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Nazira Zeineddine: the girl and the shaykhs

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Abstract

For over forty years discussion and debate about the *hijab* had raged around the Muslim Arab world, and pitted conservatives against reformists within a political context shaped by European colonialism. In 1927 Syrian shaykhs announced that women must cover their faces. Women took to the streets, and a nineteen-year-old Druze woman from the Beirut bourgeoisie took to her desk. Quoting Islamic scriptures and contemporary religious and secular authorities on almost every page, Nazira Zeineddine wrote four hundred pages about the harm to society of covering women's faces. Within a few months she published Unveiling and Veiling. The book, the first by a woman to detail women's rights in Islam, was an attack on shaykhs who presumed to order women to cover their faces, and who manipulated interpretations of the Qur'an and *hadiths* with the sole goal of empowering men. In this essay, I will provide an overview of Nazira's hermeneutics and my hypotheses for why she and her writings remained virtually unknown until the end of the 20th century.

Keywords: Arab feminism, Islam, *hijab*, Muslim women, women's rights.

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Nazira Zeineddine: a jovem e os xeiques

Resumo

Por mais de quatro décadas os debates sobre o *hijab* se alastravam pelo mundo árabe muçulmano, opondo conservadores e reformistas em um contexto político conformado pelo colonialismo europeu. Em 1927, os xeiques sírios decretaram que as mulheres deveriam cobrir o rosto. As mulheres saíram às ruas e uma jovem drusa de dezenove anos, Nazira Zeineddine, pertencente à burguesia de Beirute, sentou-se à escrivaninha. Escreveu quatrocentas páginas sobre os prejuízos para a sociedade do ato de cobrir o rosto das mulheres, citando as escrituras islâmicas e autoridades religiosas e seculares contemporâneas em quase todas as páginas. Poucos meses depois, ela publicava *Unveiling and Veiling*. O livro, o primeiro escrito por uma mulher a tratar dos direitos das mulheres no Islã, foi um ataque aos xeiques que se atreveram a ordenar que as mulheres cobrissem seus rostos e que manipulavam as interpretações do Alcorão e dos *hadiths* com o único objetivo de assegurar poder aos homens. Neste ensaio, apresento uma síntese da hermenêutica de Nazira e minhas hipóteses sobre por que ela e seus escritos permaneceram praticamente desconhecidos até o final do século XX.

Palavras-chave: feminismo árabe, islamismo, *hijab*, mulheres muçulmanas, direitos das mulheres.

It was in Damascus during the hot summer of 1927 that the recently discarded *hijab* returned. For over forty years discussion and debate about the *hijab* – in the late 19th and early 20th centuries it referred to both hair and face covering[1] – had raged around the Muslim Arab world, and pitted conservatives against reformists within a political context shaped by European colonialism. For the French and British colonizers, the *hijab* symbolized the backwardness of communities they wished to control. Distinguishing barbaric men from civilizable women, these seemed to believe that unveiling women would bring salvation to benighted societies (Spivak, 1993, p. 93). The *hijab* became the emblem of what was wrong with Muslim culture.

[1] More recently, a distinction has been made so that face covering is called *niqab*.

Although many Muslim Arabs mistrusted the European obsession with the *hijab*, some male reformists, including the modernist scholar Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), the judge Qasim Amin (1863-1908), the poet Ahmad Shawqi (1869-1932) as well as the founder of the Turkish Republic Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938), also deemed the *hijab* an obstacle to women's ability to adapt to the conditions of modernity.

In his controversial 1899 *Tahrir al-mar'a* (The Liberation of Women), Qasim Amin argued that true Islam, having lost its moorings, was shrouded in misogynist innovations. The removal of the *hijab*, he argued, was the sine qua non for Muslim women to be educated, to choose life partners and to achieve a measure of equality. Feminists have subsequently revealed the patriarchal assumptions at the core of Amin's reform discourse, criticizing him for infantilizing women and mimicking Westernized cultural norms. Male dominance was never in question, Leila Ahmed argues, especially for "men of the classes assimilating to European ways and smarting under the humiliation of being described as uncivilized because 'their' women are veiled" (Ahmed, 1992, p. 163, 165). These male reformists were not the only people concerned about Arab Muslim women's rights.

Some educated Arab women of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were also demanding reforms. Writers like the Egyptians Aisha Taymuriya (1840-1902) and Malak Hifni Nasif aka Bahithat al-Badiya (1886-1918) as well as the Lebanese Zaynab Fawwaz (1860-1914), Labiba Hashim (1882-1947) and Mayy Ziyada (1886-1941) challenged laws that discriminated against women (Badran; cooke, 1990, p. xv-xlvii). They campaigned for women's rights to education, suffrage, health, and labor. They founded magazines and wrote for progressive newspapers about the value to society of educated women, mothers of the next generation of male leaders. Aware of the controversy they would incite, they justified their claims in the language of Islamic reformers. They "did not anticipate that the gender anxiety and conservative backlash produced by war and French occupation would prompt others to employ different interpretations of religious law to block their attainment of these rights" (Thompson, 1999,

p. 117). Because of the European mobilization of feminist ideas to advance colonial agendas, social and political actions on behalf of women were stigmatized as western-inspired and unpatriotic, a severe charge during a period of heightened nationalism.

Despite opposition to women's public assertiveness, a feminist revolution was under way. In 1923, the aristocratic Huda Shaarawi founded the Egyptian Feminist Union and took some of its members to Rome for an international feminist meeting. Upon their return to Cairo, Huda and two of her companions uncovered their faces to a stunned crowd. Some of the people come to greet the women were shocked, but most were thrilled. In no time, the news had spread throughout Muslim majority societies, and many women unveiled. In 1973, on the fiftieth anniversary of this revolutionary event, Egyptian journalist Amina Said celebrated the courage of Shaarawi, Saiza Nabarawi and Nabawiya Musa and narrated how they had

> represented Egypt for the first time in an international feminist conference in Rome. Conference members who came from throughout the advanced world were greatly surprised to see the three Egyptian women … The image of the Arab woman in the minds of the western woman was of a backward woman living behind the walls of the harem, ignorant, veiled and crippled in effort and movement… [T]hrough their political speeches they commanded admiration… After her experience at the Rome conference Shaarawi saw that the veil was the biggest obstacle in the way of progress of the Muslim Arab woman… with her colleagues she decided to be the first to unveil. Upon their arrival by train at the station in the capital, they met those gathered there to receive them with their faces unveiled. When signs of disapproval became apparent in the crowd, women immediately supported the unveiled women by also removing the veils from their faces and throwing them on the ground. Hence, the greatest victory in the history of the Arab woman (Said, 1990, p. 359-360).

The feminist revolution was underwritten by a widespread attack on corrupt religious scholars, the shaykhs. In 1929, the blind Egyptian scholar Taha Husayn caused an outcry with *Al-ayyam* (The Days), his autobiography that detailed the corruption pervading the religious and educational establishments. He was harshest on the Azhar Mosque scholars

who represented the highest Islamic authorities at the time. Shaykhs around the world were outraged at such an assault on the central institution of Islamic education. Consequently, signs of modernity and westernization were stigmatized as heretical.

It is in this maelstrom that Syrian shaykhs in 1927 announced that women must cover their faces. Women took to the streets, and a nineteen-year-old Druze woman from the Beirut bourgeoisie took to her desk. What were these shaykhs thinking? Quoting Islamic scriptures and contemporary religious and secular authorities on almost every page,[2] Nazira Zeineddine (1908-1976) wrote four hundred pages about the harm to society of covering women's faces. Within a few months she was done and in April 1928 she published *Unveiling and Veiling* (Zeineddine, 1998b [F&S], p. 11).[3] So hot were the issues raised in this book that, two months later, it went into a second printing.

The book, the first by a woman to detail women's rights in Islam, was an attack on shaykhs who presumed to order women to cover their faces, and who manipulated interpretations of the Qur'an and *hadiths* with the sole goal of empowering men. *Hadiths* – also referred to as Prophetic Traditions – are reports of the 7th century Prophet Muhammad's actions seen and statements heard that were recorded and repeated by one of his Companions. Subsequently, each repetition of a *hadith* had to be authenticated through a reliable chain of authorities. If over the centuries, this chain omitted an authority or added one, the *hadith* would be invalidated. Nothing angered Nazira more than the *hadith* misogynist Islamic authorities liked to cite concerning women's lack of reason and religion. She would deconstruct this *hadith* and show its implausibility through careful comparison with Qur'anic verses about women's intelligence (see below).

[2] She cites, for example, the poet Ahmad Shawqi: "Egypt is renewing its glory through its women" and in a 16-line poem he had referred to veiled women as "mummies" (Zeineddine, 1998a [S&H], p. 148-149).

[3] In this essay, references to *Unveiling and Veiling* will be made in text as S&H from the Arabic *Al-sufur wa al-hijab*. Page references from her second book *The Girl and the Shaykhs* (Zeineddine, 1998b) will be made in text as F&S from the Arabic *Al-fatat wa al-shuyukh*.

Before publishing the book, Nazira had asked her father, an Ottoman judge who was considered Sunni Muslim because of his Istanbul legal training, to check with his Muslim associates, some highly placed in Islamic institutions, that her argumentation was correct, and she had not made any factual errors. He did and was satisfied as was she that the book was ready.

Almost immediately, however, objections were aired, including ad feminam assaults on the author. She did not know the Qur'an, and she had no right to question *hadiths* from the Prophet Muhammad that centuries of authorities had declared sound and thus not subject to question. Nazira quickly collected these reactions and her rebuttals in *The Girl and the Shaykhs*. This second book came out in 1929 when she was twenty. Despite the uproar that pitted opponents against proponents and the fame immediately surrounded this daring, brilliant young woman, she soon disappeared. In what follows, I will provide an overview of Nazira's hermeneutics and my hypotheses for why she and her writings remained virtually unknown until the end of the 20th century.

Women are not lacking in religion and reason

Unveiling and Veiling argued from the Qur'an and Sunna, the two sources for Islamic doctrine and faith, that for over a millennium, men had perverted Islam with their misogynistic interpretations of the sacred texts. Their insistence on the *hijab* as an Islamic mandate had for centuries deprived women of their rights to education, equality, freedom of expression and dignity.

Nazira made two powerful, connected points about how misogynist Islamic authorities had demeaned women in defiance of God and Muhammad. First, she argued that the *hijab* was not an Islamic mandate, and it did not originally refer to a piece of cloth. Rather, the word *hijab* meant a barrier. In the Qur'an, *hijab* designated the division of space between the wives of the Prophet Muhammad and his visitors.

Second, she deconstructed the *hadith* about women's lack in religion and reason.

Assuming that men had invented this *hadith*, Nazira looked for its justification. She found it in

> Qur'anic verses that grant women half a man's right to inheritance and consider women's witness worth half of a man's witness. Polygyny and *talaq* also play their part. These officially sanctioned privileges and rights for men have led some religious authorities to conclude that women lack in reason and religion (S&H, p. 96).

Nazira contended to the contrary that these verses reveal God's understanding of men's weakness: "had God wanted slavery, polygyny and inequality between men and women, He would not have enjoined expenses for her, like dower, and *nafaqa*, or the provision of all her needs and those of her children. Indeed, all of these costs amount to more than the value of half of an inheritance." (S&H, p. 97, 100). Moreover, those expenses are on-going throughout the life of a woman whereas the inheritance is a one-time sum. As for *talaq*, or male-instigated divorce, she wrote "God hates *talaq* because it is a denial of grace and a destruction of homes," and she added this statement from the twelfth century scholar al-Ghazali "*talaq* is only permitted if there is no unnecessary harm. However, *talaq* entails harm" (S&H, p. 220).

Nazira had no doubt that in God's eyes men and women were equal. Citing countless Qur'anic verses, often together for emphasis, she urged her readers to act in accordance with revelation and reason. To cite one example,

> girls are said to mature at age nine and boys only at twelve, the age when they are subject to the laws of the Sharia. Does this not mean that women's reason is complete earlier than the men's? Here are my proofs concerning the perfection of women's reason and religion, so bring on your proofs about their lack (S&H, p. 102-105).

The notion of women's lack of religion and reason did not come from the Qur'an and, quoting the Prophet Muhammad, she insisted that any *hadith* that contradicts the Qur'an is false. Since it is false and invented, the *hadith* must come from another source: women's invisibility that the *hijab* enabled. It allowed men to say what they liked about women without attending to their responses. Without seeing women's faces, they could not register women's reactions to their words. A voice muffled by cloth was inconsequential, easy to silence. The *hijab* paralyzes half the population, and this paralyzed half can be despised and forgotten (S&H, p. 62).

However, Nazira wrote, it had not always been thus. In the past, women had held powerful positions in Muslim societies. In the eleventh century

> Shaykha Shahda, aka Fakhr al-Nisa, lectured to elites in Baghdad mosques and schools about literature, history, and theology, and she is still highly respected. Like her also were Umm al-Khair and Umm Ibrahim who gave lessons to students in Baghdad, and Umm Sa`d bint `Isam al-Sa`duna who taught the science of Traditions and theology in the Cordoba madrasa.

Ibn Khallikan and Ibn Mas`ab wrote about Muhammad's beautiful granddaughter Sukayna whose "home became the Ka`ba for people who came from all over the Muslim region to hear her lectures." Sukayna was no exception to the norm of elite women wielding power. Nazira mentions Ibn Athir, Ibn Jubayr, al-Mas`udi, al-Suyuti, al-Isfahani and most recently Zaynab Fawwaz mention Queen Khayzuran who encouraged her husband al-Mahdi to build academies, and she received scholars and poets and rulers in the palace. Zubayda, the wife of the great caliph of Baghdad Harun al-Rashid, and his sister al-Abbasa lectured scholars and intellectuals. Qatar al-Nada, the wife of Caliph al-Mutadid and mother of al-Muqtadir, attended all official gatherings. Nazira mentions Ibn Battuta whose famous travels had introduced him to Tatar women who summoned scholars and intellectuals whenever they wanted. Nazira claims that it is well known that Nafisa, the granddaughter of Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad and the fourth Caliph, had instructed Imam al-Shafii one of the founding

fathers of Islamic law. "And these names are only a few of many, a fact that demonstrates that Muslim women used to rival men in visibility" (S&H, p. 160-161).[4] None of these women were veiled.

The *hijab* is not the sign of lack and inferiority, Nazira announces, it is its instrument: "Some of us in this East have endured four kinds of darkness: face covering, ignorance, hypocrisy, and stagnation" (S&H, p. 50). Instead of seeing that this piece of cloth caused the ignorance, hypocrisy, and stagnation, these men claimed that the ignorance, hypocrisy, and stagnation were inherent in women. In other words, they claimed that women exemplified what the cloth produced. To the contrary, Nazira argued, women are not lacking in reason and religion *before* covering their faces, only *afterwards*:

> 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… How can there be religion where there is ignorance? The ignorant can only take from the surface of religion, and of what use is religion without its core? (S&H, p. 136).

Women, Nazira argued, are by nature rational and pious, and never more so than when they uncover their faces: "Any Muslim woman who removes the cover from her eyes and vision will see the flood of freedom God has granted her" (p. 39). Stunting their intellectual capacities, this piece of cloth prevents women from entering fully into the life of the community and contributing to it. If it is the cloth that dehumanizes women, and it is men who impose it, then it is men who have caused women's deficiency in reason and religion. How could it be that these shaykhs' misogyny had not been refuted? She decided that she should be the one to do it: "I gave my reason full liberty and I received from the Qur'an and the Sunna the intensity of the lights of guidance about freedom and women's rights that would shame the sun when it rises" (S&H, p. 76).

[4] John Stuart Mill, whom Nazira often cites, also wrote about powerful women regents in India about whom he learned during his posting in the sub-continent (Mill, 1869, p. 41).

Women's invisibility harms not only them but also their society. A veiled society lags behind those that include women in public space. Her argument reflects the position of John Stuart Mill whose works she often cites. In the introductory remarks to his 1869 *The subjection of Women*, Mill writes

> the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other (Mill, 1869, p. 1).

The key was a strong intellectual partnership in marriage: "The moral regeneration of mankind will only really commence when the most fundamental of the social relations is placed under the rule of equal justice" (Mill, 1869, p. 31, 50). Nazira cites at some length Mill's dedication in his 1859 *On Liberty* to the soul that inspired his best thoughts:

> my friend and wife whose passion for truth and justice was my greatest support and whose approval of my work was my most cherished achievement. Her share in this book is no less than mine… If it were possible for my pen to express half of the noble thoughts and lofty sentiment buried with her, scholars would gain greater benefit than from anything I write from my own thought and feelings without the counsel of her unique mind (S&H, p. 85).

Nazira exhorts the shaykhs to listen to Mill and to "give back to your wife her stolen rights, the most basic of which is the acknowledgment of her fullness of mind and religion." Men have no right to denigrate women's minds and religion because they are not available to them to judge, should they do so they are contradicting God (S&H, p. 85). She particularly approved of Mill's view that men's antipathy to women's equality and freedom was based on their fear that their wives would outshine them.

The Riposte

Unveiling and Veiling created a furor around the world. Some loved it;[5] some hated it. For many contemporary women, the book and its author were revolutionary. On 15 October 1928 while attending the steering committee meeting of the International Feminist Organization in Berlin, Huda Shaarawi wrote to Nazira: "I have received your lovely gift of *Unveiling and Veiling* and I thank you for this passionate cry for the liberation of women … Our sex is honored and made proud by the likes of you." Many other women wrote her letters of congratulations (F&S, p. 165-169).

But many religious scholars responded negatively, so many, in fact, that within a year Nazira had collected enough reviews to be able to compile a sizzling sequel. By then, however, she had become too hot to handle. Quzma Press had published her first book, yet it turned this one down and no other publisher would touch *The Girl and the Shaykhs* (1929). She brought out at her own expense a volume that included the wide publicity she had received, the shaykhs' invectives, and her fearless rebuttals. She dedicated this book to women in general, saying how happy she had been while writing *Unveiling and Veiling* because she had thought she was doing Muslims a service. Concerned to show what was positive in Islam, she had been disappointed to learn that "my Umma is not pleased with its girl." Always tongue in cheek, she added, "and yet I took the Qur'an and Sunna (code for Muhammad) as my guide so perhaps the Umma is not pleased with them" (F&S, p. 11-12). In a 2015 chapter, I wrote that Nazira

> was especially angry with those whose views on women and gender she had commended in her book but who had attacked her. She addresses the shaykhs in the second person plural, often calling them "Gentlemen" and sometimes, when angry at their insults, "Shaikhly Opponents" or "Slingers of Arrows". These shaykhs held moral sway in the eastern Mediterranean and few dared to question their authority (cooke 2015, p. 120).

[5] For an image of a congratulatory letter Syrian prime minister Taj al-Din al-Hasani sent to Nazira on 25 April 1928 see cooke (2010, p. 61).

Guessing that they were attempting to distance themselves from the controversy, she mocked their hypocrisy: were they not aware of the damage they were doing to their society? Nazira admonished them to re-examine their biological notions of gender and exhorted them to make room for the determining influences of history, culture, and society.

She saved her harshest critique for Shaykh Mustafa al-Ghalayini (1886-1944), president of the Lebanese court of justice for the Muslim minority and a professor at the Islamic College of Beirut. Nazira called him the "Leader of the Opponents" and the one who had instigated much of the negative critique. Within months of receiving a copy of the book, he had written a 194-page rebuttal entitled *Views on the Book Unveiling and Veiling attributed to Miss Nazira Zeineddine* (F&S, p. 251). He claimed that colleagues had asked him to speak out about the problems in the book, and he had agreed. In a Friday sermon in the Majidiya mosque in Beirut, he scolded Nazira for her claim to know more than scholars like him. How could she ask "the French to intervene in Muslims' private matters"? Unlike him, she was not authorized to speak on Muslim women's behalf (Al-Ghalayini, 1928, p. 3, 24, 29, 33). He defends a 1908 book of his that Nazira had mocked for its contradictions. When addressing the English Controller General in Egypt Lord Cromer, she wrote, he had boasted about the rights Arab women had enjoyed after Islam forbad injustices like the burying of girls alive, men marrying dozens of women and inheriting women upon the death of their husbands. He claimed that the *hijab* was not Islamic, and that women's covered faces draw more attention than uncovered faces. When addressing Muslim women, however, he called for modesty and the *hijab*. Peeved at Nazira's disparagement of his 1908 book, he asserted self-servingly that the "research on Muslim women in our book was of the highest caliber. Indeed, it was reprinted in Egypt in 1926" (al-Ghalayini, 1928, p. 24, 25). Apparently, he had admitted privately that had she not criticized that book he would not have opposed her (cooke, 2010, p. 77).

Riled by the word *attributed*, in other words the presumption that it was not she but rather nine ignorant people who had written the book,

Nazira retorted at length. She was proud of his insult that a mere girl like her, "a graduate of secular and convent schools, is unable to write such a work, to encompass the Sunna and to comprehend the Qur'anic verses. And he turned to me and said: Nazira Zeineddine, they are the ones who wrote your book and embellished it" (F&S, p. 16, see cooke, 2010, p. 39-44, p. 69-73).

She took on other critics, recommending that before criticizing her, the shaykhs should read the Qur'an that, as she had argued, affirms throughout the intelligence and rights of women. She is fierce in her sarcasm: "Gentlemen and Shaykhly Opponents, you should read more widely before you write your books and letters in which you oppose the Girl's behavior so that you would know what our Master Ali, the Leader of the Faithful, said and do not have to rely on the missionaries" (F&S, p. 41). No, she did not consult with missionaries, but she is sure that her opponents did. Here was a twenty-year-old woman without formal Islamic credentials pouring contempt on known and respected shaykhs expected to have memorized the Qur'an as she had.

She chided them for accepting without question and then citing some *hadiths* about women that had to be challenged. The Prophet could not have said that women are lacking in religion and reason because of the high esteem he had for women. Had he not said that Paradise lies under the feet of mothers and that what he loved most were perfume, prayer, and women? Most importantly, however, religious scholars should know that when a *hadith* contradicts the Qur'an, it is wrong. God's unmediated word trumps anything, including a reported action or a statement of the Prophet, a mere, if perfect mortal.

Again and again, she cites parts of her work that the shaykhs have misquoted or inappropriately used or interpreted. Unlike the earlier wealth of quotations from the Qur'an and *hadiths* that have no references, when she mentions scholars' and shaykhs' reactions to her book she points to specific pages in their writings, and she provides chains of authorities to prove the reliability of certain *hadiths* germane to a point she is trying to make.

The arrogance glimpsed in the first book has become more pronounced. She has included dozens of pages of positive citations of *Unveiling and Veiling*. Describing a meeting with what she calls "enlightened Muslim women," she cites an unnamed woman who is given four pages in which to produce verbatim quotations of her book. She mocks al-Ghalayini, writing "Poor Shaykh, he could not restrain his angry soul from vengeance. He could find nothing in your book except what accorded with religion and reason and the welfare of the Muslims, so he made things up." What was Shaykh Salim Hamdan thinking when he claimed that the *hijab* is Islamic? He turned his opinion into law, even though he knew that women of other religions are veiled (F&S, p. 256-260).

In a spirit of openness, she challenged her opponents to bring Qur'anic proof that faces should be covered. She would consider their evidence, but only if they had not derived it from the verse about modesty and averting eyes from the opposite sex. Since the verse addressed both men and women, they would then have to demand of men that they also cover their faces. If men refuse to cover their faces and still want to impose it on women "then I beg you to acknowledge that the justice and respect for religion that you profess were but a trick to allow you to oppress your mother, your sister, your wife and to be unjust to them" (F&S, p. 182-183).

She cited several *hadiths* concerning unveiled Muslim women around Muhammad and then asked: "Gentlemen, have you read in the Book or a *hadith* a command against unveiling? Surely not! So, if you have not found such a command then have you found one concerning covering the face? Again, surely not! So why do you disobey God's command and that of the Prophet? When a man covers the face of a woman, Gentlemen, he is committing a certain injustice" (F&S, p. 186-189).

She is clearly delighted at the accusation that it was impossible for the Girl to have written it. They could not imagine that a girl who was, after all, lacking in religion and reason could write such a tome and so they assumed that it was the work of many men. These stupid accusations confirmed to her "that it is the men who have no reason and that Miss Nazira Zeineddine

is the most knowledgeable of scholars in the past and today and that she alone can sit on the throne of knowledge and understanding. She was able to understand God's verses and to interpret those connected with the veil" (F&S, p. 15). Remarkable hubris but justified!

Looking for Nazira and her books

How is it that a book that "redefined the terms of conflict between religious elites and the women's movement for at least a decade to come" (Thompson, 1999, p. 127) fell out of circulation?[6] How did this reckless Girl disappear and with her the oft reiterated call for freedom of religions, of knowledge, of will and of the liberation of women that will lead to the renewal of society?

Historian Elizabeth Thompson believes that scholars like al-Ghalayini "dismissed the book's broader social and political argument by focusing upon narrow legal debates about whether or not Islamic scripture enjoined the veil. In effect, by constructing the veil issue as a legal one, Zayn al-Din [aka Zeineddine] had played right into the hands of conservative Muslim scholars, and put herself – and all other women – at a disastrous disadvantage" (Thompson, 1999, p. 135, 136). Conservative vigilantes intimidated women by throwing acid on those who were walking unveiled in the streets. By the mid-1930s many shaykhs in Syria and Lebanon had reduced the *hijab* question to a simple binary: those who supported it were good Muslims; those who opposed were collaborators with the French.

How is it that the first woman to publish a book about women's rights in Islam was forgotten? The name was known in Islamic feminist circles

[6] It is not unusual for an explosive work to disappear, for its ideas to be plagiarized and for the author to wait to be discovered centuries later, if ever. Consider Ernst von Lasaulx (1805-1861), one of the formulators of the idea of the axial age along with Weber, who has disappeared while they were lionized. His 1856 A New Attempt at an Old Philosophy of History based on the Truth of Facts dropped out of history until Hans Joas resuscitated him in a 2012 book that he co-edited with Robert Bellah entitled *The Axial Age and its consequences*, demonstrating that von Lasaulx had developed the idea a century earlier than Karl Jaspers who is considered to have pioneered the term in his 1949 *On the Origin and Goal of History* (Joas, 2012).

of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, but in 2007 when I began my research, few knew or as far as I could tell cared who she was and what had happened to her after her two books had incensed the Muslim authorities of 1920s and 1930s Lebanon and Syria.

When Oneworld publishers invited me to write a biography for their Makers of the Muslim World series, I chose Nazira Zeineddine. I believed that focused research would reveal the whereabouts of the author and her works. But the project was much harder than I had imagined. Nowhere could I find mention of where she had lived in Lebanon or what she had done after her two books *Unveiling and Veiling* and *The Girl and the Shaykhs* had created a firestorm. I knew that her father, Said Bey Zeineddine, was an Ottoman judge trained in Istanbul and thus considered at the time to be a Sunni Muslim. He had practiced law in various places in Turkey, Syria, and Palestine and ended up in Beirut. A research trip to the region stumbled at first but soon began to answer these questions. While Said Bey Zeineddine had left no trace in Turkey, he had in Lebanon. In 2008 I heard that a Druze town in Mount Lebanon called Baaqlin was celebrating the centenary of Nazira's birth. While the rest of Lebanese society had forgotten about her, a Druze high school teacher from Baaqlin, Nabil Abu Matar had been writing a book about Nazira since the early 1980s. When he died in 1995 before finishing the book, his wife Hayat took up where he had left off and published the book in time for the August colloquium (Abu Matar, 2008).

I flew to Beirut where I met people who knew her through her writings or in person. One was Aida al-Jawhari, a scholar who had written the previous year the first book about Nazira and her writings (al-Jawhari, 2007). Three others were members of her family: two sons who had emigrated to Italy when they were in their teens, and a nephew named Said Zeineddine in honor of his uncle, Nazira's father. I interviewed all of them and even went with the scholar and the nephew to Ayn Qani.

I learned that in 1938, Nazira married Shafiq al-Halabi. He was a Druze notable from Baaqlin who had served as governor of Beirut during World War II. With this marriage her already faltering intellectual career

ground to a halt. When interviewing her sons, I began to visualize life in the al-Halabi home. Nazira's youngest son Arij remembered that whenever he came home from school, the house was "full of important people," and his mother sat with up to 300 people a day:

> People came to my father to resolve disputes, especially between Druzes and Christians. It was not a comfortable atmosphere for children, so we would escape the house to play with friends or to go hunting. I remember that Alfred Naqqash, President of Lebanon, played with me and let me ride on his back. Father was harsh. He didn't play or tell jokes. He did not want his sons to enter politics. Father was very strict about meal times: lunch at 12 sharp and dinner at 7. There was very little conversation at the dining table. Father wasn't interested in us because we were so young. He didn't help with our homework although my mother did. After dinner he would retire to his bedroom that also served as his study. And he closed the door.[7]

Arij's brother Nabil expressed the same kind of alienation from their parents. He had heard that his mother did good works with Red Cross and women's organizations. However, he knew so little about his mother's feminist past that when a passage from *Unveiling and Veiling* was assigned to his high school class, he was astonished to learn that his mother had once had a life outside the walls of their childhood home. He was embarrassed to tell me that he could not understand the passage, his mother's classical Arabic was well beyond his high school Arabic.

While the sons' memories of their mother were vague, her nephew Said had taken it upon himself to collect everything to do with his aunt, including a large cache of letters from all over the world. Interviews with these three men filled in the gap yawning between the publication of her two books and her death in 1976. I began to piece together the puzzle of the woman, the writings, and the time.

Nazira was the eldest of four children from a notable Druze family. Born in Istanbul and educated in French schools in Beirut,[8] she learned

[7] Interview, August 10, 2008.
[8] Arij told me that his mother was the first Lebanese girl to earn the French Baccalaureate (Interview August 10, 2008)

about Islam from her father and his circle of eminent literary and religious acquaintances. Said Bey Zeineddine convened a regular open house in their ancestral home in Ayn Qani, a Druze village in the Chouf mountains above Beirut. At a time when girls were expected to stay home and excel in the domestic arts, Nazira attended her father's salon. In her late teens, she lectured in Beirut venues on women's rights in Islam.

In 1923 when she was fifteen, she heard of feminist activists in Egypt, and she corresponded with Huda Shaarawi. When in 1927 the Sunni shaykhs in Damascus issued a fatwa against unveiling, Nazira mounted her argument against the fatwa. She was not alone in her fight against the religious authorities and their claims to know best what the Qur'an and the Sunna demanded of Muslims. While building on the work of Egyptian male and female feminists, she was surrounded by Lebanese feminists who were demanding their rights as women and full citizens of their country.

Why was she so quickly forgotten even in her native land? In her 1961 *Adibat lubnaniyat* (Lebanese women writers), Emily Fares Ibrahim provides biographies of women she considered to be the sixteen most important feminist writers living between 1838 and 1960, including Zaynab Fawwaz (1850-1914), Labiba Hashim (1882-1952) and Mayy Ziyada (1886-1941). She praises their achievements and demands for equality in what she calls "our feminist literature" (Ibrahim, 1961, p. 140). Remarkably, she never mentions Nazira, this prominent Lebanese intellectual and pioneer of Islamic feminism whom she may have met since they were both living in Beirut at the same time. In a 2014 documentary, Aida al-Jawhari[9] suggests that a possible reason was that she stopped writing after the publication of *The Girl and the Shaykhs*. But there are many writers who publish nothing after a notable book, and they are not forgotten.

There are other reasons for the repression of Nazira's memory. As the daughter of an Ottoman judge, Nazira had claimed a Sunni Muslim authority that would allow her to arbitrate what was Islamic and what was

[9] "Nazira Zeineddine" documentary by Aida Jawhari see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVpQGB_lARw

not. Ironically, however, when she argued that the *hijab* was not Islamic, she turned the *hijab* polemic into a civil matter that the French could adjudicate and from whom she could ask for support. The French became the third element between the proponents and opponents of the *hijab*. They were secularists whose commitment to neutrality in matters of religion, she thought at the time, made them allies in the fight against the *hijab*.

Not only did Nazira appeal to the French colonizers to intervene, but she was also not afraid to hold up models of ideal womanhood that were neither Muslim nor Arab. She referred to unveiled Western women who are respected and allowed to play important roles in their society. Drawing on her experience at the convent school she wrote about nuns who do not cover their faces and yet Muslim men do not call them lacking in reason and religion, and parents send their children to the nuns' schools (S&H, p. 134, 138). If those schools were considered the best, they should be emulated:

> The best way to build the best schools for Arabs and Islam is to copy the best foreign schools and universities like Oxford, the Sorbonne, Columbia, Princeton and Harvard where minds are freed to soar into the open sky enlightened by new knowledge and attentive to the illuminating forces God gave them, purified of the germs of stagnating diseases or worn-out customs that are a disaster for the East (F&S, p. 40).

These foreign schools could inspire cultural, social, and political autonomy, the path of true nationalism, a commitment to a nation that gives women their rights to cultivate their minds. Although Nazira thought she could work within both the French and the Islamic systems, she finally failed. Few Islamic scholars were persuaded that her demands for changed gender norms and values were based in a thorough understanding of Islam rather than emulating European models. Some called her a traitor and, as mentioned above, Shaykh al-Ghalayini led the charge that the book was not hers. She had lent her name to a book that missionaries had penned.

But *Unveiling and Veiling* is no missionary work. It lacks the central project of colonialism: a denigration of the society to be penetrated and possessed. The European ploy was to use the oppression of women as a

gauge of the intellectual caliber of the society and the spiritual value of its religion. A society in which men are sanctioned to discriminate against their women can only be saved for universal civilization through the mediation of an outside, civilized agent, i.e., the colonizer.

Nazira did not make the point that men were uncivilized or that there was something wrong with Muslim society. It was the shaykhs who were the problem. It was the shaykhs who had not understood that the family and the nation can only improve through women's elevation and preparation to be fully human. Women should be considered sisters and partners (S&H, p. 52, 59, 85, 113). Taking her cue from the Qur'an, Muhammad but also from John Stuart Mill, she was making a case for women's intellectual and spiritual equality with men and their right to participate in running the affairs of home and society. Anticipating the arguments of late twentieth century feminists, she declared that nurture not nature was responsible for any lack in women.

In *Nazira Zeineddine: A Pioneer of Islamic Feminism*, I added another reason for Nazira's erasure from history: a radical change in Lebanese politics (cooke, 2010, p. 104-105). Following the chaotic collapse and breakup of the Ottoman Empire in 1922 and the post-World War I French appropriation of Syria and Lebanon as mandate, confessional affiliation became a political football. The Druzes who until then had power in Lebanon were displaced by the Maronites as the result of a 1932 French-instigated census. It was held to determine national political positions in terms of the comparative size of the country's seventeen different religious communities. It was the first and last such census ever taken and from the beginning it was contested. The French announced the results of the census: their proteges, the Maronites, were the most numerous, and they should therefore be appointed to the highest offices in the country's political system. The next most numerous were the Sunnis followed by the Shiites and only then by the Druzes. The census accorded the Druzes limited national power and influence. More importantly, it fixed Druze identity as heterodox. Druzes could no longer speak in the name of Sunni Islam as the Zeineddine father and daughter

had done. Nazira had referred to herself as a Muslim girl in both of her texts and had done so to prove her authority and right to argue for women's rights in Islam and against men's claims that a good Muslim woman must cover her face and shut up. Three years after the publication of *The Girl and the Shaykhs* in which she had scoffed at the critique of her most powerful opponent Shaykh al-Ghalayini, her newly fixed religious identity overwrote her claim to be Muslim. The religious authorities who had attacked her ideological position if not the soundness of her argument could forget about this thorn in their side and her supporters remained silent.

Nazira's fate as a forgotten intellectual may be compared with the disappearance of the German psychoanalyst and sociologist Erich Fromm. Neil McLaughlin writes that the "social construction of intellectual reputations can be understood in variants of four models: (1) climate of times; (2) geography/ national traditions; (3) institutional prestige, and (4) personal characteristics" (McLaughlin, 2017, p. 217). Each variant accounts differentially for an intellectual's rise to fame and subsequent fall into oblivion. Like Fromm, Nazira's ultimate decline was due to "the importance of intense hostility" and the lack of an intellectual community emotionally committed to promote and develop her "challenge to orthodoxies" (239-240). It would not be until the 1990s that her outrage at the misogyny of so-called Islamic authorities would be picked up by Islamic feminists who, however, almost universally failed to acknowledge her ground-breaking work.

On 18 January 1974, two years before Nazira died, she gave an interview to Saad Sami Ramadan that indicated how she had changed over those forty-four years. Her first question was: "What reminded you of me? I live far from the lights and any activity worth mentioning. But thanks for the visit that revives from the distant past images of my efforts to liberate Arab women." She reminded him of the many leading Arab intellectuals who had commended her book, including the Iraqi poet al-Rusafi who wrote lyrically about how she had smashed the customs undergirding a "loathsome prison for women." Why, Ramadan asked, had she decided to write? She replied that she had wanted to help her society. Her dream had been to

be a doctor who could help the epidemic of childbirth fatalities, but no medical school in the 1920s was accepting women so her only choice was to write. However, she could not write after marriage because a woman's role was at home. She conceded that women without domestic obligations could work. Women should participate in politics by voting but they should not become politically active because "political parties corrupt women." Answering the concluding question about who had impressed her as the most eloquent proponent of women's rights to freedom, she said Ataturk, the founder of the Turkish Republic because he had credited his victories over his enemies to his soldiers and to "tearing the veil off women's faces" (Ramadan, 1974, p. 16-17). Although she did mention Arab feminists, including Huda Shaarawi, in her books and in this interview, she chose to extol a man as the most ardent defender of women's rights because he was so proud of having opposed the *hijab* and thus bringing modernity to his fledgling republic.

When she died during the second year of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), there was no big funeral. The Girl who had compelled serious attention to misogynist readings of Islamic scriptures, had infuriated the shaykhs in the late 1920s and driven a wedge into her society had fallen into the dark space between the lines of history.

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