

# Instigating social change: Translating feminism in the Arab world and India

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## ABSTRACT

The most common accusation levelled at those working in gender studies in the Arab world is tied to the fact that they are commonly viewed as dealing with a “Western” concept; corrupting the cultural and traditional value system of the Arabo-Islamic heritage of the region. Linguistic resistance to this field is an obvious impediment to its progression, with a range of dissatisfactory and often conflicted terminology meant to distance the language from the very concept of feminism: *Nassawiyar Unthawiya*, both alien-sounding and cumbersome. Engaging in the act of translation in a linguistic and cultural vacuum means that the translator becomes an active agent in developing and shaping concepts associated with Feminism, while simultaneously conveying the social and moral values that are associated with the quest for female empowerment in the West. This same burden of shaping concepts and creating them while actively engaging in the act of translation was faced by Indian translators of feminism and those working in the field of gender studies beforehand. This paper will attempt to look at the experience of the importance of translation in the field of gender studies in the developing world and the similar hurdles and triumphs that were experienced by those working in the field in India and in the Arab Middle East.

*Keywords:* comparative feminism, translation, India, Arab

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## INTRODUCTION

In a broad sense, feminist theory and feminism have been institutionalised in the West, and have garnered credibility through the different scholarly approaches that have interacted with and built upon the canon. As a social and political movement it has a clearly delineated trajectory, with the emergence of manifestos that demanded equal rights for women, by women, around the tail end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe. The Indian experience entailed similar demands for a change in the status of women around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but like Arab feminism, this had its roots in both colonialist demands for an end to 'barbaric' practices against women, and a newly educated male elite that wanted to improve the condition of women but not necessarily emancipate them. So calls for educational reform in India were in a similar vein to Qasim Amin's call for educating the "mothers of the nation" in Egypt (Amin, 1900) This brings us to the two main ideas that will be discussed in this paper; firstly that the translation of feminist texts in India and the Arab world involves the invention of new terms and terminologies that are introduced alongside the translated concepts. This process is compounded in both regions by the post-colonial baggage of the feminist movement, and its early adoption by men who had different agendas than the feminists themselves. Secondly, translators in both regions become active instigators of social disruption, and can either hold back, or expedite the dissemination of feminist ideas and their absorption into the local culture through the terminology they choose to use, and whether it is a "faithful" meaning literal, or a "grounded" meaning practical, translation as J. Devika named them (Devika, 2008).

In the same way that Bassnett and Trivedi argue that "translation does not happen in a vacuum, but in a continuum..[as] part of an on-going process of intercultural transfer" (Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999, p.2), feminist translation develops both from the theory of gender biased responses, and the activism side of the movement. Therefore it is in a constant state of flux, absorbing and building on developments in the socio-political sphere. Re-examining Juliet Mitchell's description of feminism as "the longest revolution" (Mitchell, 1984) in the context of translation, we would find revolutions within the feminist tract itself. While the position of euro-centric feminists centred on the assumption of the universal suppression of women, with first and second wave feminists likening their position to that of other disenfranchised groups, "the Jews and the Blacks" as Simone de Beauvoir put it in *The Second Sex* (De Beauvoir, 2011, p.290), later waves revolted against this idea of a uniform female experience. While Marxist feminists were in revolution against the social hierarchies inherent in first wave arguments, feminists of non-white ethnicities were in revolt against the insidious racism of white feminist discourse. The translator of feminist tracts, in dealing with multiple layers of feminist ideology and cultural meanings, can also be placed as a direct agent of this feminist revolution. Especially since those translating feminist concepts are likely to also be those who are engaging in feminist acts, at the very least, in gynocriticism. The Canadian poet and translator Erin Moure argues that, "Choosing what to translate is a political act, it's a community act. It's an act that's culturally constructed" (Moure, 2012) but translating in the Arab world and India is, to quote Spivak (1999) "often a political exercise of a different kind" (p.406). In both regions the translator is dealing with a multitude of ethnically different political and cultural ideologies that have brushed up against global ones and embraced them at a point in time, such as communism in the south of the Indian subcontinent, and the socialist regimes in Iraq, Syria and Egypt. Both regions have a high formal language and different dialects that act as everyday languages coloured by geographical influences outside its borders. Both are especially hostile to feminist intervention and have been accused of backward practices by Western observers since the beginning of the state formation project in the 1950s and 1960s. Of course, India's size, population and industrial prowess places it far ahead of the Arab Middle East in terms of the sheer volume of feminist output, and the national recognition of a leadership figure in Indira Ghandi, although it has yet to be repeated again, places it in a more advanced cognitive space in feminist terms than the Arab-speaking world. The homogeneity of India as a subcontinent is also markedly different than the many Arab identities that make up the twenty-one countries of the Arab world, especially after the post-liberation statehood projects began to get involved in the national identity manufacturing process. The latter meant that the legal and social position of women progressed at widely differing rates in the various Arab countries, and thus produced a varying range of engagements with feminist thought, texts and translations. Lastly India has established matrilineal and supposedly matriarchal societies (such as the Khasis of North East India and the now no longer practiced Marumakkathayam inheritance system in Kerala) whereas the Arab states have no such practices in their socio-cultural history.

## TRANSLATING A UNIVERSAL STRUGGLE

According to [Jeremy Munday \(2009\)](#) feminist engagement with the act of translation has focused on four main concerns (p.192). The first, which both Indian and Arab writers have not engaged with enough, centers around uncovering the role of female translators themselves and their historical limitations. However the dearth of academic texts on the issue of female translators can be compensated by Arab writers such as Fatima Mernissi's attempts to challenge the traditional historical relegation of women to the side-lines with books such as *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* ([Mernissi, 1994](#)), and the many anthologies and volumes written on uncovering the misrepresented history of women in India. This ties in with the second concern, which attempts to dismantle the ideological and historical correlation of translation with traditional gender construction, so that the feminist translator is not only instigating social change but uncovering the traditional reasons behind the status quo, and much of the third concern, that of critiquing the translation of feminist texts falls into this category. The last concern, that of gendered language and choosing what gender biases and societal practices to omit or include in a specific text is perhaps the one that the post-colonialist feminist translator in the Arab world and India struggles with most.

The problem with traditional feminist translation theory is in its insistence on the lowly status of both feminism and translation. [Sherry Simon \(1996\)](#) saw that the literary view on translated texts as derivative of and inferior to the original text is similar to how women were repressed and relegated to a less prominent role in society and literature. She advocated an adherence to a feminist translation project by which "feminist translators openly advocate and implement strategies (linguistic or otherwise) to foreground the feminist in the translated text." ([Hatim & Munday, 2004, p.105](#)). This leads to what [Lori Chamberlain \(1988\)](#) calls the "sexualisation of translation" and requires the translator and the original author to engage in a subversive collaboration to restore or uncover the hidden feminist message that has been previously suppressed. Here the translator, who these theorists argue is lesser than the creator of the original text, is able through the act of translation to undermine the sexist marginalisation and engage in the creative process of "liberating" the feminine, much like the social act of women's emancipation.

Although both translators of feminist texts in India and the Arab world cannot avoid a form of this re-inventive process the idea of starting off from an inferior position (that of woman, or that of translator) can get prickly in a post-colonial setting, where the sensitivities towards this type of cultural positioning can run especially high. [Chakravarty \(2015\)](#) states that:

Yet, this overlooks the fact that a preoccupation with "fidelity" or "authenticity" was not part of the tradition in India before colonial times. Ours was a polyglot culture with a strong oral tradition, and linguistic and regional borders were fluid; in this scenario, it was inevitable that texts should travel in translation (p. 26).

This description also works for the nature of translation in the Arab world. In fact, there was no belief in the inferiority of the translator, who was seen as an essential vessel to transmit a foreign culture's knowledge into Arabic whether at the time of the Islamic Empire expansion, or during colonial occupation when the printing presses allowed for a wider dissemination of Western texts ([Al-Khalili, 2012](#)). As women in both India and the Arab world continue to explore feminist texts and translations, the lack of organic and home-grown feminist translation theories will be supplanted and replaced by those starting from a viewpoint that is more authentic and less concerned with the Western perception of translation and more concerned with the "fluidity" of texts in regions historically immersed in multi-cultural exchanges.

## FEMINIST PERCEPTIONS IN TRANSLATION

Examining the translated choices in the Arabic language and in India's regional languages gives us a vivid example of this protracted wrangling between translating the social act and actually engaging in social action. Feminism is deeply rooted in social service and social justice, and therefore contains an implicit invitation to overthrow existing social systems that are oppressive to women as a weaker social group. The universal application of the gender issue frames the national in the international, the personal in the political, thereby making the implicit call for action, an explicit one.

Feminism's disruptive properties in traditional Indian and Arab societies caught up in preserving "family values" that centre on inherited sexual hierarchies and gender roles can be seen in its challenging of attitudes, behaviours, laws, policies and institutional frameworks that seek to keep women occupied within a rigidly controlled domestic space. In the shift from source to translated

language feminism's focus on inclusion, fairness and equal opportunity and its challenges to notions of manhood, gender, language and family are subjected to critical analyses by the interpreter. As [Simon \(1996\)](#) put it "complicities between gender and translation become the basis of a consciously transformative project" (p.6). Those working in gender studies in India and the Arab world are viewed as dealing with a "Western" concept with an imperialist agenda; corrupting the cultural and traditional value system of the indigenous heritage of the region. The cultural rejection of feminist discourse derives a lot of its power from labeling it an "imported" problem. Linguistic resistance to this field is one of the more obvious impediments to its progression, with a range of dissatisfactory and often conflicted terminology meant to distance the language from the very concept of feminism. The Arabic "Nissawiya" or "Unthawiya", both provide incomplete descriptions of feminism as they focus on the biological aspect and disregard the more encompassing feminist "world view". When figures such as Alice Walker reject "feminism" as a white women's term and replace it with Womanism, this creates an ever-larger dilemma for the translator by forcing them to take a side in the on-going debate . . . which Arabic "iya" to go with which English "ism"? The Indian term "Streevadani" is a similar reduction to the literal meaning of "argument on behalf of women", which fails to convey the spectrum of feminist concerns. [Devika \(2008\)](#) argues that both the emphasis on literal interpretations and the conservative nature of the local community which "discourages the active discussion of themes like sexuality, very often decides the limits of feminist innovation in language" (p.184). This becomes more complicated as developments in Western feminism push the limits of linguistic and cultural flexibility further with concepts such as "intersectionality", "gender-queer" and "femi-nazi", which may not be suitable or useful in the current social climate of the target language.

### THE BURDEN OF TRANSLATION

At present, the field of gender studies seems to be in a translation transition. [Devika \(2008\)](#) claims that the word "Gender" started to appear in the popular discourse of Indian development and decentralisation in the 1990s, as it was seen as less divisive than feminism. The most commonly used term, "lingapadavi", merely means "the status of sex". In India and the Arab world, naming the field of gender studies is a problem in itself because sex as a socio-cultural issue and sex as biologically determined were rarely considered as separate enough to merit different words before the advent of translated feminism. [Al-Dabbagh and Ramadan \(2013\)](#) make the same claim for the use of "Gender" as a less divisive term in the Arab world, and explain how many Arab feminists rejected it because of this shift in focus from women to the more inclusive "women and men". As more and more Universities and independent researchers in the Arab world engage with the study of gender and feminism, the usage will probably evolve and normalise so that its not as alien-sounding as [SaadalBazie's \(2014\)](#) suggestion "Jinthawiyah", or the more common obtuse term "al-no'a al Ijtima'ee", or the lazy and odd sounding "Jandarah". [Spivak \(2004\)](#) examines the awkwardness and relative novelty of the words gender and gendering in the English language itself, and quotes the Bangladeshi activist and author Farida Akhter as complaining that "the real work of the women's movement and of feminism is being undermined by talk of "gendering", mostly by the women's development wings of transnational nongovernment organisations, in conjunction with some local academic feminist theorists" ([Spivak, 2004, p.146](#)). Similarly, the United Nations programs have tried to push the word "Jinsaniyah" as the Arabic version of gendering, a mixture of the word for humanity "Insaniyah" and that for sex "Jinns", and it has so far resisted adoption outside of the organisation.

Besides the different psychological burdens of post-colonialism that Indian and Arab feminist discussions start off from, there is the obvious gap in theoretical background. Although there has been many interesting and valid publications in the past four decades that dealt with comparative, Islamic and the unfortunately named Third world feminism, the main theoretical underpinnings of mainstream Feminist thought and critical approaches comes from two Western, liberal humanist schools of thought; Anglo-American feminism, which deals mostly in biology, and the French feminist school, which divorces feminism from the biological state of womanhood, so that both men and women can be feminist in their writings and their outlook. Both approaches rest on the exaltation of the culture of the individual, and individual rights, which is problematic when dealing with cultures where collectivism, and communal harmony are the ideological basis such as India and the Arab countries. This can make the most simplistic of feminist exchanges lose their meaning, and makes it difficult to translate even the most basic concepts that are essential to the feminist theoretical lexicon, like the word "patriarchy".

Patriarchy, in its etymology, has Greek roots, and in social relevance, is associated with the orthodox Christian concept of an ultimate father, a “Patriarch”. In an increasingly secularised West, institutionalised control based on male authority, like that exercised by the church over its faithful followers, is easily accessed in “Patriarchy’s” metaphoric repressive and restrictive elements. However, when one uses this word in Arabic, its Christian overtones lose their oppressive suggestive powers and become another manifestation of “foreignness” outside the minority of Arab Christians who engage daily with the term. Patriarchy, which is central to the universal themes of hierarchal and institutionalised male dominance, is often translated into the more Arabic sounding “Abbawiyah”, or “Thukooriyah”, derived from the Arabic word for father and male respectively. At any time, when the translator designates who is meant by Patriarchy, it is inevitable that he or she are also designating an enemy. The “Patriarch”, be he the father, the male sex or the foreign sounding and vehemently Christian Patriarchy has now been named and shamed in the translated Arabic as the root cause of female oppression. Another kind of ethical dilemma emerges for those translating the same term in the different regions of India. Should patriarchy be translated into high language, like the Malayalan term “pitmedhavitvan”, with its upper caste social implications or alternatively, the more accessible and socially egalitarian “aankioma”? As Devika (2008) points out, High Malayalam is deeply influenced by Sankrist and divorced from everyday speech, similar to the problems of translating feminist terminology into Classical Arabic, without even addressing the linguistic minefield for a feminist translator in the inherent favouring of the male sex in the grammar of the language itself. This problem of the sexist nature of language itself has been faced by those outside the field of feminist translation, but more recently, scholars from the Arab world and India have started to explore this relationship and its impact on the social contract and gender roles. Fatima Sadiqi (2002) argues that language is an important component of social power that often works in ways that undermine female empowerment. The same argument for this inherent gender bias has been made by both Indian scholars and Western scholars with varying degrees of argumentation on how much this then effects the socio-political positioning of women within a particular linguistic community.

### CULTURAL DOMINANCE AND FEMINIST TRANSLATION

Part of the feminist activist and translation movement has attempted to co-opt the overarching male subtext of literary tracts through having dedicated publishing houses looking into the lost “feminist” text. Kothari (2014) suggest that:

A more tangible interlocking of gender and translation is visible in “small” and “niche” presses focusing upon women’s texts. In India, Stree and Kali for Women undertake translation on a wide scale as a means to access women’s voices (p.43).

Similarly Noor Publishing House in Egypt, was dedicated mainly to the output of female authors, and was the organising impetus behind the 1995 Arab Women’s Writer Book Fair in Cairo. Valentine Moghadam (2003) argues that publications such as *Al-Raida*, a quarterly feminist journal published by the Institute of Women’s Studies in the Arab World of the Lebanese American University which has been operating since 1976 is “another way that MENA women have been contributing to civil society . . . through literary efforts, including the publication of books, journals and films” (p.284).

In the Arab world, Western interest in women’s writing specifically, perhaps as a result of the orientalist infatuation with the “oppressed” female figure, and this has resulted in many translated feminist novels and anthologies dedicated to Arab women’s writing (Boothe, 2002, p.410). Yet, even this can be a thorny issue because of the choice of which writer to translate can be driven by either commercial or sensational drivers that may not always have an essentially Arab feminist concern. Garnet Publishing House in London dedicated a series of publications edited by Fadia Faqir dedicated solely to Arab Women Writers, and although she argues that Western interest and exposure is ultimately a good thing, Amal Amireh (1996) argues that there is an element of cultural domination involved in translating feminist works:

To understand the problem Arab women writers face we need to look at the long and complex history of their reception in the West. Historically, the West’s interest in Arab women is part of its interest in and

<sup>1</sup> Both words mean patriarchy in Malayalam, according to J. Devika (2008): “Aankioma is now widely used in Malayalam for patriarchy, as an alternative to Pitmedhavitvan. In a sense this is really the implicit recognition of the impossibility of homolingual address assumed by much translation - of the fact that the presence of a national language does not mean it is equally available to all nationals alike.”

hostility to Islam. This hostility was central to the colonialist project, which cast women as victims to be rescued from Muslim male violence. The fixation on the veil, the harem, excision, and polygamy made Arab women symbols of a region and a religion that were at once exotic, violent, and inferior. (p.32).

This holds true for the darling of Western translation Nawal al Saadawi's work, and especially her fiction which is often described as subpar by her peers and other Arab women writers. Spivak (2004) warns of this desire to be all-embracing as a feminist translator, cautioning that a good translator "must have a tough sense of the specific terrain of the original, so that she can fight the racist assumption that all third world women's writing is good" (p.147).

The colonial context challenges the universality of feminist translation in another way. Spivak (2004) argues that it is not always empowering to the feminist writer to be pigeonholed into a cultural space through the medium of translation:

"I am often approached by women who would like to put Devi in with just Indian women writers. I am troubled by this because "Indian Women" is not a feminist category... There is an ethnocultural agenda, an obliteration of third world specificity as well as a denial of cultural citizenship, in calling them merely "Indian" " (p.147).

This also holds true for many Arab women writers who write in English and French and yet cannot be seen as part of a Western cannon.

Yet, Spivak and others in the postcolonial feminist field examined how translation could become a vehicle of feminist solidarity. By engaging in the act of translation in a linguistic and ideological vacuum the translator becomes an active agent in developing and shaping target language concepts associated with Feminism, while simultaneously conveying the social and moral values that are associated with the quest for female empowerment in the West. This burden of feminist creation was used to counter accusations of being mere vessels of a racist system that uses women's issues to attack local culture and traditions. Essays like "Why Kali wont rage" (Banerji, 2012) and Leila Ahmad's arguments on colonialism and Islam (Ahmed, 1992, p.243) attempted to re-address the feminist position by offering alternative narratives to the colonialist emphasis on backward practices in the colonies, such as the emphasis on the practice of Sati (the funeral ritual of widow suicide by burning) in India, or through exposing the hypocrisy of Lord Cromer's pro-female emancipation position in Egypt while he headed the anti-suffragette league in Britain. Decades later these same issues are still being challenged and re-addressed by Arab and Muslim feminists in a post 9-11, post-ISIL world, against the reductionism of what Evelyn alSultany (2012) describes as "the politics of pity" and within the messy ethics of cultural relativism when the plight of women continues to be highlighted by invading Western forces like the US presence in Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod, 2002: p. 783).

### **CONCLUSION: POST-POST COLONIST APPROACHES**

"Translating Feminism" was the subject of a public conversation that took place at the MOMA New York in November 2014. Artists and activists from Latin America, Poland and India were brought together to discuss how feminism has often been derided as a bourgeoisie pursuit, out of touch with more urgent concerns in the context of political oppression and dictatorship. Equally in the Arab world and India, there is a sense of frivolity and privilege associated with feminism in an impoverished and political unstable part of the world. Pandey (1989) argues that for Indians "where inequality has been institutionalised in a hierarchal manner, the concepts of individual equality and freedom are new and being offered from above" (p.13), and the same high brow accusation has been levelled at Arab feminist scholars such as Nawal al Saadawi and Fatima al Mernissi, who find much more credibility and respect in the West than in the Arab world as experts in their field.

Researchers from the global south, another unfortunate sweeping name, tried to engage with Latino, African and Asian discourses that dismantle the idea that feminism is purely an imported Western concept (though as this essay proves, it is nearly impossible to have a south-south dialogue that doesn't in some way reference a "Northern" theoretical base). Audre Lorde's (1984) famous essay on how the Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house will continue to drive some aspects of indigenous and post-colonial feminism, but as grass-root movements take hold and those arguments are subsumed within the relentless internationalism that the world wide web forces on us, these concerns are starting to wane in importance. SAFAR, the Sikh Feminist Research Institute seeks to promote and sustain Sikh feminist "research, praxis and activism" through realising the "Sikh Gurus' principles of egalitarianism and empowerment". SAFAR is based in Canada and communicates mostly in English, further proof that to find an indigenous feminist rhetoric, or to re-write a more gender

balanced regional history undistorted through patriarchal practices, an engagement with the language or the tools of the Other, of the West, is often necessary. Another example of moving on from the constraints of post-colonial feminism is Kohl, a new journal that engages with the body in Arabic, French and English. Kohl invites contributions that explore issues of gender and sexuality in the Arab Middle East even as the language and the region are not yet able to accommodate this conceptually evolved foray.

Estaygazat is an online Syrian feminist platform that started in 2014, that in spite of its anti-Assad stance and its focus on protest, is being attacked as distracting from the main issues (Gebeily, 2015). Its discourses are condemned as shameful and emulating the West because it chooses to engage with the body as Western feminists had done before. The evocative name “she has awoken” is part of what Devika (2008) calls “retrieving . . . local terms or usages, or coining new ones . . . interpreting them in the light of western political ideas and concepts . . . and strategically deploying them in political discourse.” Devika (2008) gives the example of a term coined by Anna Chandy “*adukkalavadam*” which can be roughly translated to “kitchenism”, an attempt at highlighting how “the emergent modern patriarchy in Kerala allowed a degree of mobility to women and access to paid work, but essentially tied them to domestic concerns.” Another example would be the favouring of the term “MunadhilahHugooiyah” by Arab feminists, which simply means “Rights activists”, rather than any of the agreed upon translations of the word feminist.

Two Indian girls released a rap video in March 2015 which quickly went viral (which echoed a 2013 sarcastic YouTube video by Indian actresses called *Rape: It's your Fault*), denouncing the complicity of the Indian authorities in covering up incidents of rape (Cohen, 2015). The girls focused on the use of the term “eve-teasing” in India instead of the more powerful and accusatory “sexual harassment” and this is the “grounded” activist feminism that awaits us while we struggle to find linguistic equivalents to the latest feminist trends. The act of naming and renaming is what turns feminist translation into activism in public life. In post Arab Spring Egypt a similar debate was launched through the insistence of female protesters on discussing the issue of sexual harassment, bringing a formerly taboo subject into the light and forcing governments to legislate against it.

It seems that young activists in the Arab world and India have moved past the “triple bind” (Jayawardena, 1985) created by male-centred imperialists, nationalists and religious revivalist discourse. These women are engaging in a post-postcolonial discourse that doesn't seem as burdened with disentangling feminism from a historical relationship with the West. They seem to have made a clear distinction between the geographical state of feminists located in the post-colony, and the intellectual stand of postcolonial feminism, and wholly embraced being “in-translation”, which Devika (2008) describes as the capacity to combine . . . [the faithful and grounded modes of translation] in politically fruitful ways”. This can be seen in the increasingly emboldened use of art-activism and social media tools to re-appropriate a space for women that is not dictated by male politicians or an over-burdened post colonialist feminist agenda. Campaigns such as the *Blank Noise Project*, started as a student project in a Bangalore art school in 2003 and has since then developed into an international vehicle for “changing public attitudes towards sexual violence.” Regardless of what local or translated terms we give them, the new wave of activists in India and the Arab world seem to be the modern embodiment of Cesar Chavez's words, “You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore . . . We have seen the future and it is ours” (Chavez, 1984).

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