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Nazira Zeineddine: Pioneer of Islamic Feminism

miriam cooke

I will refute these shaikhs so that that the world will know that it is neither Islam nor men in general that deprive women of their rights. The problem is with the shaikhs who abuse their authority to make people believe whatever suits them ... How impoverished is the nation in which only half the population is rational and, therefore, able to participate fully in its political and spiritual life. How impoverished is the man whose mother, wife, sister and daughter are said to be lacking! Gentlemen, you accuse us of lack of religion and reason. Why? Because you have blocked the paths of the intellect and you have cast us into an ocean of humiliation and ignorance ... Can there be religion where there is ignorance? They have forbidden women all knowledge, even writing, and taught them to spin ... the black all-enveloping cloth and the face veil were not enough of a veil for them; they wanted the veils to be the walls of the boudoirs to be left only for the grave ... I believe that unveiling, knowledge and freedom are more conducive to honorability and chastity and preservation of the meaning of motherhood, the family, and the interest of society ... Unjustly fettered by their veils and denied their freedoms and progress, mothers will be unable to secure their children's progress and happiness. To those who hold on to the veil, subjugate women, and preserve traditions: you have your beliefs, whereas we, who call for unveiling, the liberation of women, and the rejection of traditions, have our own.¹

'I will refute these shaikhs', wrote a 19-year-old Lebanese Druze woman in 1928. In a context where women were not expected to assert themselves or even to speak in public, Nazira Zeineddine boldly used the personal pronoun 'I'. She did not pretend academic distance or impersonal objectivity but assumed the right to address the Islamic authorities, directly. Throughout

her two books, *Unveiling and Veiling* (1928) and its sequel *The Girl and the Shaikhs* (1929),² she addresses the shaikhs in the second person plural, often calling them ‘Gentlemen’ and sometimes, when angry at their insults, ‘Shaikhly Opponents’ or ‘Slingers of Arrows’. These shaikhs held moral sway in the eastern Mediterranean and few dared to question their authority. Zeineddine did not merely want to address them, she wanted to refute them. She had reason to be outraged.

In the summer of 1927, some Syrian shaikhs had decreed that women should cover their faces when out in the streets. Zeineddine reacted immediately. In public lectures that she stipulated should not admit veiled women, she contended that these shaikhs, like their predecessors, had deliberately twisted the scriptures to privilege themselves and disempower women. She was determined to prove wrong their assertion that women were bound by Islamic doctrine to cover their faces: the Qur’an and the Sunna (the model of ideal comportment taken from the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad), she argued, did not call for women’s faces to be covered.

Unveiling and Veiling came out in a critical decade when Middle Eastern women activists were becoming physically and discursively visible and therefore threatening the patriarchal status quo. In 1923 Egypt, the president of the Egyptian Feminist Union Huda Shaarawi made a spectacle of unveiling when she returned from the international meeting of feminists in Rome and showed her face to the welcoming crowd. Many Arab women followed suit. In Turkey, Atatürk’s secularist social engineering project stigmatized the veil as emblematic of Ottoman backwardness. The Shah of Iran banned its use. In 1928, twenty-five journals edited by and for Arab women were in circulation. Many celebrated the new age that allowed women to make their own decisions about how to appear and act in public. It looked as though the face veil was disappearing; and with its disappearance, new opportunities and freedoms seemed to be opening up for women. The Syrian shaikhs tried to stop this process in its tracks, and Zeineddine tried to resist them.

Fluent in four languages, Turkish, Arabic, French and English, and educated in a Catholic school in Beirut with girls from the Lebanese Christian elite, Zeineddine had no formal religious training. It was her father who had taught her all she knew about Islam. Head of a minor feudal family from Mount Lebanon, Said Zeineddine was an Ottoman judge trained in nineteenth-century Istanbul, and the first president of the Lebanese Court of Appeals. At that time, all who studied and practised Sunni law were considered able to engage in polemics on

any subject of legal concern. Zeineddine took her cue from her father when she assumed the authority to speak out on behalf of Muslim women.

Everything Zeineddine had learned by the time she was 19 reinforced her belief that Islam, properly interpreted, gave women the same rights as men to freedom and equality in all domains. Plumbing scriptural sources, Zeineddine theorized the meaning of freedom beyond non-bondage to a natural freedom of will and thought equally distributed among men and women. Women need not demand freedom because it was given as part of God's grace. Muslim women, she insisted, are free to decide what they want to do and what they want to wear; they are free to think and, importantly, to decide what Islam means for them. And that is what she did: 'I gave my reason full liberty and I received from the Qur'an and the Sunna guidance concerning freedom and women's rights whose light was so intense, it would shame the brightness of the sun when it rises' (76).

She challenged the shaikhs to bring some word from the Qur'an about covering the face. Since she was convinced that they could not, there could be no mandate for it. Further, anyone who covers the face of a woman 'is committing a certain injustice'.³ Acknowledging that people have different beliefs, she addressed herself to 'those who hold on to the veil, subjugate women, and preserve traditions: you have your beliefs, whereas we, who call for unveiling, the liberation of women, and the rejection of traditions, have our own'. She did not want to change their minds, she protested, but merely wanted the shaikhs to respect the opinion of those who called for unveiling, 'because one of us might be right' (61).

In fact, the Syrian shaikhs were reversing the advances that late-nineteenth-century reformers had made in their demands for removal of the veil and education for girls. For decades, Muslim women's rights had been hotly debated. Top of the list of issues were the veil and access to education. Women, with the exception of peasants and Bedouin, were expected to cover their faces; only the few who were able to afford private tutors at home received an education. Reformers argued that the face veil was connected with women's lack of education, and that this lack contributed to the backwardness of Muslim countries newly exposed to European scientific and technological advances.

Ironically and problematically, however, they were making the same argument as the British and French who had colonized their countries. It was not easy for the colonized to argue for women's rights while embedded outsiders were touting feminist principles as the way forward. Reformers risked the charge

of collaboration with the hypocritical colonizers, for it was no secret that the white men who were saving brown women from brown men, to cite Gayatri Spivak's apt formulation, were misogynists at home.⁴ But, despite anxieties that the colonial powers might co-opt their demands, men and women reformers increasingly insisted on the need to change social norms and values so that women might participate fully in the public sphere.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some upper-class Egyptian women gathered in salons where they debated ways to advance their feminist ideals without provoking a backlash from the religious establishment.⁵ The key to acceptance of women's rights discourse was to emphasize motherhood, and this is what Zeineddine did in 1928. 'I believe that unveiling, knowledge and freedom are more conducive to honorability and chastity and preservation of the meaning of motherhood, the family, and the interest of society,' Zeineddine wrote, 'Unjustly fettered by their veils and denied their freedoms and progress, mothers will be unable to secure their children's progress and happiness.' To emphasize motherhood implied that the rights to unveiling, knowledge and freedom that women sought were not being pursued by women because they wished to displace men in the public sphere or break up the family and its traditional hierarchy. Women who demanded these rights in their capacity as mothers in fact indicated their desire to strengthen age-old gender roles. The strengthening of these approved roles, especially that of mother, would enhance the welfare of a society in which the next generation could not be knowledgeable, happy and honourable if their mothers were not. Zeineddine often referred to traditions that cited the Prophet Muhammad's words, like 'Paradise is under the feet of mothers'. But the mothers of whom the Prophet of Islam spoke were free to mingle with men and to acquire knowledge. In fact, acquiring knowledge was an Islamic obligation. A few months after the Syrian shaikhs mandated the face veil, Zeineddine collected her lectures into a book that she dedicated to her father.⁶ The first book about women's rights in Islam written by a woman, *Unveiling and Veiling*, shot her to prominence. Letters arrived from all over the world, and reviews appeared in numerous publications. For some she was a heroine and for others an apostate.

The book cited, detailed and analysed Islamic texts to uncover Muslim women's sacred rights. It outlined what some today call the feminist revolution that the Prophet Muhammad brought to the seventh-century Arabian Peninsula. Scholars have asserted that pre-Islamic Arabian tribes radically devalued women; several Qur'anic verses, by contrast, absolutely prohibit mistreatment

of women. One vivid example is female infanticide. Like today's abortion of female embryos, pre-Islamic Arabians often buried female infants at birth. The Qur'an explicitly forbids this practice (Qur'an 81: 8–14). The Islamic revolution, articulated in the Qur'an and in the Sunna, granted Muslim women important rights. For example, far from being men's property, as seems to have been the case before the seventh century, they were given sacred rights to property: property they earned, were given as a dowry or inherited was theirs. These rights Christian and Jewish women did not enjoy until the nineteenth century; even then it was not their religion that granted them those rights but the states in which they lived. Moreover, the Qur'an entitles women to sexual pleasure and if denied – either because the husband shuns his wife's bed or he is impotent – have legal recourse to divorce.

Despite Muhammad's urging to all Muslims to seek knowledge, women had historically been denied access to knowledge because, Zeineddine argued, being veiled confined them to 'the walls of the boudoirs to be left only for the grave'. She connected the face veil with the shaikhs' claim, derived from another saying of Muhammad, that women were lacking in religion and reason. Zeineddine blamed the shaikhs for this lack, not women's inborn inferiority. 'Gentlemen, you accuse us of lack of religion and reason. Why? Because you have blocked the paths of the intellect and ... cast us into an ocean of humiliation and ignorance ... Can there be religion where there is ignorance?' Because of an accident of birth, these shaikhs opined, girls were intellectually and spiritually inferior and thus not worth educating. Zeineddine argued rather that women's lack of religion and reason was due to lack of education, itself a consequence of lack of access to the public sphere and the imposition of 'the black all-enveloping cloth'. The lack, therefore, was not a biological fact but a cultural product engineered by the shaikhs. 'How impoverished is the nation in which only half the population is rational and, therefore, able to participate fully in its political and spiritual life. How impoverished is the man whose mother, wife, sister and daughter are said to be lacking!' The absence of active women in the life of the nation and the family cast a shadow on both nation and men. Both became diminished in value because the offspring of uneducated and inexperienced mothers could never achieve their full potential. The shaikhs' denial of reason and religion to women jeopardized their sacred role as mothers. Again, Zeineddine's argument revolved around the centrality of women's reason and therefore the need for education as essential to the welfare of the family and the nation.

Without knowing Mary Wollstonecraft, Zeineddine at times echoes her definition of reason as 'the simple power of improvement; or, more properly speaking, of discerning truth [...] but the nature of reason must be the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature to the Creator; for, can that soul be stamped with the heavenly image, that is not perfected by the exercise of its own reason?'⁷ (see Chapter 6 of this volume). Likewise, Zeineddine's argument for equal distribution of reason and religion derives from a notion of shared grace. The face veil created a context in which religion could not flourish: 'Any Muslim woman who removes the cover from her eyes and vision will see the flood of freedom God has granted her' (39). The veil produced ignorance that deprived women of grace and knowledge about their freedoms that were enshrined in scripture.

Zeineddine's most virulent opponent was the powerful Shaikh Mustafa al-Ghalayini whom she had accused of contradiction and hypocrisy. Within a few months of the publication of *Unveiling and Veiling*, he had written a refutation of her book, claiming that no woman, especially not one so young, could have written it alone.⁸ He accused her of naiveté for allowing missionaries to write a book whose cover she had decorated with her signature. Shortly thereafter, Zeineddine published yet another volume, *The Girl and the Shaikhs*, a full-scale attack on the shaikhs who had criticized her first book, a large part of which was devoted to Shaikh al-Ghalayini. She condemned his misogyny, most crudely exemplified in his comment that ugly women should be grateful for the mandate to cover their faces and his recommendation to Zeineddine that she take advantage of the veil.

How is it that such a powerful voice and thoroughly researched work should so soon disappear? Was it because she had been ruthless in her critique of the shaikhs, especially Shaikh al-Ghalayini? Yet, she was writing at a time when religious polemics were rife. Men insulted each other for their religious opinions, and few were castigated for exceeding the bounds of the appropriate. But they were men and she was a lone woman. She had even dared to advise the shaikhs that they, the experts who pontificated on the meaning of each verse of the Qur'an and the applicability of the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, should read the scriptures before they pronounced on the veil. Further, she declared that the 'power you attribute to the veil has been woven on a loom of weak brains; it is a fantasy that you are weaving'.⁹

The disappearance of these two books and their author must also be connected to her religion. Her claim in 1928 to be a Muslim woman defending Muslim women's rights was less convincing after 1932 than it had been four

years earlier, for deeply political reasons. When the Ottoman Empire collapsed in 1923 and the French mandate was established by the League of Nations, the Druze lost their position of influence and power. In 1932, the French oversaw a confessional census to determine the size of the seventeen religious populations. These communities were then assigned political positions in accordance with their numerical importance. The contested census affirmed that the Druze were only the fourth most populous community, after the Maronites, Sunnis and the Shiites. Not only were the Druze displaced politically, they also ceased to be considered fully Muslim – rather, they became just one more religion. In the process, any claims to be Muslim, like Zeineddine's repeated claim that she was a 'Muslim girl', no longer held. Her books in defense of Muslim women's rights, authorized by that identity, lost their authority and became screeds by a sectarian. They passed into oblivion, as did she.

After 1932, Zeineddine's pen dried up. She seems to have been concerned that her outspokenness might jeopardize her husband's political ambitions.¹⁰ Although her books remained talked about, they themselves could only be found in obscure libraries. Until 2008 and the celebration of the centenary of her birth in the Druze town of Baakline, no one outside her family knew what had happened to her. She was considered a pioneer of Islamic feminism, yet few knew what she had argued beyond some vague notion of women's rights in Islam. The shaikhs whom she had shamed took their revenge and ensured that this impertinent woman was silenced.

However, the revolution she had supported flourished. Except in very conservative societies like the Arabian Peninsula and poorer urban and rural places, women took off the face veil and the question of the veil went dormant for half a century. In the 1970s, it started to make a comeback. In Egypt, President Sadat's 1973 neoliberal Open Door Policy created an economic crisis that drove lower- and middle-class women to work to supplement dwindling family incomes. To overcome social reluctance, conservative women donned the veil, as a sign that they were chaste and honourable and no man could touch them. In 1978, Iranians opposed to the Shah and his westernizing policies turned the veil, called the chador, into a nationalist symbol. The crowds of black shrouded women out in the streets, some brandishing guns, became the face to the world of the Islamic Revolution that brought the hardliner Ayatollah Khomeini back from exile in Paris and into power in Iran. Subsequently, the veil, donned as a spectacular emblem of Iranian authenticity and nationalism, could not be removed. Until today, women in Iran, including western non-Muslim reporters, must wear the chador. In 1994, secular France was in an

uproar because three Muslim girls had gone to school with a scarf tied around their hair. The media made much of what came to be called 'l'affaire du foulard', or the affair of the scarf. Until today, the French left and right are fighting Muslim women and each other over this small piece of cloth. In many Arab countries, granddaughters are telling their mothers and grandmothers who had fought for the right to control their own bodies that they should cover. 9/11 brought a call to arms for Muslims everywhere to make themselves visible; in Muslim-minority countries veiled women became cultural ambassadors, some covering their faces for the first time. Muslim women remind their non-Muslim compatriots that they are there and to be reckoned with.

Theirs is not a return to the veil but the assumption of a religious, political symbol. Academics and activists, Muslim and non-Muslim, are fighting over its meanings: is the veil religious? Political? Social? Cultural? Is it voluntarily adopted? Are those who claim that they have chosen to cover suffering from false consciousness? Can a symbol so laden with patriarchal meaning ever liberate women? Is it coerced? Does it strengthen or weaken patriarchy? Over eighty years after Zeineddine wrote her retort to the shaikhs in Damascus, the controversy surrounding the veil remains heated. The veil continues to shape social relations even as its meanings have multiplied and complicated feminist thinking not only for Muslims but also for outsiders who have made the veil their business.