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Muhammad's Intentions & The Male Elite: Women's Rights in Egypt

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12 April 1996
Date
Muhammad's Intentions &
The Male Elite
Women's Rights in Egypt

by

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Abstract

This thesis discusses the relationship between patriarchal attitudes and the interpretation of Islamic text in Egypt. Muhammad supported women's equality and feminists today use his teachings to support their cause. However, feminist interpretations are often ignored for interpretations that favor male dominance and female subjugation. This problem lies not with Islam itself, but in the fact that the Egyptian government bends Islam with the political wind that does not favor equality.

This practice dates back to ancient times when men owned harems, practiced polygamy, and collected women as war booty. Egalitarian interpretations, that favored women's equality, threatened these "privileges"; thus these men suppressed them in favor of patriarchal interpretations. This suppression continues today through the policies of the Egyptian government which would supports male interests over female well-being and equality.
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"Any man who believes that a Muslim woman who fights for her dignity and right to citizenship excludes herself necessarily from the umma [Muslim sisterhood] and is a brainwashed victim of Western propaganda is a man who misunderstands his own religious history [and] his own cultural identity."

-Fatima Mernissi, Moroccan Sociologist

Introduction

Dr. Mernissi, in her book The Veil and The Male Elite, makes a distinction that few westerners ever make in their minds about Islam: the meaning of Qur'anic text versus the way it is interpreted.

The American media tells stories about corrupt police officers in Egypt arresting women for feminist activism, women not allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia, and women beaten in the streets of Iran for not "dressing right." In hearing these stories, many people make no distinctions, but one fact stands out: these countries are generalized as "Islamic."

With that label, the religion, Islam, becomes the object of condemnation. Individuals, after witnessing media sound bites, are more prone to label Islam as sexist and repressive and assume that this is inherent within Islam. However, many women of this faith argue that they find Islam
empowering and blame the sexism not on the Qur'an or the Prophet Muhammad but on the patriarchal leanings of their culture and the corruption of their government.

Before doing this research, I admit that I was often taken by stereotypes which presented the Muslim woman as disempowered by her religion—as opposed to being disempowered by her society or government. But in American society, as differences become more apparent and respected, making assumptions from what one sees on CNN or in Time Magazine can be dangerous. Western culture attaches itself to assumptions and stereotypes and in its attempt to find a "new" Communism, as its enemy, Islam—and its "fundamentalists"—becomes a new target for military dart boards.

Therefore, it is necessary to leave the area of assumptions and make distinctions, the main one being between Muhammad's intentions and the use of Islam by repressive states. In looking closely at the nationalist rhetoric of these societies and the governments, one would notice rigid hierarchies and paranoia. Never once, though, does one consider that these circumstances would influence the interpretation of Qur'anic texts. Just as the Christian Coalition here in the United States uses Bible verses to justify discrimination against homosexuals and single mothers, many powerful Muslims—an elite who's mostly male—
use Qur'anic verses, questionable interpretations, and old Shari'a laws to justify discrimination against women (Ahmed, 1992; Mernissi, 1991; Shaaban, 1995). This elite (a large number of men who profited economically and socially from women's disempowerment) are identified by Fatima Mernissi as the Male Elite.

Islam has been disempowering to women because a majority of Qur'anic interpretations have been done by this Male Elite. Unfortunately, those interpretations carry entrenched attitudes, favoring male dominance, that plague women in modern Muslim societies even today. In order to address these issues, it is necessary to first examine Fatima Mernissi's theory of the Male Elite. After that, the Mernissi theory will be applied to Egypt in order to recognize the entrenched Male Elite attitudes that exists within Egyptian government policy and culture.

The Male Elite left behind a legacy of Islam (called Establishment Islam by Leila Ahmed and in this paper) which, in practice, does not empower women. Mernissi (1991) and Leila Ahmed (1992) both argue that the egalitarian vision of Islam no longer exists in the Middle East and the Establishment Islam, based on elitist interests, becomes the central doctrine.

In reality most Muslims would rather separate themselves from this version of Islam—much like how

The Male Elite came up in arms as Muhammad started introducing Qur'anic passages that gave women autonomy and freedom. Giving women freedom took away men's privilege to treat women as property, and in order to preserve that privilege the Male Elite did everything possible to destroy that autonomy and freedom (Ahmed, 1992; Mernissi, 1991).

Therefore, Chapter II will trace the evolution of the Male Elite and its reaction to Muhammad's vision for women. It will first be important to outline some of the male "privileges" that the Male Elite did not want to give up which basically relegated women to being male property and allowed them very little autonomy. Next, Chapter II will show how Muhammad's teaching that all human beings have free will threatened those privileges. By granting women free will, men would no longer be allowed to trade wives like they were common cattle, and they would certainly not be allowed to interfere with their wives' inheritance or
business transactions. In short, under Muhammad's vision women had autonomy and that autonomy could not be interfered with. Finally, the reader will see how the Male Elite thwarted this vision by twisting Qur'anic verses and later inventing the Shari'a—a4—about two hundred years after Muhammad's death.

Fatima Mernissi constructed this theory generally to cultures as a whole but never to specific countries. The cultures of many Arab and Persian nations have many Male Elite tendencies existing within customs and government policies. Egypt is not an exception to this framework and in order to understand the extent of its Male Elite tendencies it must be examined in the context of Mernissi's theory.

Chapter III analyses Egypt from its ancient roots, which allowed women much economic autonomy, to its present society in which women's status is questionable. Egypt has always had active movements which not only embraced women's liberation but also had a very anti-colonial tone as well. This makes colonialism another factor in determining Egypt's use of Islam in order to mobilize people. For movements, especially nationalist movements, Islam was used as a means towards a "pure, Arab culture." This tactic worked so well that the government noticed it and used it in times of decaying legitimacy. But since the Egyptian government was
run mostly by men who grew up in a patriarchal culture much of how they used Islam was to the disadvantage of women.

Chapter IV is a further analysis of how the Egyptian government practices the techniques of the Male Elite. Here details of Egypt's history will be singled out in order to demonstrate the willingness of the Egyptian government to reinterpret Islamic law and scripture. As stated above, Mernissi never applied the Male Elite theory to any specific countries. Therefore, it is necessary to apply her theory to Egypt to see what elements in Egypt are still under the control of the Male Elite. Examples of Male Elite tendencies include the attitudes the government holds towards women's groups and how the government is always more willing to support legislation that favors male domination. There are also elements that only vaguely fall under Mernissi's theory but are still extremely important in defining women's status. These would include colonization and anti-West sentiments. All these elements share one thing in common: they are used by elites who wish to preserve patriarchy.

Through a review of Islam and the use, or abuse, of its teachings by officials in Egypt, one may perceive Islam in a different light. It will be argued that anytime a belief system is subject to many interpretations it becomes easy to use that system to one's advantage to gain power or
strengthen privileges. Mernissi referred to this type of situation as being a constant in the "story of Islam". This "story" explains beautifully why women in Middle Eastern states are oppressed but also separates the truth in Islam from the lies concocted by the power-hungry. It is these distinctions that will allow one to see Islam not in the way it is depicted on network news broadcasts, but instead in the perceptions of those women who find it an empowering part of their lives.

Methods

The research and evidence for this thesis came from a combination of library resources, electronic information, interviews, and human rights documents. Three of my sources, Ahmed (1992), El Sadaawi (1980, 1993) and Mernissi (1991, 1995) are known for their activity in feminist movements and they write from that perspective. The human rights documents are reports compiled by Middle East Watch (a subdivision of Human Rights Watch) about the discrimination against women in Egypt. These sources were discovered in reviews found about them on the internet. The rest of the sources were discovered by traditional research methods.

The internet interviews were not used to collect factual information. Instead, I utilized the results of
those interviews to comprehend the opinions of Muslim women and clarify Islamic traditions. It was important to see how Muslim women defined their rights in order to allow for cultural sensitivity.

The Egyptian case study is examined in the context of a framework. As mentioned many times above, the chosen framework is that of Mernissi and her theory of the Male Elite.

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1There are many spellings for the Qur'an. "Koran" is the English transliteration, but I use "Qur'an" because it is closer to the Arabic transliteration.

2Mernissi does not capitalize "Male Elite" in her book. I only do so to make the words stand out and present the Male Elite as an entity in itself.

3Due to a growing discomfort I've developed for the term "Islamic Fundamentalism" the term marked will be used instead to describe that which I think Islamic Fundamentalism really is—-Islam as defined centuries ago by the male elite.

4Islamic legal code. It covers administrative structures, court systems, and personal behavior. This thesis will focus on the personal behavior aspect of Shari'a as women are the most affected by these personal behavior laws.
Chapter II
The Politics of Reaction:
Evolution of the Male Elite and Establishment Islam

Women and the Male Elite

Muhammad had a grand vision of women's autonomy but it was not met without dissension. During Muhammad's time, men had power over women that concretized in patriarchal social structures. Those privileges did not always exist and women in previous societies (some dating back to the Neolithic period) were considered very powerful.

The androcentric views that demoted women to a subordinate place in society are believed to have emerged with the rise of urban centers and warfare (Ahmed, 1992; Eisler, 1987). Archaeological evidence, that pre-dated urban centers, pointed towards matriarchal societies who worshipped powerful goddesses. But as the urban center became predominant so did a warrior culture whose focus was control and conquest. (Ahmed, 1992, pp. 11-12, Eisler, 1987, p. 44).

The societies had matriarchal structures and were described as peaceful and cooperative with an emphasis on agriculture. Women were responsible for harvesting the fields and there was a mysticism surrounding childbirth (Eisler, 1987, pp. xvi-xvii). These types of societies existed all over Europe and in the Middle East and as
agriculture became more advanced these societies and their values became predominant (Ahmed, 1992, p.12; Eisler, 1987, p. 44).

Warfare was not commonplace until the invasions by Asiatic and northern nomadic peoples began. These invasions are divided into three waves: wave one: 4300-4200 BCE, wave two: 3400-3200 BCE, and wave three: 3000-2800 BCE. There were many names for these invaders but I will limit this review to the people who invaded the Middle East: the Kurgans. Like the other invaders, they brought into matriarchal Neolithic societies an ethic of destruction and male gods of war. As a result, these societies absorbed the ethics of their conquerors (Eisler, 1987, p. 44).

The Kurgans brought destruction and an ethic that placed women inferior to men because of their lack of physical strength and their reproductive capacities:

Now everywhere the men with the greatest power to destroy--the physically strongest, most insensitive, most brutal--rise to the top, as everywhere the social structure becomes more hierarchical and authoritarian. Women--who as a group are physically smaller and weaker than men, and who are most closely identified with the old view of power symbolized by the life-giving and sustaining chalice--are now gradually reduced to the status they are to hold hereafter: male-controlled technologies of production and reproduction (Eisler, 1987, p. 53).

Urban centers also produced a demand for labor and thus, an economic need for a larger population. This new cultural perspective further shifted women into a primarily
biological role that superseded skills or abilities women may have been allowed in pre-urban societies. Society also encouraged polygamy as a means of increasing populations. In order to meet this new demand for more wives, it became common practice for warriors to kidnap women captives in their conquests of surrounding cultures (Ahmed, 1992, p. 12; Eisler, 1987, p. 48).

Women's sexuality, and women themselves, became the property of men. This entrenchment of male dominance and warfare ethics divided urban societies on class and gender lines:

The growth of complex urban societies and the increasing importance of military competitiveness further entrenched male dominance and gave rise to a class-based society. . .Women's sexuality was designated the property of men, first of the woman's father, then of her husband, and female sexuality purity (virginity in particular) became economically valuable property (Ahmed, 1992, p. 12).

The harem and placing value on female sexuality were also introduced by the Kurgans because they were the first to set up harems in this region:

For instance, these findings indicate that in some Kurgan camps the bulk of female population was not Kurgan, but rather of the Neolithic Old European population. What this suggests is that the Kurgans massacred most of the local men and children but spared some women, who they took for themselves as concubines, wives, or slaves. . .In Numbers 31:32-35, for example, we read that among the spoils of war taken. . .there were, in this order, sheep, cattle, asses, and thirty-two thousand girls who had no intercourse with a man (Eisler, 1987, p. 49).
The Kurgans' practices of war and female enslavement were quite contagious and were passed on for hundreds of years. Warfare and misogyny, though, were not limited to societal preferences— they were often enforced by law. In Mesopotamia, Assyrian law enforced women's subjugation with statutes that allowed abuse—even mutilation—of wives who "would not obey." Also, the laws clearly stated that a husband's family was his property and he could sell his wife and children into slavery in order to pay his debts. Even killing his wife and children, with or without a reason, was acceptable under law and societal mores (Ahmed, 1992, pp. 12-13).

Also in Mesopotamia, religious beliefs encouraged these attitudes. In the regions around present day Iran and Iraq, the religion of the upper-classes was Zoroastrianism and the religion was state-sanctioned by a ruling class known as the Sasanians. Sasanian culture and Zoroastrianism was geared specifically towards male domination—especially in Sasanian values of wealth and wifely obedience. The combination of these values equated women with other property that these rulers would have—animals, land, and slaves. Persian royalty considered large harems as a reflection of wealth and prestige. Women were then not only considered sexual objects for the satisfaction of men, but they also had powerful economic value (Ahmed, 1992, pp. 12-13).
The "woman-as-property" mind set was not just limited to harems and the wealth of the royalty. Women were also lent and traded in the name of fraternalism. For example, Zoastrianistic doctrine and Persian culture allowed husbands to loan out their wives to other men—usually to widowers who needed a woman for household chores and sexual favors—without the permission of that wife (Ahmed, 1992, p. 20). Just like with other property, women were not considered thinking beings and society denied that they had free will. Therefore, women's decisions and opinions were not important but their ability to take orders from their husband was paramount.

Of all wifely attributes, obedience was the most decisive in separating the bad wives from the good. It was the characteristic that husbands would use most frequently in assessing the value of their wives and their testimony about that obedience could be used in court when men wanted a divorce. This had the potential to be very damaging to women because a woman that was found to be "disobedient" could lose her family and if she had been lucky enough to inherit property that could be seized as well. She would then be basically left to starve to death unless another man would marry her—which rarely happened because attitudes dictated that marrying non-virgins was immoral and disgusting. In fact, any type of economic or social status
of women depended strictly on what their husbands would allow them. Just as women, in essence, belonged to their husbands, everything from their status to their property belonged to their husbands as well (Ahmed, 1992, pp. 20-21).

In the Middle East, specifically within the Byzantine Empire, obedience was valued as well but it took on another dimension. A girl was perceived as primarily a burden who would be married off at about twelve or thirteen (Ahmed, 1992, p. 26), which demonstrates how her value as property took precedence over her value as a human being.

In addition, women were also expected to be silent and live a cloistered lifestyle:

Proper conduct of girls entailed that they be neither seen or heard outside their home. Women were not supposed to be seen in public and were kept 'cloistered as prisoners,' although women and young girls might be allowed to leave the house to attend marriages, births, religious events or go to public baths (Ahmed, 1992, p. 27).

In the private sphere women were considered inferior to men, but in the public sphere Byzantine women were allowed some economic autonomy. Byzantine women found employment in public baths, midwifery and even in business and trade. This allowed them some direct competition with men, but if they had to testify in court (which was allowed if there was a shortage of male witnesses) or get a divorce they would be quickly reminded of their true status in society. In family matters, men were allowed ultimate power and outlets for
women to question that power were either very limited or nonexistent (Ahmed, 1992, p. 27).

Perceptions about women were not only institutionalized in religion, law and societal mores but were also encouraged by foreign ideologies that penetrated these Eastern cultures. Greek and Roman philosophy—especially that of Aristotle—presented women as highly irregular beings incapable of logic or autonomy (Ahmed, 1992, p. 28). This influence "conceptualized women not merely as subordinate by social necessity but also as innately and biologically inferior in both mental and physical capabilities—and thus intended for their subservient position by 'nature'" (Ahmed, 1992, p. 29).

Although women could be very successful within the economic realm during this time period (from 330 CE to 640 CE), they would still be perceived as inferior due to societal attitudes. Of all the functions allowed to women, marriage and reproduction were foremost. As a result, keeping women subjugated within the private sphere and making divorce difficult for wives kept women not only disempowered under the law but reminded them of their inferior status within the home.

Therefore, everything from the power structure advocated within harems to the values placed on women's obedience granted one overwhelming benefit to men: a
patriarchal power structure in which men benefited from female enslavement. These benefits would later interfere with Muhammad introducing the new ideas the first Islamic societies endorsed for women.

Muhammad's Vision for Women

Around 615-620 CE, Muhammad professed two beliefs that had been unconsidered since the rise of urbanization: a) he stressed the spiritual equality of women, thus granting them free will, and b) he granted women rights through Islam and the Qur'an that were based on this spiritual equality. Both edicts directly challenged the foundations of patriarchal societies by granting women roles outside their place as male property.

Above all else, Muhammad stressed the spiritual equality between men and women. For the Middle East, the Qur'an was one of the first texts since pre-urban times to endorse such a view:

For men who submit themselves wholly to Allah, and women who submit themselves to Him and men who believe and women who believe, and men who obey Allah and women who obey Him, and men who are truthful and women who are truthful, and men who are steadfast and women who are steadfast, and men who are humble and women who are humble, and men who give alms and women who give alms, and men who fast and women who fast, and men who guard their chastity and women who guard their chastity, and men who remember Allah and women who remember Him, Allah as prepared forgiveness and a great reward (Qur'an 33:351, as cited in Mernissi, 1991).
Thus Muhammad made an extra effort to include both genders in his teachings and how he viewed both men and women as being equal in the eyes of Allah.

Muhammad educated both men and women about his movement, and was open to the opinions and questions of all his students—no matter the gender. Before the verse cited above came into being, a group of women he was instructing wanted to know why women were not mentioned in the Qur'an, and later, one of his more intellectually endowed wives, Umm Salama, also inquired about this issue (Ahmed, 1992; El Sadaawi, 1980; Mernissi, 1991). After some time pondering, he arrived at conclusions (like the one quoted above) which stressed the equality of women—and it is to this day one of the most important Islamic hadiths or traditions (Khan, 1995; Mernissi, 1991, pp. 118-119).

After justifying the spiritual equality of women, Muhammad also endorsed more specific rights. Many of his wives—especially A'isha and Umm Salama—observed pre-Islamic societies and inquired many times on the rights of women concerning marriage and property (Ahmed, 1992; El Sadaawi, 1980; Mernissi, 1991). These rights are so scattered throughout the Qur'an and subject to interpretation that a separate branch of study is devoted to women's rights in Islam. I such scholar, Muhammad Sharif Chaudhry, wrote a book called *Women's Rights in Islam*. 

Chaudhry (1991) examined women's rights in many spheres including the workplace, religion, and the home. In all spheres women are considered spiritually and morally equal and are granted the following rights: a) the right to own property, b) the right to work, c) the right to be free from structural or human-induced violence, d) the right to be free from poverty, e) the right to fair treatment from her husband, and f) the right to vote and join political discourse. Polygamy, despite Western myths, is not permitted without permission from the first wife.

Of all these rights, the one that has been considered the most innovative was the one that allowed women to own property. It not only solidified economic rights to inheritance but also condemned the attitude that women, and their sexuality, were only valuable as the property of men:

[Under Muhammad] [n]ot only would a woman no longer be 'inherited' like camels and palm trees, but she would herself inherit. She would enter into competition with men for the sharing of fortune: 'Unto the men (of a family) belongeth a share of that which parents and near kindred leave, and unto the women a share of that which parents and near kindred leave, whether it be little or much—a legal share'. . .Before this verse, only men were assured the right of inheritance in Arabia and women were usually part of the inherited goods (Mernissi, 1991, p.120).
Islamic scholars, like Chaudhry (1991) put rights on paper and define them in the context of Qur'anic scripture and in legalistic terms. These rights are worth the paper they are on, but unless they also exist in practice, these rights have no meaning. But many women do recognize these rights and truly believe that Islam is empowering because of the existence of these rights in scholarly works and the Qur'an. Sadida, a Muslim woman, who works for women's education, summed it up this way:

Islam is over 1400 [sic] years old with an excellent written record of what are the rights of women. Based on this, I can say without hesitation that Islam does NOT [her own emphasis] abuse women. Complete economic freedom, the right to participate in the political process, freedom in the choice of [a] husband, divorce, remarriage, even birth control and abortion, a Muslim woman has all these rights and more under Shari'a. . .[Sadida, personnel communication, September 30, 1995].

Nasreen Sharif, Chaudhry's wife, expressed the same type of view; she explained in the introduction of Women's Rights in Islam:

The Qur'an invariably calls man and woman as spouses of each other, companions, and helpmates. Besides restoring her human dignity, Islam bestowed on the woman innumerable rights in almost every field of human life. In terms of rights and status, what the modern western woman has achieved today by hectic struggles and violent means, is nothing as compared to the rights Islam gave her fourteen centuries earlier without her asking or demanding them (quoted in Chaudhry, 1991, p.xiii).

Chaudhry (1991) found that what has made equality for western women difficult was the fact they were forced to
struggle for the rights (or groups of rights) that are listed above. Muslim women, Chaudhry believes, were freed of this struggle because they were granted equality, by doctrine, fourteen hundred years ago by Muhammad. These rights emerged because Muhammad advocated women's free will—a philosophy dangerous to societies that viewed women as sexual or biological objects:

If woman's sovereign will was accepted, she would no longer be a private sex object that could be kidnapped, exchanged, stolen, bought, and sold. To prevent this from happening, it was necessary to attack the Prophet's wives and show that they could not escape the immemorial female destiny of being a creature deprived of judgment, of will, an object on which the will of another is exerted (Mernissi, 1991, p.186).

But, it was the kidnapping, the buying and selling, and the ownership of women that fed the ancient male ego. When women could inherit it cut down on the amount of property men could inherit. When women were no longer considered part of the booty that decreased the amount of property even more. According to Mernissi (1991), an angry and powerful group of men were able to defeat Muhammad's efforts towards women's liberation because they simply did not like what it did to their "privileges."

The Fall of Muhammad's Vision and the Rise of the Male Elite

Muhammad's vision faced some inconsistencies within his own practices and his verses were subject to blatant self-
interested misinterpretation by a group Mernissi (1991) coined as the "Male Elite." This same group also favored some Qur'anic verses over others in order to legitimize their power over women.

The Male Elite can easily be defined, in the context of Mernissi's book, as the upper-class strata of men who benefited economically and socially from the oppression of women. In the societies I described in the beginning of the last section (e.g., Sasanian culture in Mesopotamia and the Byzantine culture in the Middle East), the Male Elite would be the men who owned the harems and captured women as prizes of war. These privileges were so precious to these men that they would be extremely opportunistic in finding ways to beat Muhammad's ethics and reinstate their power over women. The first area the Male Elite attacked was Muhammad's private life.

Muhammad's own marriage practices observed by the Male Elite gave them plenty of ground to capitalize on pre-Islamic traditions that kept women subordinate. Muhammad kept concubines and married A'isha when she was about ten—conduct that resembled pre-Islamic customs. Chaudhry (1991) and Mernissi (1991) argued that the marriage of minors and the bondage of female slaves was deplorable but they are never specific in judging these customs when the Prophet practiced them.
Ahmed (1992) clears up this dualism by offering two interpretations concerning the actions of the prophet: one, Allah allowed certain practices for the prophet that were not allowed for other men, and two, Orthodox Muslims decided that Muhammad's practices were an example for all Muslim men (1992, P. 71). It is not difficult to determine which position the Male Elite preferred. After all their interest was to preserve the androcentric values of their previous society. So despite anything Muhammad preached, they continued to marry young girls and buy concubines—because of the example they believed Muhammad provided for them. In the case of these marriage customs, Muhammad's actions spoke louder than his words (Ahmed, 1992, p. 71).

Secondly, the Male Elite looked into the Qur'an to find quotes that they could use to justify male dominance. By doing this they entered the practice of picking and choosing Qur'anic verses and misinterpreting the ones that supported women's rights. When Muhammad began introducing rights for women and declaring their spiritual equality the Male Elite became extremely concerned. But, what the Male Elite really feared was that these rights would then escalate into letting women fight wars and collect booty (Mernissi, 1991, p. 121).

Like inheritance, women fighting and collecting booty intruded on what men considered "their ground" and it would
lessen the amount of material goods that men felt they were entitled to--because war booty was divided up among the soldiers. Of all these war goods, the Male Elite found female captives to be the most valuable. Therefore, they were in conflict whether to obey Islam or meet their material needs. Muhammad noticed the extent of these conflicting interests, but continued to push the ideals of Islam that put women apart from the bounty (Mernissi, 1991, p.138).

Basically, the Male Elite converted to Islam without really understanding what they were getting into. They did not expect any leanings towards women's liberation and they found that the religion that was to improve their lives was also stripping them of those powers they held dear:

These men, who came to Islam to enrich themselves and have a better life were caught by surprise by this dimension of the new religion. They suddenly found themselves stripped of their most personal privileges. And unlike slavery that affected only the wealthy, the change in the status of women affected them all. No man was spared, whatever his class or means (Mernissi, 1991, p.126).

In order to re-establish their "private privileges" the Male Elite went on a relentless search to find some verse within Qur'anic text that would allow them to regain their power. They found it, although its origin is not known:

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women. . .As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill--conduct, admonish them, refuse to share their
beds, beat them; but if they return to obedience, seek not against them (Qur'an 4:34).

Scholars suspected that this verse surprised Muhammad as much as it surprised the Male Elite (Mernissi, 1991, p.155). Sources show he did not approve of the verse and certainly did not approve of hitting women. But only one point is clear on this issue: this verse was chosen over sura 33:35 (quoted above) because of the positive implications it had for male supremacy. Not only that, it is argued that this verse may not have come from Muhammad at all, but was an invention that came from a false prophet who was only interested in preserving the status quo (Mernissi, 1991, p. 155-56).

The latter theory is fairly likely because interpretation was always subject to androcentric interests:

The practices and living arrangements of the dominant classes of the Abasid era [750-1258CE] were such that at an implicit and often explicit level, the words woman, and slave, and object for sexual use came close to being indistinguishably fused. Such practices, and the conceptions they gave rise to, informed the dominant ideology and affected how Islam was heard and interpreted in this period and how its ideas were rendered into law (Ahmed, 1992, p.67).

During the time of the androcentric interpretations Muhammad was vulnerable due to his losses in battle, his old age, and the problems he was having bringing order to the newly conquered city of Medina. Medina added another element of the Male Elite--specifically Medine men who did not want to change their repressive traditions involving women.
Many Medinese members of the Male Elite preyed on Muhammad's vulnerabilities and harassed his wives (Mernissi, 1991, p.163). The prophet's priorities then switched from pushing women's liberation to protecting the safety of the Muslim citizens and his own wives, who faced harassment from the Medinese:

Women, whatever their status, were being harassed in the streets, pursued by men who subjected them to the humiliating practice of *ta'arrud*—literally 'taking up a position long a woman's path to urge her to fornicate,'... At this point the Prophet's problem was no longer freeing women from the chains of Islamic violence, but simply assuring the safety of his own wives and those of the other Muslims in a city that was hostile and out of control (Mernissi, 101, p.180).

The hostility that the Muslims and Muhammad's wives faced caused a shift in Muhammad's ideology that went from liberating women to protecting them. From there on forward, women's liberation would be nothing more than an unrealized vision. Misinterpretation, being selective of Qur'anic verses, making women feel unsafe, and the lack of direct challenges to the Male elite all allowed the privileges to remain intact after. These attitudes remain within Islamic societies today.

So, where do these attitudes exist? After all, the previous section offered narratives of women (Sadida and Sharif) who believed Islam was empowering. But those women are Americans who practice Islam in a free society. Sexist attitudes in Islam, though, exist in societies that sponsor
the Islam of the Male Elite— which Ahmed (1992) calls Establishment Islam. To westerners, this Establishment Islam would be what we know as Islamic Fundamentalism. But Ahmed (1992) and Mernissi (1991) find "Islamic Fundamentalism" an inaccurate term because if Islam were interpreted fundamentally and fairly, it would not oppress women like many of these societies do.

Therefore, it is important to see what women living under Establishment Islam perceive their rights. By looking at a narrative from a woman who grew up under Establishment Islam, one sees a view that is primarily cultural, rather than religious.

Magida Salman, a Lebanese feminist, in her essay, "The Arab Woman" described the characteristics of gender relations in the Middle East—the area where the Male Elite emerged and Establishment Islam reigns supreme (Khamsin, 1987, p.3). In her section about the family, she described a model situation where Male Elite ethics remain paramount:

The role of the woman in the Arab-Muslim family does not allow for nuances; she is a mother, a sister, or a wife. A woman can never be a friend or a lover. She lives in a society where genders never mix, where she encounters a man only on specific occasions: when she gives birth, has to report to him (as a father or brother) or when she marries him (Salman, 1987, p.8).

This describes what the social system was basically like for those living under the Male Elite and practicing that epitome of all virtues--obedience. That isn't the only
legacy the Male Elite have brought to Arab society. The idea that men own the sexuality of women also remains within that realm:

As Islam never believed that the woman preferred to sublimate her sexuality, that she should endure it in order to beget off-spring, Islam decided to confine women's movement to the spaces that the man could control (Salman, 1987, p.9).

The empowering narratives of Islam described by Sadida and Sharif, and the narrative of Salman do not contradict one another. All have elements of truth within them. The difference is the first were taken in the context of Islam under Muhammad's vision, and the other was in the context of Establishment Islam. When Islam is separate from oppressive cultural elements, then one realizes Islam in its ethical sense; in which it would be fair to women—especially in the family sphere. After all, those laws that could have been fair to women were never introduced in the societies where establishment Islam gained ground (Ahmed, 1992, p.91).

In Establishment Islam, human rights and women's dignity as expressed by Muhammad has practically been forgotten. Even today, the ideology of the Male Elite keep these societies, and the women, as captives:

The religion was Islam and the Prophet was Muhammad. And that his egalitarian message today sounds so foreign to many in our Muslim societies that they claim it to be imported is indeed one of the great enigma's of our times. . .if women's rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran [sic] nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition,
but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of the male elite [sic]. . . trying to convince us that their egotistic, highly subjective, and mediocre view of culture and society has a sacred basis (Mernissi, 1991, p.ix).

Since these attitudes continue exist in the modern world, it is essential that Mernissi's theory is taken one step beyond her original theory and include a case study. After all, unless it is applied to an actual society, Mernissi's theory is limited to a story of old times and not taken into a true cultural framework. Egypt was chosen as a case study for reason that are described in Chapter II, but viewing in light of Mernissi's theory shows that patriarchal Egyptian attitudes are rooted not in truth or Muhammad's original vision for women's liberation, but are instead rooted in the patriarchal culture the Male Elite improved upon.

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1 Mernissi cites this verse from Marmaduke Pickthall's *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*
2 "Islamic Fundamentalism" is essentially just Establishment Islam--basically the collection of interpretations that favor male privilege.
Chapter III
Egypt, Women, and the Rise of Establishment Islam

Introduction

Egypt is interesting because its social mores and the way it interprets Islam are extremely problematic. In Ancient Egypt, women were as active in business transactions as men and they had the right to stipulate terms in marriage contracts. Now, Egypt is a society of mixed virtues: many women are in higher education and getting high paid jobs, yet at the same time, if they were to organize feminist groups or attempt to get a divorce the values of Establishment Islam would quickly come to surface. Establishment Islam thus became the accepted form of Islam—its spiritual antecedents are practically obsolete. Egyptian nationalist movements and their aim to return to a "pure" Arab society were complete with Establishment Islam and all its dogma concerning women.

Colonialism

By the time the Arabs invaded Egypt and converted its citizens to Islam, Egypt had already started on a downhill path as far as the rights of women were concerned. In fact, much of this decline happened as Greek and Roman philosophy spread through the Middle East—especially those values promoted by Aristotle—and women started to lose the
property and marriage rights they had in ancient times (Ahmed, 1992, p.33).

Many societies that Islam had penetrated had already been misogynistic in their laws and customs. But as mentioned above, the Male Elite was always anxious to find new ways to justify their superiority. After reinterpreting the Qur'an and justifying their convictions through Muhammad's conduct, they would find a new way to defend their power---promoting the patriarchal aspects of the cultures they conquered (Ahmed, 1992, p.36).

In Egypt, women were allowed to own property, but Aristolien ideas that were brought to the Egyptians by the spread of Roman and Greek mores put them in an inferior sphere compared to men--especially when it came to marriage. These mores left the property issue untouched but in marriage laws, women could no longer stipulate marriage contracts and divorce was difficult--unless they were independently wealthy and could bribe their husbands, but this left poor women vulnerable to abuse (Ahmed, 1992, pp.106-107). This situation was tolerated and sometimes encouraged by the Male Elite invaders, despite the original interpretations of Qur'anic text. Egyptian women found themselves in an inferior sphere and it wasn't until the beginning of the modernization campaign when this inferior status started to become questionable.
Economic encroachment from the West, though, forced Egypt to look towards modernization in the early nineteenth century. Many Islamic societies—especially Egypt—started to envy the European world and wonder how they could reach their stage of modernization. At this stage, the people were very curious about these cultures and foreign influence was not perceived as a threat. That curiosity, though, would start to turn into resentment as Western countries became directly involved with internal affairs. In Egyptian history, the country with the most pervasive record in this direct involvement was Great Britain (Ahmed, 1992; Bromley, 1994).

British occupation of Egypt began in 1882 and ended officially in 1952 when Nasser took over with his coup d'état. Britain saw a potential market in Egypt, thus it imported goods and built factories. Also, Britain had another vested interest in Egypt that they felt justified continued occupation: the Suez Canal. Britain, therefore, had both economic interests and strategic interests that were vital to its empire (Bromley, 1994, p.129).

As the British started to enter the picture, the leader, Muhammad 'Ali, was passing reforms in order to "Europeanize" Egypt. He built factories to push Egypt towards industrialization, concentrated land into the hands of a rich few, and stressed a European form of education
This modernization campaign invited many Europeans to come to Egypt and invest and Egyptian students were encouraged by the government to study in Europe.

Many of 'Ali's reforms would start antagonisms that would not be soon forgotten. It was well known that he was taking a European approach to development, but soon afterwards, it would also be well known that this approach was not working. Due to this, people would perceive him and his policies as pawns of foreign influence which were destroying the country.

From the land reforms, which displaced peasants and set up estates, 'Ali created a heavily landed aristocracy. This aristocracy was very involved in governmental affairs and 'Ali found himself vulnerable to their suggestions. This type of cooperation between a higher class and the government became a habit that would be hard to break (Bromley, 1994, p.129).

Concentrating land into huge parcels not only hurt the peasants but the rapid modernization threw Egypt into debt (Shukrallah, 1994, p.18). However, modernization did realize two important improvements for marginalized groups. First, slavery was abolished, but that job wasn't quite finished until the British started their occupation (Mernissi, 1991, p.151). More significant, though, was the
second effect: increased education for women. It started out on a small scale with the School of Hakimas (professional female physicians) and then it evolved to upper-class families investing more money into their daughters’ education. In 1875, 3,000 Egyptian girls were attending European-style schools, by 1887, the number had increased to 4,000. When the British missionaries arrived, they too set up schools which lower-class children could attend for free—although parents were ambivalent about sending their children to missionary schools due to the emphasis on Christianity and conversion (Ahmed, 1992, p.135).

The British put a lot of energy into education but at the same time they considered Egypt to be a "backward" country with little going for it. Therefore, the British took it upon themselves to "civilize" Egypt (Ahmed, 1992).

The British pushed their ideas of modernization and their idea of Western "Enlightenment." The leadership encouraged this because they wanted Egypt to join the civilized world. Unfortunately, though, things got a bit messy. This transfusion of British influence caused economic problems, debt, and more colonization. Egyptians began to feel embittered about their colonial situation and their attitudes towards the British changed from admiration and curiosity to resentment (Shukrallah, 1994, pp.18-19).
The British, though, did not stop with economic and military intervention. One area they found the most backward about Egypt was the treatment of women and girls—especially in terms of the veil. Hence, the Liberation Campaign began where 'Ali left off: education reform that focused on "Europeanizing" young girls. This reform set up more schools for the children of poor families, but the emphasis was on girls' schools. These schools for girls had a student body of many social classes—giving the British widespread opportunity to spread their influence.

With the establishment of these schools, the British decided to take their influence into the cultural realm and the went for the most visible target: veiling. European feminists who taught in Egyptian schools encouraged young girls to remove their veils. Eugenie Le Brun, who taught at one of these schools, would tell young girls that removing the veils was the first step to female liberation (Ahmed, 1992, p.154). Although she was well-meaning in her attempt, her suggestions were taken as an assault on Arab culture.

Arabs placed high cultural significance upon veils and they perceived the Liberation Campaign as extremely offensive. Veils had existed in pre-Islamic societies to separate free women from slave women; free women wore veils, slave women did not. In the first Islamic societies, veils were hardly ever worn, until Muhammad conquered Medina. As
mentioned above, the Medinese were hostile towards Muhammad and Muslim women. So in order to protect themselves, these women wore veils—because it symbolized that they were "respectable" women and thus men would quit trying to lure them into alleys for a brief moment of fornication. In other words, it protected them from the sexual harassment that was acceptable for men to practice on slave women. This tradition remains throughout Arab society, including Egypt, as women today feel "safer" and more respected when they wear the veil (Ahmed, 1992, p. 224; Mernissi, 1991, p.187; Salman, 1987, pp.10-11).

Therefore, what the British found degrading, Arab women found empowering and protective. Unfortunately, the sentiments of the Arab women were never considered. Thus the Liberation campaign and its European elements expanded.

Female missionaries also endorsed European Liberation judgments. Statements like Muslim women "were buried alive behind the veil," and that "they needed to be rescued by their Christian sisters" were popular in missionary propaganda (Ahmed, 1992, pp.151-152). As noted above, veiling was perceived by the British as the mark of inferiority: not just of women in Egyptian society but of Egyptian-Arab culture. Just the fact that the men needed to veil "their women" was enough for the British to assume the entire culture was—in their interpretation—savage. Thus
feminism in the terms of this Liberation movement was used as another method towards "civilizing" Egypt:

Whether in the hands of patriarchal men or feminists, the ideas of Western feminism essentially functioned to morally justify the attack on native societies and to support the notion of the comprehensive superiority of Europe. Evidently, then, whatever the disagreements of feminism with white male domination within Western societies, outside their borders feminism turned from being the critic of the system of white male domination to being its docile servant. . .feminism, or the ideas of feminism, served as its [colonialism's]. . .handmaid (Ahmed, 1992, pp.154-155).

The leader of the Unveiling Campaign was British consul general Lord Cromer. Cromer was the inventor of the idea that the veiling of Egyptian women exposed the inferiority of Egyptian men. Only by unveiling the women, he argued, could the men be civilized and the women liberated (Ahmed, 1992, p.153).

Although it may seem well-meaning, much of this feminism was practiced in prejudice and imperialism. Some female missionaries and teachers were racists and ethnocentrists as much as they were feminists and they only espoused their type of Western-style feminism that Egyptians found insulting. Lord Cromer, although he was always passionate about the rights of Egyptian women to not be veiled, was a member and president of the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage. Therefore, his support of women's liberation appeared extremely insincere.
Many Egyptian citizens recognized British feminism as an imperialistic tool aimed against their culture. Female Liberation was perceived as an enemy out to destroy their culture and in no way were its ideals allowed to be embraced. The colonial link to nineteenth century female liberation movements gave more legitimacy to the male-dominated culture of the Male Elite. As reaction to western imperialism grew, men, who wanted to preserve their dominance, were able to utilize the growing demand to return to a "pure" Arab culture which reinstated Establishment Islam. Arguments supporting Establishment Islam became stronger as resentment towards colonialism spread (Shukrallah, 1994, p.17). But before these movements towards cultural purity would start, they had to wait for the failures of its predecessors.

The Rise (and Fall) of Women's Social Movements

The failures of modernization and the practice of cultural imperialism forged a stringent national identity on the Egyptians. From this identity, the Egyptians developed a rich history for activism against their oppressors. This activism still exists today within modern feminist and Islamic movements. But it was the failure of past movements that had citizens feeling displaced enough to turn towards movements rooted in Establishment Islam and pure Arab
identity. Where the past movements failed, the radical male-dominated Islamic movements picked up. It is necessary to go over these failures in order to understand why Establishment Islam and patriarchy became so powerful. Therefore, the following movements will be evaluated: the Communist Movement, the Radical Feminist Movement, and then finally, the series of nationalist Islamic movements (Botman 1987; Shukrallah, 1994, p.18).

Egypt was a society of rigid social hierarchies, causing the Communist Movement to gain popularity among the lower classes (Botman, 1987, pp.16-17; El Saadawi, 1993, p.140). It started in the 1920's, went dead in the 1930's and was revived in the 1940's. The Communist Movement was most profound in that it protested the social hierarchies in Egypt—including the Egyptian class system and the profound hierarchy between the British colonizers and the Egyptian natives (Botman, 1987, p.17).

Women were active in the movement, especially working women who were exploited by western style factories that made them labor for fourteen hours a day for two pence in inhumane working conditions (El Saadawi, 1993, p.140). The problem was, as these women found themselves scared of losing work they dropped out of the movement making the Communist membership more middle class than working class. Also, although it did not tolerate societal hierarchies, it
did not advocate throwing the British out of Egypt. Both the middle class focus and the lack of nationalism distanced the movement from the people (Botman, 1987, p.17).

Another factor which alienated women from the movement, was that they were not treated equally by their male colleagues. As women became more and more aware of their situation in both the communist movement and in society, they started feminist movements one of which being the Radical Feminist Movement (Botman, 1987, p.18).

The new awareness fostered by the Radical Feminist Movement allowed women to become more bold in fighting for their civil rights. Before the formation of the Radical Feminist Movement, there were moderate feminist movements that only asked for small concessions from the patriarchal structure (Botman, 1987, p.21; El Saadawi, 1993, pp.142-143).

The Radical Feminists were also fervent nationalists and blamed their decline in society on colonialism. Many combined the plight of the nation with the plight of women as illustrated from a pamphlet published in the mid-1940's by the League of Women Students and Graduates:

...Struggle for the widest freedoms, struggle for liberation from oppression, hunger and aggression; struggle by ourselves and for ourselves; ...struggle to create a free, noble life for Egyptian women under the sovereignty of a free and noble country; struggle to realize democratic freedom for women in Egypt--that is the freedom which cannot arrive under the shadow of
the imperialist and imperialism nor under the shadow of enslavement and exploitation (quoted in Botman, 1987, 21).

Colonialism was isolated as not only a problem of the nation but as a subjugator of Egyptian women. European ideas about women, they believed, had been forced on them and made them subordinate. For philosophical guidance, the movement looked to their roots in ancient Egypt where women had the rights to vote, keep property and stipulate marriage contracts. The battle against sexism and the battle against imperialism became linked together with the common objective of ending subjugation (El Saadawi, 1993, p.139).

The Radical Feminists hoped for a society that existed before foreign invasion and even before misogynistic patriarchs seized control. They pursued rights that resemble those in Chaudhry's book and were available in ancient Egypt: the right to vote, available child care, social security, equal pay for equal work, and democracy. Ideas of sovereignty and equal government also attracted a few men to the movement as well as the lower classes. Women's rights still fell into a very problematic realm but no one wanted the British to be in Egypt. So the nationalist sentiments of this movement became a unifying factor between women and men (Botman, 1987, p.21).

It did not take long, though, for forces to stand up against the League and its associate organizations.
Unorganized non-egalitarian Muslim men stalked feminists and often times feminists and communists were subject to violence (Botman, 1987, p.23).

One communist-feminist, Latifa al-Zayat, known for her student activism, was often called "a prostitute" for her beliefs. Activist Sraya Adham added:

Every one of the [leftist] girls used to walk circled by our male comrades and friends so that the Muslim fundamentalists would not obstruct us... In 1948, I was beaten by some of them for political activity (quoted by Botman, 1987, p.23).

This threat to one's personal safety paralleled the situation that faced Muhammad in Medina. As reported above, this threat to women's safety forced Muhammad to quit pursuing women's rights. But it was not enough to stop the feminists of contemporary movements. Undaunted by these threats, these women continued their struggle for social equality.

Around the late 1940's, the government decided to intervene. Egyptian government at this time was a hybrid of its colonial structure and the beliefs of Establishment Islam. Colonial governments took offense to these movements and subsequently outlawed them. This intervention slowed down these movements and hindered mass support. Also, as the Nasser regime took power, people saw him as being progressive so the participation in movements decreased—especially in women's liberation movements. Despite the
destruction of their movement, Radical Feminists were successful in bringing women's issues into the public realm. (Botman, 1987, pp.24-25).

The rising opposition to women's liberation movements and an Islamic justification for this opposition fit well with Mernissi's (1991) theory of Islam captured by an the Male Elite. As mentioned above, the Muslims that stalked the feminists did not embrace the egalitarian form of Islam. Recall also, that the egalitarian spiritual form was never introduced to Egyptian society because that was not the form that came to Egypt during the Arab conquest. To many Egyptians, like many other Arabs, only one form of Islam existed: Establishment Islam. When Islamic nationalist movements wanted to move to the pure society they pursued non-egalitarian Establishment Islam. To them, this was Islam in its "purest form" (Shukrallah, 1994, p.19).

Most of these movements were sparked by the ruling class, the religious Ulamma, and intellectuals. 'Ali ran a secular regime and Nasser attempted to do so--but not without killing many suspected Islamic militants. Due to the emergence of these secular regimes, many of religious elites found Egypt too secular and they feared their power was threatened by the lower classes due to the regimes seeming liberal (Shukrallah, 1994, p.18). Therefore, a new
group emerged and just like the Male Elite, their interest was in preserving their power—a "New Elite." Just like the communist and feminist movements had their targets, this New Elite had to find their own target. Since they were guided by the patriarchal interests of Establishment Islam, they held many of its beliefs towards women. Supporting strict divorce and marriage laws for women was a main tenet of their belief structure but they had another angle as well, which was women as "cultural bearers of Islamic tradition" (Shukrallah, 1994, p.24). The New Elite advocated the view that women be forced into an Islamic image in which they were at home obeying their husband in the model of pre-Islamic Egypt traditions and twisted verses that were favored by the past Male Elite. Women activists were denying and subverting this role and had to be put back into line and under patriarchal control (Shukrallah, 1994, pp.24-25). Women who didn't conform were viewed as getting in the way of the Islamic utopia and were "mimics of Western values" (Shukrallah, 1994, p.25).

Within the Islamic groups of today, this manipulation of tradition and verse continues. Whether these groups are Muslim militants or political elites, both groups abuse Islam for their own selfish purposes:

This gives us the difficulty that the interpretation of verse 34 of sura 4 poses and of why modern politicians, who have not succeeded in assimilating the concept of
democracy, use it to legitimize their fanaticism, never stopping for a moment to consider the enormous difficulty it has posed, and still poses to those who make some effort to respect the divine will. They use it today to affirm male supremacy, as if this were a verse without ambiguity, without differences in interpretation, without conflict (Mernissi, 1991, p.159).

This quote by Mernissi also makes another important point that does not excuse the role of elites. Not only are they guilty, but politicians who are attempting to legitimize their governments also abuse Islam for their own ends.

Establishment Islam and the Government

The first leader after colonialism, Gamel Abdel Nasser, took control of the government under a platform of Arab nationalism but he needed more legitimacy. After all, Egypt was experiencing mass poverty, unemployment and even those that supported his coup had doubts of his leadership. Nasser was reluctant at first to embrace the New Elite's platform because he wanted to run a secular government, but their sentiment won out. Arab nationalism merged with an Islamic identity making both secularism and religion part of the state ideology. The New Elite took this opportunity to fuse Establishment Islam into the state apparatus and enforce their ideals in the same matter the Male Elite utilized (Ahmed, 1992, pp.205-206; Shukrallah, 1994).
Another incentive for Nasser to give in to the New Elite was his desire to pursue a project of state-led development. As mentioned above, 'Ali's government concentrated land away from the peasants and into the hands of a wealthy few so that he could mass produce cotton (Bromley, 1992, p.129). Since this displaced many peasants, one of Nasser's priorities was land redistribution. Before land reform in 1952, 70% of Egypt's cultivable land was owned by 1% of the population. When Nasser was through with the reform, these landed classes were displaced and stripped of their political power (Bromley, 1994, p.131). Nasser then gained the support from the majority of the population—the poor, but he had to also gain legitimacy from the landed classes he displaced.

To rally this support, Nasser turned to that which was immutable and dependable—Islam. In order to make this attempt seem like a sincere one, Nasser decided to put some tenants of Establishment Islam into law. As a result, the regime passed laws that would have the Medinese celebrating. For one, the Personal Status law "gave male members of the household the right to deny women the right to work, although under more secular governments women were allowed free education, equal opportunity, and equal pay" (Shukrallah, 1994, p.21). Although this denied women equal rights that are explicit within Chaudhry's book and the
Qur'an, it gave the Nasser regime the appearance that it embraced tradition and a true Egyptian identity.

At the same time, though, secular institutions still existed making the regime look as though it was also embracing modernization. This situation placed a double on standard on women. Women were told by the Islamic elements to be traditional, while modernization pushed them to become economic contributors. Their rights were limited and they were forced to play a double role, but they were unsure who or what to rebel against (El Saadawi, 1993, p.143-44).

The Personal Status laws are based on a twisted replica of Shari'a laws which have been altered in several ways—much like how the old Male Elite had altered Qur'anic verses (Mayer, 1995, p.106-107). Some of these laws, though, also embrace a French law code which is one reason why Islamic Militants still plot assassinations to this day—due to the foreign roots of these laws. This type of hybrid shows that the Egyptian government is not strictly Muslim, but it likes to pretend to be. Unfortunately because it is just pretending, it has more leeway on how it can interpret laws; this makes it extremely easy to interpret these laws on a level that the government would feel most comfortable with—to the disadvantage of women (Mayer, 1995, p.108).
Shari'a can very easily go either way concerning the rights of women. It depends on is how the political elite feels at the time:

From the standpoint of the rulers, the ambiguity of rights in the shari'a\(^2\) [sic] offers the flexibility needed to bend with the political wind, so that Islam can be evoked either to liberalize opportunities for women, or to levy new restrictions on them (Doumato, 1995, p.145).

With debt and the occupied territories aggravating national sentiments, the Nasser regime and Islamic influences started to lose appeal. With this demise, the state had to deal with an "ideological void that had to be filled" as well as a bad economy (Shukrallah, 1994, p.22).

Nasser's successor, Anwar Al-Sadat leaned towards policies of privatization and greater economic ties with the West. For a while, this brought growth, it backfired to debt and economic crisis by the early 1980's. None of the growth ever trickled down to the lower classes and their anti-West sentiments began to pop up again. After all, during both the Nasser and Sadat regimes, unemployment and inflation increased, land reforms failed, and health care and education became less available (Shukrallah, 1994, p.22).

Sadat was facing the same problems Nasser did and like Nasser he decided to fall back on an old stand-by--Islam. He continued to allow the Islamic identity take over the
Arab nationalist identify, but he was more active in directly promoting it. Sadat officially aligned his government with Islamic movements in the early seventies and made the alliance stronger as the economic conditions grew worse. He saw the Shari'a as being a new administrative tool that would give his government legitimacy and keep the Islamic militants at bay (Bromley, 1994, p.134).

Unlike the leftist movements, Islamic movements embraced tradition that had not changed for centuries. Many people had not benefited from Sadat's economic policies and the social welfare state he had attempted to create was unable to help the new poor. Islam was perceived as being not only a cultural comfort but conservative Islamic organizations also had grass roots connections and many charities that helped the poor. This gave these conservative Islamic groups more leeway to penetrate government structures and continue to strengthen the Shari'a-based Personal Status laws (Bromley, 1994, pp.134-135).

Fouad Ajami, a foreign policy analyst, argues that in this decade Islamic movements have become a disappointment in Egypt but most Establishment Islamic sentiments remain in the political culture. According to Ajami's article, "The Sorrows of Egypt", (1994, p.75), Egypt is still a country full of economic problems and class antagonisms--and it
could possibly be vulnerable to any ideology that seems hopeful.

Also, the society still carries with it a component left over from colonialism: anti-west sentiments. Egyptians, after believing the west has polluted their culture, feel as if the west is promoting an anti-Egypt paternalism. Most of these sentiments were in the context of US aid to Egypt:

And for all the vast aid the United States has poured into Egypt over the last two decades, there is in the air as well a curious free-floating hostility to American ideals and interests, a conviction that the United States wishes Egypt permanent dependency and helplessness, a reflexive tendency to take up, against America's wishes, the cause of renegade states like Libya and Iraq, a belief that the United States is somehow engaged with Israel in an attempt to diminish and hem in the power and influence of Egypt (Ajami, 1994, p.87).

Ajami (1994) argued that Egypt would not return to "theocratic zeal" but at the same time he also referred to Egyptian women as "emancipated." So far, more evidence exists to the contrary. What Ajami fails to recognize is that although the government is not tolerant towards Islamic militants, it is quite tolerant towards those Islamic sects that advocate disempowering women in the areas of family and marriage law (Shukrallah, 1994, p.27). Although Egypt may never become an "officially" Islamic state that does not deny that Egyptian culture and government does not lean towards Establishment Islam ideas. Also, most of the
literature concurs that women have a long way to go in Egypt before they are given freedom in marriage and family law (Ahmed, 1992; El Saadawi, 1993; Shukrallah, 1994). All the reservations towards women's rights are not limited to laws passed decades ago; these reservations also come into play in Egyptian policy towards women's organizations.

Repression of Modern Women's and Human Rights Movements

In the case of Egypt, actions speak louder than words. The particular action being referred to is the government's closure of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA) on June 15, 1991. Headed and founded by Dr. Nawal El-Saadawi (who has written many articles and books on women's liberation), in 1982, the primary function of the AWSA was to unite liberation groups around the world—especially those with an Islamic focus. It also published a magazine, Noun, that alerted the world to the oppression that Arab women faced (Middle East Watch, 1991, p.2).

To El-Saadawi, the only way to give women rights within the family and fight neo-colonialism was through Arab Unity:

Arab unity is a goal and Arab women's unity and solidarity is an important weapon in fighting for the liberation of women, the land, and the economy. . .If the patriarchal class system is global then resistance must be global. . .This requires political and organizational efforts to unite women all over the world (El Saadawi, 1993, pp.144-145).
The government had kept watch on the organization for years because the material it published and its activism were very controversial. AWSA, though, remained undisturbed for many years. Later, in 1991, it was banned under Law No. 32 of the Law of Associations and Private Foundations for misusing funds and violating public morality. When the case was closed, a court document revealed that the AWSA's publications:

...contained attacks against and aroused suspicions of the social and religious order, especially the conventions of marriage, divorce, and the number of wives. ...The attacks on state policy constitute an offense against the fundamental rules of association (Middle East Watch, 1992, p.2).

The government apparently felt threatened by the AWSA's feminist agenda. After all, the court document specifically mentioned issues that affect women and those same laws are endorsed by the male-dominated government. Officials knew AWSA's work was important to working against gender discrimination and that can be very threatening to a government that doesn't even want to grant women the right to work--without having to ask her husband first (Middle East Watch, 1992, pp.5-6).

Other organizations that have been dissolved under the same criteria included the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights and the Arab Thought Forum--a group that discussed Arab cultural issues (Middle East Watch, 1992, p.2).
Middle East Watch (1992) argued that the reasons for the closure were purely political and reflected a patriarchal structure within the government. This bias against feminist groups was further evidenced when the government transferred services offered by the AWSA to a non-controversial (i.e. supports Establishment Islam) Muslim women's group—Women of Islam. Even more suspicious yet, is that the liquidator, Farouq El-Fiel, is the director of Women of Islam (Middle East Watch, 1991, p.4).

This is the perfect demonstration of the power of Establishment Islam. In supporting laws that attacked the original rights set up by Muhammad, the agenda obviously works to the interests of a male elite class. The court documents that showed concern about the AWSA confronting issues concerning divorce, work and polygamy could have easily been written by a member of the Male Elite. After all, closing down the organization was advantageous to the elite within Establishment Islam.

Although many would blame actions like this on a corrupt or oppressive government it would be wrong and inaccurate to deny the "woman factor." Male political dissidents get jailed and lose their organizations, but this harassment is focused mainly on their actions. Women dissidents get targeted simply because they are women (Ahmed, 1992, p.231). The direction that is needed then is
to protect these people from the state—especially if it is aligned to Establishment Islam. As far as oppressive states are concerned their laws:

... directly reflect or are entirely compatible with shari'a views as interpreted by an establishment Islam. There is every reason to believe that any government declaring itself committed to Islamization, along either Sunni or Shia lines, would introduce similar laws [of oppression in family matters] for women (Ahmed, 1992, p.234).

Basically, the more a government embraces Establishment Islam, the more patriarchal it becomes. It does this in order to gain legitimacy in a society that prefers patriarchy to woman's equality. Much of that is due to the fact that Egypt is going through tough times economically and socially and because of that it is vulnerable to ideologies that offer hope. Conservative Islamic groups are patriarchal, but they offer charity to the poor when the national social net has failed and they offer a cultural hope as well. That is why their patriarchal intentions are overlooked and Male Elite tendencies are still prevalent in Egyptian culture.

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1Mernissi makes no distinctions between the Male Elite of the present and the Male Elite of the past. I only do so because 1) The new elite class has some women, and 2) To prevent confusion.

2"Shari'a" is written in both capitalized and uncapitalized form.
Chapter IV
Egypt and Mernissi's Theory

Introduction

Nowhere is abuse of scripture more evident than in Egyptian divorce laws. Egyptian divorce law tilts favorably towards the husband in a system known as unilateral divorce: husbands can divorce, no questions asked, without a ruling from the judicial system; wives must take their complaints to the judicial system where their requests must be reviewed. The Egyptian government is very protective of this privilege, and the examples of the AWSA closure and their objection to the Convention of Eliminating all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) demonstrates this protective attitude. But these examples also demonstrate another tenet of Mernissi's theory: the misrepresentation of Islam in order to fulfill patriarchal ends.

Abuse of the Qur'an by the Egyptian Government

Suppressing the AWSA (Arab Women's Solidarity Association)

The Egyptian government has always felt threatened by women's movements. It felt threatened by the Radical Feminist Movement in the 1940's and now it finds the contemporary movements just as threatening. New feminist literature pointed out new interpretations in both the Qur'an and Shari'a that help in the realm of women's rights
(Mayer, 1995, p.107), and that worries interpreters who prefer the interpretations of Establishment Islam and the Male Elite. Also, feminists, armed with these new interpretations, tended to rock the boat:

As it is well known to the government, Egyptian feminists do not accept that these laws are just; they have challenged these laws and called for their reform, and debates over whether and how these laws should be reformed have raged in public for years (Mayer, 1995, p.107).

The government seems to fear not only the challenge to its authority, rooted in Islamic law, but also that women were the actors in this movement. As stated above, women dissidents are often targeted simply because they are women. To understand government fears, one only has to take a look at the causes that the AWSA decided to embrace, including the ones specifically mentioned in the court documents.

These causes were mentioned in the court documents as violating "the rule of law and public order and morality by the practice of political and religious activities. . ." (Middle East Watch, 1992, p.2). They included: marriage and divorce laws and the number of wives (Middle East Watch, 1992, p.2).

Taking a closer look, one would realize that these types of issues concerned the Male Elite. In Chapter II we saw how men historically have had power over women, in the perspective of the Male Elite, and their "privileges" in
having that power included polygamy and unilateral divorce (Ahmed, 1992; El Saadawi, 1980; Mayer, 1995, p.106).

In fact, while objecting to a world-wide statement on women's equality (the CEDAW; to be discussed in the next section), Egyptian officials admitted to limiting divorce:

The Shari'a therefore restricts a wife's right to divorce by making it contingent on a judge's ruling, whereas no such restriction is laid down in the case of a husband (quoted in Mayer, 1995, p.106).

This is justified by the fact that husbands, under Shari'a, are required to provide for their wives financially, and are thereby allowed the upper hand in marriage. There are three problems with this logic: first, it is a way to preserve male dominance. This makes divorce difficult for women even if they are being abused—placing male interests above the female's well-being. Second, it denies the reality that in Egypt it is economically necessary for most wives to work—meaning the husband is not supporting her by himself. According to the Population Reference Bureau, 58% of women work outside the home due to economic necessity and so the justification the government applies to this law just does not hold true. Finally, the other 42% of women (who do not work) must be considered; if a woman does not work outside the home, that makes her the financially vulnerable partner. Once again the government is placing male interests above female well-being.
Unilateral divorce could easily put a financially vulnerable wife into poverty, thus it would seem to make more sense that the husband's need for divorce be questioned. (Population Reference Bureau, 1995; Mayer, 1995, p.109)

Basically, in closing down the AWSA, the government was acting upon patriarchal interests. After all, family law is found to be a powerful tool in keeping women subordinate:

Family law is the cornerstone of the system of male privilege set up by establishment Islam. That it is still preserved almost intact signals the existence of enormously powerful forces within Middle Eastern societies determined to uphold male privilege and male control over women (Ahmed, 1992, p.242).

Questioning marriage and divorce laws, in retrospect, questions the patriarchal structure advocated by the Egyptian government. Therefore, the vote to close down the AWSA was also a vote for the Male Elite, and a shot against the feminism that threatens its patriarchal structure.

CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women)

The CEDAW (finalized in 1985) outlined protections that nations should provide for women. It covered many issues such as birth control, work, and domestic violence, but the section that will require the most focus is Article 16, which provided that men and women should be equal in laws concerning divorce.
From the condemnation of the AWSA, it is easy to see that Egypt's laws towards divorce were turned in favor of the husband. But in condemning the CEDAW, Egypt admitted its discriminatory practices to the world. But in order to keep its ugly side hidden, Egypt attempted to cover up this discrimination by arguing that their version of Shari'a supported equality (Mayer 1995).

There are two problems with Egypt's interpretation of Shari'a—that it considers to be equal: one, divorce laws are obviously tilted to the male advantage, and two, the laws and interpretations are a pick-and-choose assortment of how to keep women "in their place" (Ahmed, 1992, p.91; Kandiyoti, 1995, p.22; Mayer, 1995, p.107; Monshipouri and Kukla, 1994, p.351).

As mentioned above, the husband has unilateral rights in marriage because he is considered to be the sole breadwinner. However, this is not the reality in Egypt, as women often become the sole breadwinners as well. The government is aware of this fact, but even if this is the case, the husband still retains absolute authority under law—even if he is unemployed (Mayer, 1995, p.108; Population Reference Bureau, 1995).

Second, this demonstrates the ability of the government to reinterpret Islamic law:
There is no national consensus that Egypt's personal status law, as reformed, embodies perfect restatement of shari'a [sic] principles. The fact that government has made a number of changes to its personal laws, is itself an indication that it does not in reality consider shari'a law immutable. . .If Egypt really followed the principle that it had to retain shari'a laws because they were religiously mandated, one would expect shari'a law across the board, but Egypt long ago discarded Islamic law in favor of a French-inspired law except impersonal status matters. . .the truth is that the husband's financial obligations vis-a-vis his wife correlate exactly with his superior rights and his legal prerogative to demand sexual submission and obedience from her (Mayer, 1995, p.108)

This shows pick-and-choose on two levels: first, that western law codes are adopted in all but laws that concern women, and second, the male supremacy interpretation is preferred over the female empowerment interpretations.

The fact is, there are many interpretations that support women's rights, but interpreters with that perspective found their views suppressed:

There are very few women interpreters in the history of Islam because women are seen to be the subject of the Islamic shari'a and not its legislators. Yet even the few interpreters who have appeared during the long history of Islam have been kept at the periphery, their views never allowed to influence Islamic legislation. Moreover, even men interpreters who were open-minded about women were marginalized and, in some cases, found their authority questioned (Shaaban, 1995, p.61).

The Egyptian government seems to be following a long tradition of choosing interpretations that best fit the patriarchal structure. One woman who interpreted Islamic texts, Nazira Zin al-Din, argued that women were purposely excluded from the drafting of Shari'a law because the men
involved wanted to preserve their patriarchal privileges. She goes on to claim that what is important in Islam is the Qur'an and the *hadith* (traditions) and the woman-friendly tenets in those documents are what the male interpreters found threatening (Shaaban, 1995, pp.64-65).

The ways that Islam is practiced by governments today, are in complete contradiction with the spirit of Islam which al-Din argues is rooted in peace, social justice, and equality. She states that governments are doing nothing but disobeying God:

> It is a great shame that some Muslim local authorities dare to disobey the words of God and impose constraints on the freedom of Muslim women in towns while non-Muslim women in towns and Muslim women in the countryside enjoy their complete freedoms² (quoted in Shaaban, 1995, p.67)

The Male Elite held on to their privileges simply because they would twist interpretations to their favor. This was done in order to keep women subordinate and to keep forces from standing up to what they were doing:

One of the primary weapons used to keep back the revolt of women and youth against the patriarchal system and its values is the misuse of Islam and its doctrines. There is no doubt that the wave of religious fanaticism that has swept across many Arab countries in recent years is one of the ways used by the feudal and capitalist³ ruling classes to hold back the movement towards progress (El Saadawi, 1980, p.82).

Egyptian lawmakers are not as inflexible as they pretend to be. They have changed their law codes numerous times, and even adopted a Western law code. When faced with
the CEDAW, they suddenly became very inflexible and protective of their "holy mandates" of Shari'a. There are interpretations that favor women's rights, but as Shaaban stated, they are ignored, except by the feminists (Shaaban, 1995, pp.64-65, Kandiyoti, 1995, p.22). Instead, as argued by Mernissi, Mayer, and others, the lawmakers rule in favor of patriarchy with their interests towards men's privileges instead of women's equality. They are essentially doing exactly what the Male Elite did when they felt that their privileges were threatened—choosing patriarchal interpretations of Establishment Islam in order to keep the balance tilted in favor of men.

Attitudes towards the West

Imperialism has helped and hindered feminism. The Radical Feminist Movement gained most of its membership from both men and women who wanted to throw the British out of Egypt. El Saadawi critiques Western society and believes that capitalism and consumerism have no place in a society based on equality (El Sadaawi, 1980, p.82-83; Ahmed, 1992, p.236). Western values often become the targets of feminist movements, but they are also the targets of militant Muslim groups that would love to lock women into subordinate positions.
Feminists adopt the notion that the West has been an oppressive force in Egypt for some time and that its presence does not help ditch dated traditions that hurt women. Also, Western values of consumerism, and Western advertisements that display women as objects, do not help women much in their journey to establish themselves as thinking beings. The latter concern is also shared with many Western feminists (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 84).

The New Elite, who favor patriarchal interpretations, want to protect women from Westernization by leading them into a "true Islamic society." This issue is described briefly by Mernissi when she writes:

"... Muslims in search of an identity put the accent on the confinement of women as a solution for a pressing crisis. Protecting women from change by veiling them and shutting them out of the world has echoes of closing the community to protect it from the West (Mernissi, 1991, p. 99).

Both movements want to address the issue of Westernization but they take different approaches to solving the issue. Feminists in Egypt believe that the solution lies in promoting values of respecting women and respecting their equality. The New Elite would rather protect women from the onslaught.

Egypt is a society of strict puritanical values, which are usually only enforced on women, as well as a society that promotes sensuality. Egyptian music sings of sensual..."
love and beauty and Egyptian movies tend to stay on the same theme--love. Western magazines and advertisements are in newsstands, on TV, and on billboards and they emphasize female beauty in terms of make-up, skin creams, and short skirts. At the same time, the New Elite movements promote sensuality as sin, and that women's bodies are dirty and need to covered (El Saadawi, 1980, p.85).

This situation inflicts double-standards on women, and thus it hurts them:

Arab women are the victims of oppression because of the moral double standards that govern their societies. The economic exploitation imposed on the Arab countries not only leads to a systematic plunder of their resources, but also imposes upon them the double moral standards resulting from the contradiction between the commercial values of capitalism and the religious values inherited from the past (El Saadawi, 1980, p.87).

Under Western commercial Imperialism, women become tools for advertisement and promoting sex appeal. This is the concern of Egyptian feminists when it comes to Imperialism because they argue that one type of oppression almost always leads to another. Their proposal is to first, develop solidarity between the countries that face Imperialism from the West. After that, the united countries must stand up to the West--especially to multinational corporations that squeeze their resources and promote anti-woman and morally corrupt capitalist values4 (Ahmed, 1992,
While the feminists want to be active participants in ending this trend, the New Elite would rather cloister women—as was done in ancient societies. They try to do this by presenting women as responsible for the continuity of Islam:

Women not only teach and transfer the cultural and ideological traditions of ethnic and national groups. Very often they constitute their actual symbolic figuration (quoted by Shukrallah, 1994, p.26).

This is what justifies the need to protect women from the West. By cloistering them and making them live a strict Islamic lifestyle they are less likely to be corrupted by Western values and can be better at passing on cultural and Islamic tradition. Unless women are kept in this role, it is often argued that Islam would be endangered (Shukrallah, 1994, pp.26-27).

Even the women in these movements believe that they must be protected. In a meeting of the "Muslim Sisters" the speaker began with:

The pitiful West should be a lesson to us all. We should not give up our religion and imitate them, the price is too high. Islam is then our protection (quoted in Shukrallah, 1994, p.27)

This new philosophy that seems to grant women special power and liberalization through Establishment Islam, is of great concern to feminists like El Saadawi. To Mernissi,
fighting for rights and dignity is not bad for Muslim women—so she wondered why women were ever made to feel they must be subservient in the first place.

To El Saadawi, this movement is dangerous to women's status as well as the status of the lower classes:

The slogan under which the reactionaries operate is that of 'a return to Islamic doctrine'. This slogan is used to mask the real nature of their aims and their desire to maintain the forms of exploitation on which they thrive. They attempt to convince people that most of the economic and political difficulties and crises that have been faced in recent years are due to the fact that they have strayed from the path of Islam (El Saadawi, 1980, p.82).

New Elite movements become, not movements of good intentions and "liberation", but are simply movements that want to keep their power. Westernization becomes an excuse to justify male dominance. It was so with the British Unveiling Campaign as the arguments for culture became also arguments for preserving the patriarchal system.

There is also a large amount of truth that Imperialism and Westernization have caused economic hardship like that described in Chapter III. It is during these hard times that these groups find it easy to prey upon women's rights:

Widespread discontent and frustration invariably form pronounced elements in the societies in which Islamic groups are able to seize power; and imposing restrictions on women, limiting their access to education or jobs—and thus increasing the availability of both for men as well as increasing the availability of women's domestic and personal services to men—and giving men increased control over 'their' women are

Imperialism, as an argument, makes it easier for men to claim dominance in cases of both cultural and economic panic. Feminists would rather rebel against Western standards that use the media to turn women into objects. They want to be active and walk the streets freely without having to look at billboards of half-naked women. Also, they want to fight against the double standards that want a woman to be both an attractive sex-object for men and a puritanical virgin. That is their battle: respect for women and equality.

The New Elite practices a double-speak which wants women to be powerful teachers on one hand but meek and cloistered on the other. This is not liberating, but neither is the Western culture that these women are exposed to. Allowing women to be active participants against the degradation of Westernization and allowing them equality, seem to be much more productive than keeping them hidden and silent from the world.

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2 From what El Sadaawi writes, this would seem to be true for Egyptian women because it was more difficult to enforce these laws on women living in the periphery. However, if a poor, rural woman found herself with an illegitimate pregnancy, or if she were raped, then she would find herself much more vulnerable simply because she would not have the
money to bribe officials or get an illegal abortion (El Sadaawi, 1980, p.175).

El Sadaawi is an avowed Marxist (Ahmed, 1992, p.236). Therefore, she tends to take a class based analysis to most of her work—especially when she critiques Western capitalism.

In some ways, the Egyptian feminist critique on Western advertisements is not that much different from the opinions of Western feminists. Neither group likes the nearly pornographic ads of emaciated women in tight jeans being presented as weak and vulnerable.
Mernissi (1991) referred to her theory as a narrative because she wanted to present it in such a way that most uneducated Muslims could read it. She found that the understanding of this 'narrative' was important to Islam in light of all the stereotypes the Western world has held against it.

In reading it, one finds that men of that time had privileges that they did not want to let go, such as harems, women being collected as war booty, and women being kept in a subordinate position that did not threaten male wealth or power. When Muhammad advocated women as having free will, his teaching threatened all these privileges because under that vision women could no longer be sold, traded, or stolen like livestock. Therefore, the Male Elite had to find new ways of keeping their privileges intact.

They found that the most effective way to keep those privileges was to reinterpret the Qur'an and later draft a law code which legislated women's behavior. Now there emerged a patriarchal Islam that would become the norm of Islamic societies from that point on.

Egypt then becomes an interesting case study. In Ancient Egypt, women made business transactions, owned property, and were involved in the trade industry. Women
also stipulated marriage contracts. Even as Greek and Roman beliefs of female inferiority seeped into society, the property rights were retained but marriage rights were extremely limited. When Islam came to Egypt, through Arab invaders, economic rights continued to be intact but marriage rights continued to decline.

When the British occupied Egypt, women first found themselves becoming pawns to imperialism. The occupation's insincere attempt towards female liberation was done only to bring Egypt up to the British level of "civilization." Women found themselves to be tools of this during the Unveiling Campaign, in which they were told their veils, that they found empowering, were actually signs that they were considered inferior in their culture. It was during this time period that Westernization became more prevalent due to economic reforms but also social reforms that focused on "modernizing" women. This attempt towards making Egypt more European was considered insulting, and Egypt continues to harbor that attitude towards foreign attitudes to this day.

In the early twentieth century, Egyptians resented the British occupation and opposition movements started to rise. The first of these, the Communist movement, was successful for a while during its resurgence in the 1940's, but lacked the support of exploited lower classes and lacked
nationalist rhetoric. The Radical Feminist Movement was nationalist, feminist and enjoyed the support of many. But physical violence against the participants and government intervention killed this movement as well. It was then that the people felt they had nowhere to turn but to the Islamic nationalist movements who seemed benevolent towards their concerns.

Islam became a force of legitimacy for both Nasser and Sadat while their regimes' authority and leadership was questioned and economic prosperity became unlikely. But the form of Islam that was embraced was Establishment Islam, and with it the downfall of women.

The Egyptian government found it appropriate to come down on those organizations that challenged its laws and its patriarchal authority. It shut down the woman's group, the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, and numerous human rights groups. The justification for these actions was political in that court documents state that its concern for the AWSA's agenda was on moral and religious grounds—especially those issues concerning marriage and divorce.

These grounds were also used against the CEDAW in arguing that Egypt's tilted laws were actually quite equal concerning women. In reality, this was all a game of pick-and-choose in which the patriarchal interpretations were accepted and the ones that favored women's rights, like
those written by Nazira al-Din, were rejected. It was not women that the government was concerned about, it was preserving male power.

The same goes with how the New Elite utilized the threat of Imperialism. Imperialism became an excuse for male domination by arguing that women needed to be protected in order for Islam to be preserved. Feminists, though, also opposed imperialism because the Western values that infiltrated society were degrading towards women. They wanted to be active contributors to this cause and obtain equality. The feminists do not want to be cloistered; they simply want a society where women are respected and allowed to work and walk the streets without hindrance.

Mernissi's (1991) analysis is appropriate to modern Egypt in that it parallels Egypt's New Elite. This is because the situation for Egyptian women supports Mernissi's thesis perfectly. Both the Male Elite and the New Elite want to keep women subordinate and they do that by justifying male domination through legislation of twisted Islamic laws and using interpretations of Islam that favor women's subordination. All this happens despite the existence of interpretations that favor women's rights. Just like the Male Elite of centuries ago, this New Elite wishes to keep privileges intact. Therefore, they use patriarchal
interpretations and the excuse of Imperialism to keep their power.

Mernissi is not country specific but she does specify root causes. Through her theory, one can see how Islam becomes patriarchal and how that was not Muhammad's intention. El Saadawi believed the oppression of women was due to class differences and that is one area where she and Mernissi differ. However, many of Mernissi's points about misinterpretation and manipulating text in order to justify domination are quite consistent with El Saadawi.

Mernissi's theory describes an interpretation of Islam that needs to be exposed in order to discourage stereotypes. Exposure of such interpretations gives ammunition to feminists. Also, these alternative interpretations can purge attitudes that perceive Islam as backward and oppressing. In reality, the oppression exists not because Islam is backward but because the elites who practice Islam in an oppressive framework force that framework onto others. This makes stubborn attachment to archaic attitudes, not Islam, the enemy of Egyptian women.

There are also perceptions that Islam has one form, and that one form is static and dangerous to women. Unfortunately for this view, Islam is not monolithic and other countries have their own ways of justifying woman's subordination. Therefore, Mernissi's theory needs to be
applied to more countries in order to show differences in interpretation and methods of oppression. Exposing inconsistencies between nations can be important in exposing the inconsistencies in oppressive interpretations--thus revealing weaknesses. It was Egypt's inconsistency in its law codes (in claiming Shari'a was immutable but having no problem with changing its meaning with political sentiment) that made its CEDAW objections seem suspicious. Perhaps when people understand this inconsistency, the interpretations that favor male domination will lose popularity, and in the process the interpretations favoring equality will receive their due attention.

Mernissi's theory describes many root causes as to why women in Egypt have not yet achieved equality. The difference between the Male Elite and Egypt's New Elite is that the New Elite pretends to promote equality--the Male Elite showed no subtlety. But once again, the arguments may all come down to consistency. The New Elite doctrine of cloistering women while considering them the cultural bearers of Islam is not consistent and is inherently inequitable. Feminists promote women's activity at work, with the family, and against oppressive societal elements--be they sexist advertising, sexist laws, or sexist attitudes. Feminists are consistent in that they promote women as being active and visible in all parts of life--not
isolated and hiding from the danger of Western influences. In the feminist's vision, women are able to resist the influence of corrupt Western values without the protection of a veil or four walls that keep women separate from the outside world.

Inconsistencies are proof of a government's willingness to bend with political winds and favor male privileges. The fact that it can, and does bend, gives feminists hope that some day these governments will finally be concerned with their equality. At that point, Muhammad's intentions will become reality and the Male Elite and their attitudes will take the place now held by egalitarian Islam: forgotten.
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