2024

Western Feminism Before and After October 7

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Interview with Dr. Lama Abu Odeh (1) Western feminism before and after October 7

We can assert that the ongoing colonial war on Gaza is the most important event since the Arab uprisings after 2011. Just as those events changed us, for better and worse, this war also changed us and continues to do so. We are no longer talking here about the duality of the oppressor and the oppressed in its simplicity, as it used to be before the war. Women and men, patriarchy and feminism, political authority and its subjects, secularism and religion, capitalism and anti-capitalism, all of them are being annihilated in Gaza, all of them are enduring, and all of them are living pivotal days. We can now see these dualities independently from the judgment of the Western world involved in this genocide. Here we find our feminism confronting their patriarchy, and we find our patriarchy, that is, the thoughtful, sublime, humble, and calm grandfatherhood of Khaled Al-Nabhan, confronting the genocidal, bloody, barbaric feminism of the utilized as a war effort in the media and on the ground.

From this standpoint, we decided to interview feminist activist and law professor in Washington, Dr. Lama Abu Odeh, who in recent decades has acquired the ability to formulate maps of allies and enemies of the Palestinians in the United States and the Western world, and the ability to deal with complex and thorny questions such as the intertwining and intersection of women’s struggle for equality with the Palestinian struggle of survival against colonial genocide.

Fakhry Al-Sardawi: During the eras of the War on Terror and the Arab Spring uprisings and conflicts, there was a state of convergence between neoconservatives and international liberals in Washington and Brussels regarding the adoption of a feminist foreign policy in the Arab region. A prominent example of the essence of this convergence is what the American-Egyptian feminist activist Mona Eltahawy wrote in her article in Foreign Policy magazine, directed at a white Western audience, which explained in the terms of George W. Bush how Arab men hate the freedom of Arab women, just as Muslims hate the freedom of Westerners. What do you think of what Eltahawy wrote?

Dr. Lama Abu Odeh: Tahawy wrote at a time the Arab Spring was witnessing a new surge of feminist activism that was affiliated with the emergent dissenting forces agitating against authoritarianism in the Arab world. It is hard to define those feminisms by following a Western typology of “first wave, second wave, etc…” but you got the sense that the young women who were participating with the men in this political agitation were not having it anymore. Whether they were directing their ire towards “comrades” in struggle who they thought mistreated and misunderstood them or towards the abusive state/military that tried to undermine their activism by impugning them sexually, these women fought back. They introduced new forms of politicization that neither their liberal democratic nor radical leftist male comrades had thought about or even considered. It took the form of negotiating safe
and amorous spaces for themselves as they joint their male comrades in struggle. As they politicized these spaces, they thought and reflected about their situation and they wrote about it. Their writings were rich with insight and analysis. They were producing something new, original and radical that was productive of the revolutionary moment they lived.

Tahaway wasn’t part of this scene as she was an Egyptian expatriate who wrote from the imperial center. Her writings were less the product of an activist scene and more of a memoir of a rebel against a conservative family background. In her rebellion, she wrote about a society she loathed and a religion she disliked. In some ways, you could see Tahaway as more radical: uncompromising, blunt, and totalizing. “J’accuse,” Tahawy screamed. It is this totalizing posture in which the accusation is not part of a bargaining structure with the other (men) but a form of declaration that made her “cri de Coeur” open to appropriation by the imperial center.

**Fakhry Al-Sardawi:** Since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, there has been a liberal mass hysteria dressed as a cultural revolution in the United States. One of the characteristics of this “revolution” was the emergence of intersectional feminism under the umbrella of the Democratic Party, open in principle towards the rights of Palestinians. How do you evaluate this feminism in the years in which Before October 7th?

**Lama Abu Odeh:** Intersectionalist feminism emerged in legal academia in the 80s in an attempt to complicate the position of black women as standing on the intersection of two forms of legal discrimination (race and gender). I remember vividly when Hillary Clinton, a presidential candidate, used it in a tweet. The entrance of "intersectional feminism" into the language of the Democratic party was meant to put it to use to fight both Trump's base (disgruntled white men) and Bernie Sanders' base (the working class). Since then it has been incorporated into the language of the professional managerial class (PMC) -a major electoral base for the Democratic Party-as one of the expressions of identity politics this class is so enamored with. Intersectional feminism has been PMC'd, you might say and one can see how the PMC took it wherever they went institutionally including in the UN, regional bodies, professional bodies, etc.

Since then intersectional feminism has proved helpful for the Democratic party as a framework to incorporate new "identity constituencies" that vote and donate for the Democratic party. One needs only witness the incorporation of "trans" as a cause within the intersectionalist coalition of the Democrats even if "trans" threatens directly the interests and gains of women.
That is not to say that intersectional feminism doesn't have its own radical bite. One can put it to use for instance to critique Julie Bindel, a radical feminist, whose rush to indict Hamas of rape on October 7 with scant, or easily refutable, evidence as an expression of her racism. Arab Muslim men are prone to rape therefore Hamas raped Israeli women. Intersectional feminism wants to check the box of colonialism, racism before checking the box of patriarchy or male dominance and this instance is a good use of that conceptual capacity that it has. It is this conceptual capacity that made intersectionalism open to the Palestinian cause. At the end of the day though, the multiple causes that the Democratic party adopts under the umbrella of "intersectionalism" are promoted and demoted according to the contemporary needs of the Democrats and their need to win elections.

Fakhry Al-Sardawi: After October 7, we are witnessing a violent Rightining of feminism and a return to white feminism par excellence, especially with the Zionist propaganda that there were cases of rape on October 7, as you mentioned previously when you spoke about “Julie Bindel.” What is unfortunate about the matter is that populist feminism, which is hostile to neoliberal policies that undermine the working-class nuclear family, betrays the suffering of Palestinians and turns a blind eye to the erasure of entire families from the civil registry, adopting instead an Orientalist narrative based on protecting the white woman from the dangerous black and brown males. How do you explain such a thing as This betrayal by the populist feminist intellectual in the West?

Lama Abu Odeh: I am more inclined to call this feminism "post-liberal/populist" feminism but your point is well taken. One would think that those post-liberal feminists would welcome solidarity with the preliberal cultures of Muslim immigrants and would see in us comrades in the same anti-liberal or post-liberal reconstructive project they are involved in. The only explanation I have for their hostility is that they on the one hand see us as outside the liberal/conservative divide altogether belonging to a radically different culture that they cannot relate to and on the other they see this culture as part of the cultural forces they are fighting against in Europe. It is as if they are saying it is not just liberalism that is chewing away at the European family structure it is also Muslim immigrants who derail this reconstructive project by offering the West the easy alternative to anti liberal reconstruction. Muslim immigrants represent a real challenge to post-liberal reconstruction: a) they have a high birth rate compared to the European one which is plummeting to negative rates, 2) they only marry other Muslims; and 3) they have a distinct culture/religion. These are frightening facts that indicate that Europe might be marching faster to a Muslim future than it is to a reconstructed post-liberal Judeo/Christian one. I think they see Palestine through this prism and are unable to sympathize with it for after all who are the people filling the streets of Europe agitating against the genocide in Gaza but these very Muslim immigrants that are seen as threatening the cultural future of Europe? It must be unnerving to watch the abundance of children in Gaza when what you are struggling against is the paucity of children in your own country. Perhaps there is even a secret pleasure at work in seeing those children killed as an
embodiment of one's secret wish to be rid of Muslim immigrants. Who knows? That is not to deny that there are also the Zionist feminists among those whose loyalty is to the state of Israel and whose feminist faith is bent over backwards to accommodate their Zionism.

**Fakhry Al-Sardawi:** On the other hand, we find in the United States some liberal calls for “Zionist intersectionality,” as comedian Amy Schumer implied, an intersectionality that calls for a focus on protecting the Jews - that is, the Israeli colonial establishment- and adopts progressive policies regarding all marginalized segments except the Palestinians. How does this explain the structural defect in intersectionality?

**Lama Abu Odeh:** I think this is explained by the phenomenon I referred to above which is that intersectionalism has been PMC’d. It has been turned into an empty form that can accommodate the causes of the various identity groups that are voter base of the Democratic party even if the ordering of the victims within intersectionalism differs according to who is speaking.

**Interview with Dr. Lama Abu Odeh (2) Arab feminism before and after October 7**

In the second part of this dialogue, we discuss with the Palestinian feminist activist and law professor Dr. Lama Abu Odeh the history of our local feminism before October 7 and its consequences after the Western genocidal war on Gaza.

**Fakhry Al-Sardawi:** Recently, we have witnessed signs of the decline of Western feminist foreign policy, starting with the disastrous American withdrawal from Afghanistan, all the emergence of multipolarity and realism on a global level. Ali Abu Nimah, editor in chief of the Electronic Intifada, says, addressing the European Union: “There is nothing you have to offer, you don't bring anything, you bring these fake women's empowerment programs and workshops to countries around the world. You are not building airports, ports, and schools.” What are the Europeans' motives behind adopting feminist policies in Palestine in particular from the beginning?

**Lama Abu Odeh:** I think the active promotion of feminism in the region in general and in Palestine in particular is part of the strategy of "liberalizing" the Arab world. It was not dissimilar to what the activists of the Arab Spring wanted to do. This is why many of those activists, after the failure of the Arab Spring, became recipients of European aid to set up sites of dissent, publication, human rights activism, etc. It is interesting to consider the relationship between a local emergent liberal impulse that develops as it struggles with a conservative and authoritarian milieu and an internationalist liberal agenda that is underwritten by money and imperialist interest. Who is using who in this relationship, one wonders? What are the constraints of such relationships? Are these sites of the imperial liberal center offering support for their local agent or are they informing the agendas that are pursued in a way that is obligatory? These are interesting questions to ask and try to answer concretely.
For Palestine, one observes the introduction of legalization of the Palestinian struggle with the promise of "lawsuits" "human rights reports" etc to displace the more militant struggle. One notes a class element to all this as these forms of legalization are recruiting urban college educated labor whereas the more militant struggle is attracting working class, refugee camp dweller labor.

I think that the imperial center sees itself engaged in producing functionaries for a future state where conflict is resolved peaceably through law reforms and courts as opposed to veering to something more violent.

Feminist activism is a piece of that in that it meets an actual local need especially with the increasing Islamicization of society in the last few decades but at the same time puts the onus on feminist activists to continuously relate their struggle to a more pressing one which is the Israeli occupation. This creates a debate among those involved. Of particular sensitivity is the feminism that is regarded as representing its cause in ways that open up Palestinian society to forms of representation preferable to the imperial center that is opposed to a more radical form of anti colonial struggle. There is no easy answer to any of this as feminism requires dissent against social constraints on women as much as it requires dissent against constraints placed on women by Israeli occupation. There are continuous attempts by those involved to produce a feminism that meets the needs of both local agendas. Whether they succeed or fail is open to debate. One needs to keep in mind that this feminist dilemma is part of the larger one that emerged out of the Oslo Accords. The turn to producing functionaries for a future liberal legal and feminist state is always derailed by practices by the Israelis that challenge that promise and repeatedly return the actors back to forms of struggle and solidarity that statist liberal ideologies never had to consider in their modern histories.

Fakhry Al-Sardawi: In recent years, I have noticed how the cultural revolution/mass hysteria in the West - mentioned in the first part of this discussion - has affected some urban segments of middle-class activists and the professional-managerial class in the local Arab context, such that on the one hand there has become a new third option that differs from juridical engagement or the armed struggle against the occupation. This new form of confrontation, which became common in the years preceding October 7, is based on moralistic puritanical activism, or “Virtue Signaling.” It is a false rebellion based on the power of accusation, as you mentioned in the first part of the dialogue, a condemning nihilistic attitude that refuses to enter the space of societal negotiation. This results in some toxic and Orientalist assumptions, such as those who say, “I worry about the fate of Palestinian women if we are liberated from the occupation.” On the other side of this cultural war imported from the West, we find new populist movements that are hostile to women and that also reject societal negotiation, such as the “Haraer Falastin” and the anti-CEDAW movement. You previously wrote in Mada Masr magazine about your concern that feminist activism, especially in the digital space, has the possibility of becoming removed from reality. What do you think of this “moralistic” struggle in general?
**Lama Abu Odeh:** I think this is an interesting question because what you call “the third form” is actually the development of a strand within the left that understands its cause from a radical social constructionist point of view. It is the left of the “virtual” not just of the “virtue.” Everything can be changed, and every form of societal practice is a constraint that needs to be overcome. Nothing is “real”. All is liquid and in flux. A form of radical skepticism of every inherited social form. The problem for the left adopting this form of “radicalism” is that the liquefaction of social relations is exactly what capitalism and empire wants. It is an attack on social forms of resistance to power on the one hand, and an opportunity for profit on the other. Feminism relied historically on the idea of the “social construction” of patriarchy. But feminisms differed on how much of femaleness was socially constructed given that it was women who got pregnant, gave birth, and nursed their children. There was a theoretic stuckness on this question within feminism for decades until Euro-American women of the PMC class stopped having children or had them very late in life. That allowed for radical constructivism to take hold among them as the world of reproduction became alien to them and they felt that they could be free of biology.

But this form of radical constructivism doesn’t make sense to the women of the working class (for whom the body (working), the reproductive body (pregnant and nursing) is all too real) nor for that matter did it make sense in Muslim societies who remain all too reproductive and all too conservative. But also all too reliant on social and familial forms for solidarity. I think the resistance to this strand on the right is both appropriate and not. Appropriate in that it has taken on the task of criticizing radical social constructionism on the left that the left should have done but didn’t (the materialist left sucks up to and is afraid of the social constructionist left/liberals) and “not” (appropriate) because it treats its critique as validating its opposition to all forms of feminism which I think is misplaced.

For all that, I think that the task of theorizing a local feminism remains lacking because most of what is said echoes intellectual developments in the imperial center whether liberal or left without developing its own local critique of these developments that would free it to theorize its location better.

**Fakhry Al-Sardawi:** Professor of Social Sciences at Birzeit University, Dr. Khaled Odettallah, pointed out years ago that Western research methods cannot understand, for example, the phenomenon of Negev Bedouins’ resistance to Israeli colonialism except by seeing the Bedouin clans as non-modern, patriarchal structures. Since intersectional feminism - which is prevalent in feminist circles now - is more complex than liberal feminism, how can it reconcile not postponing feminism under the pretext of the priority of the struggle against colonialism while avoiding the loss of anti-colonial awareness in Western and Israeli feminist methodologies?

**Lama Abu Odeh:** I think that the intersectionalist feminism which is dominant among current day feminist activists on the left is a form of obfuscation that is productive. Through putting
race/colonialism as primary, it has sought to defend the cultural status quo. Defending the cultural status quo was not only a retort against the cultural stereotype of the imperial center but also a cultural defense that understands the importance of "difference" as resistance to the imperialist liberal West. It is an obfuscation because they are in effect defending Muslim conservatism. It is productive because they are attentive to the good resistant uses it could be put to. If one were to avoid the obfuscation, and if we were to put the options before us starkly, I would say we are dealing with two models of resistance: liberalism and its left that seeks to "liberalize the family and its social relations in order to emancipate the individuals in that unit" and sees anti-colonial struggle as a form of emancipation against political constrint and part and parcel of the liberal/left emancipatory project, and on the other hand, social conservatism which looks with horror at the liberal project and that sees the family form in its patriarchal structure as necessary to enable resistance. After all, there is something unique about the Islamic patriarchal structure which while it gives men power over women, it still puts the onus on the men to provide for their families. Against the background of the absent state, or the overpresence of the colonial one that doesn't care for its subject, giving up patriarchy as it exists in reality is a cost too high for this position. One has to pick one or the other understanding that with each choice there is a thing to gain and a thing to lose but one only picks once the obfuscation ceases and one's choices are open to one starkly.

**Fakhry Al-Sardawi:** I will quote here the sincere call of the young Egyptian activist Rahma Zein on the border between Egypt and Palestine in the face of an American “feminist” journalist: “We stand with the Palestinians and we stand with the Arabs.” Is there hope for cross-border Arab feminism arising from this existential epoch?

**Lama Abu Odeh:** There is always an attempt to create cross-Arab feminism through unifying legislation on women in these various countries. There was such an attempt during the Arab Spring and it has offered legislation to that effect that awaits the Arab legislatures to pass. It is a difficult project because it depends on the local political forces and whether they are willing to support such feminist interventions legislatively. Feminism finds its home within "progressivism" and progressive political presence varies in strength from one country to the other. Add to that the fact that progressives have their own considerations that might clash with feminism which sometimes they see as undermining of their efforts to create a working class base. One is left to say, in each context, it depends....