation” of Jerusalem.


4 Al-Ghazali, “al-Mara al-Muslima

5 Barbara Stowasser, Women in the Qur’an, Traditions, and Interpretation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994)
The “return” of Jerusalem to the umma has been, and continues to be, a rallying cry for Egyptian Islamists. It is a subject which would have been quite familiar for the readers of *al-Da’wah* magazine. Within the various editions from 1981, many articles and cartoons reflect the Muslim Brotherhood’s obsession with the re-conquest of Jerusalem. One such cartoon, published as the cover of the May edition, depicts a bleeding, shackled Dome of the Rock, locked in chains by a star of David. The lock is about to be forcefully struck by an axe, carried by a bearded man. The title of the cartoon commands the reader to “Save the Captured Mosque.” This cartoon is one of the many reminders of the prevalence of the Jerusalem issue in the psyche of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Assuming that her audience was concerned with the “liberation” of Jerusalem, al-Ghazali argues that this issue should be a concern for not only Muslim men, but also Muslim women. The issue should be important to all Muslims, irrespective of nationality, age, or sex. Al-Ghazali asserts that women are just as responsible as men in defending the Islamic nation, and in fighting in God’s path. This equality is one which is found in religious devotion and in religious struggle, but not in social roles or behavior.

In this article, al-Ghazali points to the fact that Israeli women are active in the efforts of their community, and that their participation had greatly benefited Israel. If the enemy was fully utilizing the potential of its population, should the Muslim community not do the same?

“Oh Muslim youth, the Zionist woman carries weapons and benefits her government in many different tasks. Isn’t it time that the Muslim Woman don the silken garb of determination and rectify what has been spoiled by the Zionist woman.”

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Ironically, al-Ghazali seems to be encouraging Muslim women to emulate Zionist women and their participation in the struggle. Al-Ghazali remains ambiguous as to the nature of women’s participation and whether it was to be civil or militant. She prefers to vaguely exhort Muslim women to “be spiritually aware of the Palestinian issue, an issue of the Muslim nation.” Al-Ghazali asserts that the women of the enemy must be matched if there is ever to be any hope of victory.

According to al-Ghazali, the “liberation” of Jerusalem and the advancement of the Islamic nation is a formidable task. It is a mission which all Muslims must undertake, both men and women. Is this emphasis on the important, equal role of women in the struggle a form of feminism? After all, al-Ghazali is clearly advocating the full participation of women in jihad as a prerequisite for success of the mission. She furthers her argument, contending that women should not remain at the margins of society, quietly observing the hollow war cries of men. “The thoughts of our men and women are poisoned by the saber-rattling of our boys and the shyness of our women. In such a state, how will we ever take back Jerusalem?” Her lament for masculinity complements her cries for participation of women in the struggle; men cannot fight this battle alone, but neither can women.

The dual themes of femininity and masculinity are pervasive in this article. Al-Ghazali correlates the loss of Islamic sovereignty with the loss of masculine pride and damaged dignity. Al-Ghazali blames Muslims for having lost their power by compromising their honor, and yet clearly she insists that the perpetuating weakness of the Islamic nation prevents Muslim men and women from restoring that honor. Therefore, what is at stake is not only the political and religious gains to be made

8 Al-Ghazali, “Al-Mara al-Muslima wa Tahreer al-Quds.”

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.
Analysis of these texts reveals al-Ghazali’s true feelings on the nature of the Muslim woman. She is a powerful member of society, whose prescribed role as a mother and wife are intended to empower her, not oppress her. Furthermore, Islam is the true source of her agency. Within Islam, she may demand the respects and rights she deserves, whether they be that of motherhood and domesticity, or that of public leadership and Islamic da’wah. While al-Ghazali claims that there is no need for Western forms of feminism in Islamic societies, her life and work are a testament to how the ideals of feminism can be approached according to indigenous means. Detaching feminism from the narrow quest for gender equality, and expanding it to the idea of gender equity, allows activists like al-Ghazali to be seen as contributors to a new gender discourse that may have greater resonance in conservative, post-colonial societies.

Conclusion

One of the most prominent aspects of al-Ghazali’s discourse is her belief in a stark dichotomy between Islam and the West. Al-Ghazali’s efforts to polarize the West and Islam are not unexpected, nor unprecedented. The tone of her writing is strikingly similar to another member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb, whose work Social Justice in Islam drew similar conclusions about the ideal role of women in Islamic Societies. Also similar to Qutb’s worldview is al-Ghazali’s insistence on a total rejection of the colonial past and a full return to Islam. Both Qutb and al-Ghazali assert that a total rejection of the colonial past was needed if there were to be any hope of an Egyptian and Islamic revival. As Edward Said has most famously argued, the belief in nonporous “civilizations” is a faulty approach based more on imagination than reality. Despite the logical and factual issues with this discourse, it nonetheless was pervasive in both colonizer, colonized, and post-colonial societies. The question of gender norms and women’s social participation was, and continues to be, deeply tied to bigger questions of national, spiritual, and cultural identity. The connection between Al-Ghazali’s

11 Ibid.
conservative gender norms and her virulent anti-colonialism illuminates the historical perspective of the Islamist movement, and reveals the complex relationship between gender and cultural sovereignty.

Bibliography


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12 This argument is most convincingly made by Saba Mahmood in Politics of Piety, a work which greatly influenced my reading of al-Ghazali’s text.