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Traveling Critique: *Anti-imperialism, Gender and Rights Discourses*

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Bridging Academia and Activism

Abstract

The article engages with the feminist anti-imperialist critique of rights discourses, particularly when used as a theoretical lens to understand or evaluate women's rights movements, or gender related campaigns for justice in non-democratic settings. I argue that the anti-imperialist critique is caught up in a locked binary of universalism versus cultural relativism, a form of a meta-narrative that disregards the details, the personal narratives of struggle and accommodation, or what would constitute the fragments of history that are necessary for a holistic understanding of historical moments; that the anti-imperialist critics disregard the insights gained from Edward Said's important intervention about "Traveling Theory", and how "travel" to another context enables a new process whereby the theory or concept is assimilated and new meanings emerge that are attuned to the new context; and that in many cases, the feminist anti-imperialist has not been attentive to the geopolitics of critique, i.e. that meanings and consequences of critique can be radically different in different contexts and against very different power relations. I pose the following questions: how do ideas/paradigms/concepts change when they travel? Or, how are new ideas integrated and appropriated in different contexts? What are the implications/consequences of the feminist/ antiimperialist critique when it travels and is used as a framework to interpret different realities on the ground? Who uses the anti-imperialist critique and for what purpose in these new contexts? And who uses the rights approach and for what purpose?

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Introduction

The use and abuse of rights-based-approaches to furthering social justice in general, and gender justice in particular, has been the subject of much debate and contestation in feminist scholarship. Across postcolonial studies, development studies, gender studies, critics have debated the positive and negative manifestations of the politics of rights. The key arguments against "rights talk" have been: that human rights discourses are universalist and Eurocentric (Rajagopal 2008); that they put undue focus on the rights of the individual at the expense of the rights of the community (Baxi 2006); that they often divert attention from the pressing needs of women (Hodgson 2011); that they are too focused on political rights and push aside social and economic rights (An-Naim 2014); that human rights are espoused by elites aligned with globalization projects and identifying with western paradigms (Mutua 2001); that the liberal feminist excessive focus on legal reform and relative disregard of societal norms and power structures has often undermined good laws or even led to unintended results, not necessarily in the interest of women; that rights discourses aim to monopolize political spaces and hence impede the realization of "other kinds of political projects … [thatt] may offer a more appropriate and far-reaching remedy for injustice (Brown 2004: 461-2); that they constitute a form of imperialist dominance (Cornwall and Molyneux 2006; Abu-Lughod 2013).

All of the above critiques have a solid basis in theory and practice. Needless to say, advocates for the usefulness of using a rights framework acknowledge the validity of the above critiques but warn against the danger of throwing the baby with the bathwater. And just as there is a significant amount of scholarship that critiques the rights paradigm in activism, there is an equally significant amount of scholarship that engages with those critiques. In the field of critical legal theory, scholars are addressing the issue of how legal litigation is empowering mobilization and social movements in lieu of focusing on whether or not using the law matters (Boutcher and Chua 2018). Lynn Stephen uses empirical data to demonstrate how rights discourses have been assimilated and reworked in new contexts to respond to local needs and questions. The Oaxaca social movement in Mexico appropriated rights discourses and enabled the production of "a gendered local vernacular of rights talk" that became accessible to both men and women (Stephen 2011). In a similar vein, Claret Vargas has argued that rights discourses can be redefined and adapted "as a tactic for subaltern self-actualization" (Vargas 2012, 3).

Critics have also pointed out that rights discourses are sometimes the only viable option at a particular moment in time to the marginalized and the oppressed and allow them entry into the political arena. For example in Egypt, Mona El-Ghobashy has argued that the internationalization of the political regime in Egypt in the 1990s and its endorsement of human rights conventions and treaties as a prerequisite for inclusion in the club of civilized nations, was one of the factors that gave human rights activists, feminists and ordinary citizens "unexpected political leverage in their asymmetric share of public power with the executive" (El-Ghobashy 2008, 1593). Until the first decade of the 21st century, UN conferences and commissions became sites of struggle and contestation between state actors and non-state actors who used the language of rights and rule of law to lobby their governments and enforce compliance with international law. In fact, and in many cases, rights discourses become very powerful discursive tools for reemphasizing local values as well as aspirations that are reinforced by reference to international standards and mechanisms. In general, critics who emphasize the value of rights discourses in non-western contexts approach "international human rights doctrines and resolutions as spheres of contention, sets of signifying practices and repertoires of tools that have no 'ideal form' or singular direction of dissemination, nor one meaning or legacy that would maintain them as exclusive property of the West (Amar 2011:304)

In this paper I will engage with the feminist anti-imperialist critique of rights discourses, particularly when used as a theoretical lens to understand or evaluate women's rights movements, or gender related campaigns for justice in non-democratic settings. The anti-imperialist critique of rights regimes is premised on two key ideas. The first

questions “the political legitimacy of a western-inspired agenda of liberal rights and its fit, or lack of fit, with existing rights regimes and practices in different cultural contexts” (Cornwall and Molyneux 2006: 1178-77); the second foregrounds the potential, and actual, propensity of rights discourses to be abused by imperial powers to justify imperialist agendas (Cornwall and Molyneux 2006; Abu-Lughod 2013). Regarding this last point, critics always refer to how the banner of safeguarding women’s rights was used by the US to justify the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq.

My argument will be grounded in the following propositions: that the anti-imperialist critique is caught up in a locked binary of universalism vs. cultural relativism, a form of a meta-narrative that disregards the details, the personal narratives of struggle and accommodation, or what would constitute the fragments of history that are absolutely necessary for a holistic understanding of historical moments; that the anti-imperialist critics disregard the insights gained from Edward Said’s important intervention about “Traveling Theory,” and how “travel” to another context enables a new process whereby the theory or concept is assimilated and new meanings emerge that are attuned to the new context; and that in many cases, the feminist anti-imperialist has not been attentive to the geopolitics of critique, i.e. that meanings and consequences of critique can be radically different in different contexts and against very different power relations. I pose the following questions: how are ideas/paradigms/concepts change when they travel? Or, how are new ideas integrated and appropriated in different contexts? What are the implications/consequences of the feminist / anti-imperialist critique when it travels and is used as a framework to interpret different realities on the ground? Who uses the anti-imperialist critique and for what purpose in these new contexts? And who uses the rights approach and for what purpose?

My engagement with the feminist anti-imperialist critique is shaped by my position as an academic, a feminist and activist for women’s rights in Egypt. As an academic in the department of English language and literature at Cairo University, I taught courses in postcolonial literature and facilitated numerous discussions and debates about colonial representations of Arabs and Arab women, exposing the trope of saving Muslim women from Muslim men, and the abuse and manipulation of cultural practices out of context to justify colonial interventions and domination. As an academic at the University of Manchester for a few years (from 2005-2011), I became even more aware of the legacy of colonial mis/representations and discourses about the status of Muslim and Arab women and their re-emergence in new forms to feed Islamophobia and justify imperialist interventions in the twenty-first century. Yet at the same time, and as a feminist with strong links to the Arab women’s movement, I was deeply concerned about the extent to which this manipulation of women’s issues became a weapon to silence women rights advocates in Arab countries and prohibit them from engaging critically with their societies under the pretext that any criticism of social ills can and will be used by imperialists to defame Arab culture and justify military and political interventions. The question was and remains: how can we as Arab feminists expose misogynist practices and ideas in our own societies and avoid having our voice taken out of context and manipulated to consolidate imperialist prejudices and stereotypes about our societies? In the aftermath of Arab revolutions in 2011, new spaces opened up, and new ventures and initiatives became possible, hence enabling feminist voices to rise and be heard. And as the voices of feminists became louder and clearer, the conservative campaign against them gained momentum and the same old accusations about feminists being arms of imperialist projects, were repeated. What I describe as a conservative campaign consists of very unlikely allies: state actors keen on discrediting social and political rights movements that were gaining strength in the post revolutionary phase and challenging the authority of state actors; and religious extremists, advocates of political Islam on ideological grounds who considered women’s rights agendas as tantamount to an assault on cultural values and norms. These conservative voices used the exact same arguments put forward by feminist anti-imperialists to discredit and undermine women

rights activists. The intensity of the confrontation made three things very clear to me. First, the language of rights is extremely powerful not only in confrontations with state actors, but as a means of engagement and advocacy with ordinary men and women. In Arabic the word for "right" is *al-haq* (plural *huquq*) is extremely powerful on more than one level. In addition to usage comparable to its English equivalent, *al-haq* is also one of the names of God in Islam. Moreover, the Faculty of Law in Egypt is literally called *kuliyyat al-huquq* (Faculty of rights), a consolidation of the link between law and rights. The language of rights resonates deeply and at more than one level with local communities. Second, the fact that words or the language of rights as used in local contexts can be appropriated and abused in global contexts should not result in silencing activists who engage critically with their societies and cultures. In fact, local and global campaigns that seek to stigmatize our culture for their purposes must strengthen our determination to own our cultures, to speak for our cultures from a position of rights and justice, and make sure that our adversaries do not have a monopoly over defining what our culture means. Third, there is a need to revisit the feminist anti-imperialist critique from a theoretical perspective.

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Violence Against Women: *The Case of Egypt*

I will engage with the questions posed above by focusing on the issue of violence against women in Arab and/or Muslim societies, examining the struggle of women rights activists in Egypt to campaign and raise awareness. This particular struggle has been the target of criticism by anti-imperialist feminists based on the following assumptions: that the violence against women agenda is an essentially western agenda that is not sensitive to local contexts; that advocacy campaigns on violence against women in Muslim contexts consolidate essentialist colonial stereotypes about the "inherent" violence of Muslim societies and their disrespect of women and human rights, hence propagate a culturalist narrative in lieu of a political narrative; that the violence against women agenda has been transformed into a profession and a business by international organizations; that all women's groups who receive funds from international donors wittingly or unwittingly promote an agenda that is divorced from reality on the ground and solidify an imperialist narrative that manipulates the issue of "violence against women" to justify political even military interventions in the affairs of sovereign states (Abu-Lughod 2002). Again this critique is not without merit and substance: feminist critics have challenged the US led invasion of Afghanistan on the pretext of saving Afghani women (Scott 2002; Abu-Lughod 2002) and have exposed the feminist imperialist discourse that was instrumentalized to justify the assaults. But the question is: when and where does a critique act as a force of resistance to dominant power networks and relations, and hence act as a tool of empowerment? And when and where does it become a tool of oppression and disempowerment?

The answer, I argue resides in the geopolitics of power relations: in other words, an anti-imperialist critique that seeks to challenge dominant power relations must be particularly attuned to its impact and consequences when it travels to another context with different power relations and different power struggles. To clarify, I will examine the trajectory/fate of the struggle against violence against women as it has been addressed by rights organizations in Egypt. I will argue that while the struggle of feminists in Egypt has benefited from international solidarity and experience, it has also accommodated the battle to local concerns and struggles.

Campaigns to raise public awareness on issues related to violence against women, in both the public and the private spheres started as early as the 1990s, with the work of a number of feminist organizations notably al-Nadim, New Woman Foundation and the Centre for Egyptian Women Legal Assistance. These organizations used a rights based approach to challenge inequalities in society in general, and gender inequalities in particular, as well as oppressive practices by the ruling regime. In an article that focuses on the activism of rights organizations against violence against women, Paul Amar demonstrated how international human rights frameworks are reworked, rearticulated and reinvented in local contexts. He highlights the praxis of Egyptian feminists and their approach to sexual harassment, foregrounding the work of Aida Seif al-Dawla and Mozn Hassan in order to challenge the off hand dismissal of rights activists in Egypt by right wing groups as well as state actors as conscious or unconscious implementers of western agendas (Amar 2011). With reference to the work of El-Nadeem, he points out that it focused "critique on the state; on the practices of the state security services and on police and prison officials" (Amar 2011,312). This focus is significantly different from other anti-violence campaigns in democratic contexts, for example, where the issue of state violence is not at the forefront of concerns and challenges. It, i.e. the focus on politically motivated sexual violence, became a hallmark of activism against violence in the aftermath of the 25th of January revolution in 2011 and resulted in a radical break in addressing the problem[1].

What happened in 2011 and why did events lead to significant advances in dealing with the issue of sexual violence? The revolutionary wave that swept

[1] For details of politically motivated sexual violence post 2011 see Tadros (2013).

Egypt in 2011 opened up new spaces for challenging dominant power structures and dominant authoritarian discourses, with varying degrees of success. It was only after the mass protests in 2011 that sexual harassment and assaults on women became the subject of public media debates. Before 2011, while feminists conducted advocacy campaigns to raise awareness and attempt to rectify legal constraints that impeded a serious confrontation with sexual violence, their efforts did not succeed in making the issue a matter for public debate and concern. This was primarily due to the undemocratic political environment that limited serious efforts to address sensitive social and political issues. Hence, feminist efforts to address sexual violence were restricted in closed circles of experts and limited audiences. When an incident of sexual violence attracted public attention, it was usually treated with stereotypical and prejudiced arguments, invariably blaming the victim of assaults for not being dressed properly or for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. This prejudiced approach deterred victims from filing complaints and pursuing justice. Needless to say there were important exceptions that are worthy of note. In 2008 a young woman called Noha Roshdy filed a sexual harassment lawsuit resulting in a prison sentence for the harasser.

At the end of 2012 and start of 2013, incidents of sexual assaults against women present in large protests were reported. Activists recognized the problem and responded by organizing groups that would intervene to help women who were assaulted in public spaces. Bassma (Imprint) was founded in June 2012, Shoft Taharush (I saw harassment) was founded in October 2012, and OpAntish (Operation Anti-Harassment), and Tahrir Bodyguards were established in November 2012. The new groups, together with already established activist groups working on violence against women, notably Nazra, El-Nadeem, and Harassmap succeeded in raising media and public awareness of the extent and scale of the problem. They formed rescue groups that intervened to save women from attacks; they provided survivors with psychological and legal aid; they offered self-defense classes; they collected the stories of women who suffered assaults; and they pressured new political parties and civil society actors to recognize the problem2. January 2013 marks a turning point in the status of the issue of sexual violence against women as a matter for public debate, as survivors of attacks felt empowered to talk about their experience in public and on live TV. Together with the efforts of the anti-sexual harassment support groups, or possibly as a direct result of the said efforts, these powerful public testimonials of women broke the taboo that inhibited discussions of the issue of sexual assault. Political parties and groups finally acknowledged the problem and issues statements to denounce the violence and participated in a demonstration under the slogan "The Street is Ours", asserting women's right to public spaces and also reviving the memory of the earlier women's movement in response to the assaults in 2005.

So how were these incidents framed and narrated by feminist groups?
Who was the culprit? In February 2013, a report that documented testimonials of survivors of sexual assault in Tahrir between 2011 and 2013 was published by three prominent Egyptian women and human rights organizations3. Many of the survivors told of systematic and organized attacks: the woman would be isolated from her group, encircled by men who start groping her and at the same time telling her that they are protecting her, which maximizes her confusion and helplessness and renders attempts to save her almost impossible as she is unable to work out who to trust and who to

[2] For a detailed account of the anti-sexual harassment groups post 2011 see chapter 9 entitled "The Changing Face of Gender Activism in Post-Mubarak Egypt" in Tadros (2016).

[3] El-Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture, Nazra for Feminist Studies and New Woman Foundation, "Sexual Assault and Rape in Tahrir Square and its Vicinity: A Compendium of Sources 2011-2013". Accessed: 5 March 2013. http://nazra.org/sites/nazra/files/attachments/compilation-_of_sexual-violence_-testimonies_between_20111_2013_en.pdf

fear. In the Foreword to the report, Dr. Magda Adly, prominent human rights activist and founding member of El-Nadeem, unequivocally holds state security forces responsible for the attacks. She grounds her analysis in the memory of Black Wednesday4: "We know the method and have experienced it before, and we know who is behind it. Our certainty that the crime was committed in a systematic manner was evidenced in the decision of the prosecutor general to close the case due to failure in finding the perpetrators. Despite the fact that tens of pictures and videos of the criminals and the cars they used (bearing signs of famous members of the then ruling party, National Democratic Party) were submitted, the case was closed due to insufficient evidence" (5). The report also included a statement signed by more than a 100 organizations and public figures denouncing the attack. The statement again framed the matter with reference to the 2005 assaults: " Ever since Mubarak's regime started using sexual violence against female protesters in 2005, gang attacks against women have not stopped... According to more than one survivor, these gangs are very well organized and they do not appear to be thugs who harass women (random harassments), as they are organized and trained in a clear way to accomplish the task assigned to them" (46-47). The statement directly accuses state security forces of ordering the attacks to destroy the revolution. And while it recognizes the occurrence of attacks during Eid and other public holidays, it nevertheless sees them as direct consequences to the founding moment of state-sanctioned gang violence in public spaces during Mubarak rule.

Important to note that the report also included a statement by feminist organizations, also supported by a number of public figures, and a position paper written by Nazra, a feminist organization. The statement is entitled: "It's Our Right ... The Street is Ours", reviving the activism of women's groups vis a vis previous attacks. The statement highlights the following: solidarity with victims of sexual assault; demand for accountability and responsibility; recognition of victims of sexual assaults amongst the injured of the revolution, i.e. recognition of sexual crimes as political crimes; holding political parties and forces responsible for women's safety during political events; asserting women's power and ability to reclaim the square.

The position paper by Nazra also emphasizes the social climate that enables and justifies violence against women as perpetrators of violence continue to violate women's bodies with impunity: "We believe that this social climate, which has begun to resemble a daily psychological war on women, has directly fostered these crimes and led to their present brutal incarnation...In our view, those recent events are a brutal escalation of the widespread social pathology that is sexual violence" (52).

As demonstrated in the above account, the campaign against violence against women was adapted to the local context: activists challenged state sanctioned sexual violence against women while also paying attention to the issue as a social problem aggravated by political responsibility or lack of, of state actors. As a direct consequence of feminist activism as well as other pro-democracy actors, four concrete gains can be

[4] Black Wednesday refers to May 25th 2005 when when women protesters were subjected to mass assaults in broad daylight and in public view. The occasion was a protest organized by the pro-democracy movement, Kefaya, to denounce a referendum on the constitution that was taking place on the same day, and which was seen by political activists as an attempt to ensure the ascension to power of the President's son, Gamal Mubarak. Women were abused and violently harassed by hired thugs and/or plain-clothed policemen. All the evidence pointed to the responsibility of thugs hired by the NDP, and complicity of the police, who simply watched and did not intervene to protect protesters. The incident led to the formation of a movement called "The Street is Ours," which brought together activists, journalists and many of the women who were assaulted on the 25th. In 2006, and after exhausting all domestic legal venues, the case was submitted to the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR). Two human rights organizations represented the four women applicants, and in 2013 the Commission ruled in favour of the applicants and requested Egypt to reopen the investigation and provide monetary compensation for the victims.

identified. First, article 11 in the Egyptian constitution endorsed in a referendum in 2014, commits the state to combating violence against women. This is an important development, as it overrides long-standing discourses that blamed women for the violence inflicted on them because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, or because they were not dressed modestly and so forth. The campaign against violence against women, championed by women rights advocates and several youth groups at a time when political spaces were opened and allowed for serious discussions of social problems, gave rise to counter discourses that highlighted the social, political and discursive roots of violence against women and contributed to the success in rendering the issue a matter of public concern and interest. Second, an anti-sexual harassment decree was passed in June 2014 imposing harsh sentences on offenders. This decree resulted in the establishment of anti-sexual harassment units in police stations charged with handling complaints and supporting victims of sexual violence. Third, the first anti-sexual harassment unit in a national university in Egypt was established at Cairo University in September 2014. This was the work of academics and activists who capitalized on the legal developments in the constitution as well as on the anti-harassment decree and drafted an anti-sexual harassment policy for implementation in national universities. The policy became a powerful tool in advocacy campaigns against sexual harassment in university campuses across the country and other youth communities. Finally, the issue of sexual harassment is no longer a topic discussed within the confines of meetings and conferences of rights groups: it has become a matter of national concern, a regular theme in the media, featuring women who talk about their experiences without fear of retribution or shame. This can be counted as one of the unequivocal gains achieved by women rights activists empowered by a revolutionary moment.

This detailed account of the success of women rights activists in Egypt in addressing the challenge of sexual violence against women leading to important modifications of laws as well as societal attitudes is told to corroborate two points: that rights agendas can, and have been instrumental in addressing local concerns; and that a rights agenda when adopted in a new political and cultural environment is more often than not appropriated and modified to suit local struggles and agendas.

In an article about the challenges facing feminists today, Deniz Kandiyoti highlights the plight of women rights activists who employ international rights frameworks in their battle for gender justice. Not only do they have to contend with local and global patriarchal authoritarianisms, but they are also depicted by anti-imperialist transnational academics as accomplices of imperialism at worst, or as "uncritical dupes" at best (Kandiyoti 2015). I have argued that the main problem with anti-imperialist critiques is their disregard of geopolitics: the context of power struggles at a particular time and place. A critique of the manipulation of rights talk to justify imperial interventions by the US and its allies is critique directed at the dominant discourse of the powerful in favour of, and to empower, the voices of the marginalized struggling to be heard. But, extending this critique of rights to cast doubt on and undermine the credibility of women rights activists or groups, in Egypt or Palestine, becomes a weapon that consolidates dominant discourses of authoritarian regimes and silences the embattled voices of marginalized groups[5].

A good case of potential misunderstandings/misrepresentations that result from traveling critique is exemplified in an exchange on the pages of the e-journal *Jadaliyya* in 2012. In an article entitled "Tradition and the Anti-Politics Machine: DAM Seduced by the "Honor Crime", Lila Abu Lughod and Maya Mikdashi put forward a strong critique of an Arabic song produced by a Palestinian hip hop group DAM entitled "If I Could Go Back in Time" about honor crimes in Palestine to condemn violence against women. The authors take DAM to task for "succumb[ing] to an international anti-politics machine that blames only tradition for the intractability of (some) people's problems. Why, when they decide to speak up about violence against women, do they suddenly forget the gritty and complex realities of life on the ground in the places they know?" The authors go on to point out that the group is supported by UN Women and "faithfully follows the script of an international campaign against the so-called honor crime." The key assumptions underlying this critique of DAM is that honor crimes and sexual violence against women are used as a stick to chastise Arabs and Arab cultures and even justify Israeli violence and occupation; that an apolitical rights agenda that foregrounds sexual violence against women in Muslim cultures is championed and pushed by international organizations, in this case UN Women; that a local group receiving money from a UN organization makes them suspect, i.e. local agents propagating a global anti-politics agenda; and, more importantly, in the case of Palestine, a focus on cultural and social problems deflects attention from the ugly realities of the Israeli occupation. DAM responds to the critique also in *Jadaliyya* with a strong rebuttal and somewhat vexed tone. They emphasize the following: that the song is in Arabic and addresses an Arab audience; that they are not obliged to worry every time they produce art about what the Americans or the Israelis think; that there is a problem of violence against women in Arab societies that must be addressed; that they respect the BDS and do not understand why the authors of the critique fault them for receiving money from UN Women as it is not on the boycott list; that the implication that they are "intellectually naïve" disregards their history and their activism etc. Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi respond by emphasizing solidarity, that it was not their intention to fault DAM, that they "never doubted your [DAM's] integrity" and hoped that DAM would also respect their integrity "as sisters and comrades in the struggle for justice for Palestinians of all ages, genders and classes," (Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi 2012b). The exchange highlights an important point: that both sides have excellent arguments and justifications for their positions; both are politically savvy; and both are trying very hard to navigate difficult positionalities in extremely complex contexts; and with reference to the last piece in the exchange, there is no doubt that both sides have no desire or reason for becoming entrenched in adversarial positions. It is my contention that the misunderstandings/conflicts are a consequence of the inevitable effects of the travel of critique, a factor that requires more critical

[5] Kandiyoti further points out that these critiques do not only target liberal secular feminists, but also "Muslim feminists endeavouring to find an indigenous voice for change and reform" (2015).

attention of the use and abuse of interpretive frameworks in a globalized world.

In his essay, "Traveling theory" (1983) Edward Said explored the potential of traveling theory in changing and adapting to new environments and also warned against turning theories into cultural dogma. In his later essay, "Traveling Theory Reconsidered," he strongly refutes the claim that theories are fixed in time and place and argues that "the point of theory therefore is to travel, always to move beyond its confinements, to emigrate, to remain in a sense in exile" (Said 2001: 450)

Joan Scott uses the term "reverberations" to describe "circuits of influence" (Scott 2002:12) in today's world and proposes an alternative way for conceptualizing the global circulation of feminist strategies and knowledges that circumvents the more conventional notion of unidirectional flows of influence from a powerful center to less powerful margins. She subverts the notion of origins by examining the intellectual trajectory of Julia Kristeva, acknowledged as a prominent theorist of French feminism. Kristeva was Bulgarian and was influenced by the work of Bakhtin. According to Scott, "What came to be called French feminism … was crucially influenced by philosophical movements opposing communism in the "East"" (Scott 2002: 15). She also draws attention to the movement entitled Women in Black, which started in 1988, the time of the first intifada and organized weekly protests against the occupation in the West Bank and Gaza. This movement spread to many other countries, not identically, but always accommodating itself to local needs. So in Germany, Women in Black protested against Neo-Nazis attacks on migrants, in Italy they marched against the Mafia and so forth (Scott 2002:16-21). The point made is that ideas/concepts/movements cause reverberations that are more often than not, transformed and appropriated to meet local agendas and needs. "Difference … must be understood not as sharp contrast, but as a succession of echoes, reverberations" (Scott 2002: 20).

In 2011 many women rights advocates have been subjected to vilification campaigns by local right wing religious extremists, as well as nationalist elites invested in maintaining the status quo, both accusing women rights activists of pursuing westernized agendas that were not indigenous enough. This line of attack is not new, has roots in postcolonial nationalist histories. Conservative, religious as well as nationalist discourses in society have historically dismissed women's rights on the grounds that they are mere reflections of westernized agendas in favour of a cultural specificity approach[6]. While "saving Muslim women" has been a battle cry of imperialist powers since colonial times, and more recently during the military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and has been manipulated to justify invasions, the cultural specificity argument of "our women are different" as well as "we must protect our values" has been the battle cry of authoritarian Arab postcolonial regimes to justify human rights violations and the suppression of rights.

Moreover rights activists in the Arab world have also had to contend with feminist anti-imperialist critics whose critique of imperialism, rightly directed against imperialist discourses in the west that have arisen and gained prominence in the aftermath of September 11 in 2001, results in very different consequences when used as the theoretical lens for understanding rights movements in postcolonial contexts. To posit that rights movements in postcolonial contexts are duplicates of western agendas, in both direction and aims is erroneous practically and theoretically. From a practice point of view, as demonstrated above, and as evidenced in many other contexts, rights agendas can and have been adapted and reworked to suit local settings and respond to local needs. From a theoretical point of view, I contend we need to foreground the relation between theory and practice, or the geopolitics of theory in our global world. We also need to pay attention to the details, the fragment, the declared or undeclared drivers of action, to the actors' agency and

[6] For a detailed discussion of the assault on women's rights post 2011 and its roots in history see Elsadda 2011.

location in the political and social spheres. In other words, we need to address the challenges of contexts that limit or shape aspirations. As Wendy Brown puts it: it is impossible to make a generic pronouncement on the "political value of rights" as it is not feasible "to argue for them or against them separately from an analysis of the historical conditions, social powers, and political discourses with which they converge and of which they interdict" (Brown 1995, 98).

Amartya Sen highlights the importance of context in addition to the awareness of actors/activists in their pursuit of justice: "The subject of justice is not merely about trying to achieve – or dreaming about achieving – some perfectly just society or social arrangements, but about preventing manifestly severe injustice… For example, when people agitated for the abolition of slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they were not laboring under the illusion that the abolition of slavery would make the world perfectly just. It was their claim, rather, that a society with slavery was totally unjust" (Sen 2009: 21)

The pursuit of rights, similar to the pursuit of justice, must not only be contextualized, but must also be understood against the background of possibilities, struggles and achievable aims, rather than with reference to ideal worlds and abstract concepts.

Anti-imperialist critiques of universalist rights discourses, important and valid in exposing imperialist agendas and discourses, have often missed the mark when extended to authoritarian postcolonial contexts where the location of rights advocates in the power spectrum is tenuous to say the least. They are constantly subject to vilification campaigns under the pretext of cultural specificity or safeguarding sovereignty. In fact anti-imperialist critiques of rights discourses are not used "by the people whose rights are being violated" (Chanock 2000:16). In Egypt, ruling regimes have repeatedly employed the anti-imperialist critique in order to '"nationalise"', and undermine the efforts of human rights groups advocating for universal rights to all citizens by "manipulating the discourse of human rights in order to shore up its failing legitimacy" (Abdelrahman 2007: 286).

The anti-imperialist critique reproduces the binary opposition between universalism vs. cultural specificity. The adoption of a universal rights approach is tainted by the fact that it has been manipulated in western contexts to justify imperial interventions. Laura Bush's famous speech about saving Afghani women to justify the US invasion of Afghanistan, is an excellent example of such imperialist manipulations. This is a woman in a powerful position using or abusing a rights agenda to justify a war of aggression. The power relations here are clear: it is the powerful who is using the rights approach. However, a rights advocate in Egypt or Iraq or Syria who adopts a rights agenda, making use of the moral and legal authority of an international rights agenda, to advocate for rights in a highly charged and beleaguered political context, is in a very different position. Here the rights advocate is the weaker link on the power spectrum, and is up against most often than not an authoritarian system that does not necessarily respect or implement rule of law. This rights advocate is in effect the voice of the underdog and the silenced speaking truth to power.

Concluding Remark

In my engagement with the feminist ant-imperialist critique of rights movements in postcolonial contexts I have highlighted the need for a geopolitical grounding of theory that addresses global manifestations and variations of power relations in different contexts. I have faulted the tendency in feminist anti-imperialist critiques to overlook the consequences and implications of the different locations of rights advocates in different contexts and have argued for contextualization as an imperative for bridging the gap between theory and practice. Contextualization here is both geographical and historical: it is about the details of a particular struggle in a specific location and at a particular moment in history. Contextualization will illuminate the power spectrum in different geographies and can help in avoiding ahistorical renderings of struggles for justice. With reference to the history of the women's movement in Egypt, it would be totally ahistorical to undermine the interaction/exchanges and contribution of Egyptian feminists to the conceptualization and formulation of ideas and rights movements. It would be ahistorical and reductionist to confine their engagement with rights discourses to the time when the UN became a key factor in furthering women's rights agendas. The story is much richer and much more nuanced.

This plea to historicize and to stay focused on the global/local variations in power relations is admittedly a huge challenge and a massive responsibility as it requires a constant reappraisal of our critical lens and our tools for understanding and making sense of the world. From the standpoint of a feminist contestation of power grounded in theory and praxis, it would potentially enable us all to avoid the pitfalls of our interpretive frameworks becoming normative dogma.

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