Uncovering the Harem in the Classroom: Tania Kamal-Eldin’s "Covered: The Hejab in Cairo, Egypt" and "Hollywood Harems" within the Context of a Course on Arab Women Writers

Author(s): Diya Abdo

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Uncovering the Harem in the Classroom

Tania Kamal-Eldin’s *Covered: The Hejab in Cairo, Egypt* and *Hollywood Harems* Within the Context of a Course on Arab Women Writers

*Diya Abdo*

In an effort to promote understanding in the wake of September 11, Women Make Movies undertook a special “Response to Hate” campaign. Under this initiative, the organization lent their videos relating to Arabs and Muslims free of charge to organizations and institutions wishing to educate on the experiences of Arabs and Muslims, especially women. The offer came to my attention as I was constructing a course on Arab women writers. From the Women Make Movies catalog, I selected two films by Tania Kamal-Eldin, an Egyptian-born scholar and filmmaker currently residing in the United States: *Covered: The Hejab in Cairo, Egypt* was included in the “Response to Hate” offer, and *Hollywood Harems* was a regular feature. In the following essay I examine these films and the ways in which I hope to utilize them in the classroom. In adopting them for my course, I accept the generous offer, and the challenge, presented by the “Response to Hate” campaign. The films, supplementing the literary selections that are the core of my course, will no doubt help to educate my students about Arab and Muslim women and counter the gross misunderstandings perpetuated by consistent misrepresentation of Arab and Muslim culture.

The Teacher, the Students, the Course

In the spring of 2002, I will teach a course, Arab Women Writers in English, at Drew University, a small liberal arts college in Madison, New Jersey. The course will focus on the ways in which Arab women writers negotiate their, as one writer so aptly put it, “feminist longings and post-colonial conditions” (Abu-Lughod). The course has emerged from my own location and experience and reflects the area that is increasingly my central academic focus. The course will be a first for
myself as well as the university. Born, raised, and educated in Amman, Jordan, I am completing a Ph.D. in English literature at Drew. Since my arrival in the United States, my self-imposed exile and perpetual homesickness have honed my cultural and national identity. Regularly exposed to women's issues and discourses on feminism, I began to think of myself in terms of multiple identities: Arab/Palestinian and woman. As a result, my literary interests shifted toward twentieth-century Arab women's writing.

The syllabus I have devised includes seven novels by Lebanese, Jordanian, Palestinian, Syrian, Egyptian, Algerian, and Moroccan women writers, as well as an anthology of essays, short stories, and poems by women from these and other countries. The texts deal with historical, political, social, religious, and cultural aspects of Arab society. Our discussion will focus on, among other things, women and war, religion, patriarchy, colonialism and the colonial legacy, and sexuality. I hope that the students will come to formulate a vision of Arab feminism within the specific religious and political history of the region.

After September 11, however, it became clear that my course at Drew would need to encompass much more. Particularly in need of examination would be the politics of representation of Arab women, whether it be by the West or by Arab women themselves. Because the class meets a general education requirement, the nature of the audience becomes extremely relevant. My students may be male or female; Arab, Muslim, or neither; freshmen or seniors; women's studies or English majors; or anything else. Some of these students I know personally from previous courses or as residents in the Islamic Culture Theme House in which I serve as advisor. Others I will be meeting for the first time. Some students will have enrolled to learn more about their culture, about their religion, or about women in a culture. No doubt some students' interest will have been sparked by recent events and the now ubiquitous images of Muslims and Muslim women in the media. Many will enter with preconceived notions of Arab women and Arab culture, falsehoods that the media has largely reinforced since September 11. However, I maintain the hope that my students will be intelligent critical thinkers with open minds to learn about "other" women and other feminisms.

Recognizing the potential pitfalls of teaching Arab women's writing to such a diverse audience in a Western space, I decided that one or more short, powerful films could be an effective means of introducing complex issues in an engaging yet nonthreatening manner. After searching through available titles, I selected Covered and Hollywood Harems by Tania Kamal-Eldin because these films will serve to intro-
duce the class to the Arab world in general, and Arab women in particular. Since the literature we will study is postcolonial, I must also address some concepts in postcolonial theory, the most relevant of which is Orientalism. *Hollywood Harem* offers an ideal introduction to this concept, confronting students with the very preconceptions that they will need to leave behind in order to appreciate the texts they will read in this course. *Covered* will serve to inform students on perhaps the most well-known, and most commonly misunderstood, Arab and Muslim women’s issue: the hejab, or veil.

In developing this course, I will take into account not just the nature of my audience, but also my own role. Although I am an Arab woman raised in the Arab world, my viewing lens has been honed and shaped in the West, where I have been exposed to a largely Western model of feminism. Currently I am a privileged Arab woman studying other Arab women at an American college in a white upper-middle-class community. As such, I am simultaneously insider and outsider with regard to the subject of our study. As Amal Amireh observes, inappropriate Western feminist paradigms are often applied to the Arab world, even by Arab women scholars themselves (185). In my own attempt to examine Arab women through their lives and texts, I must not engage in the “elaboration of a victim discourse that fetishizes Islam [and] reifies Arab women” (186), such that they become “objects—of study, of pity, and of liberation” sans “agency and subjectivity” (185). Such an approach would replicate the condescending stance that First World women frequently tend to adopt toward Third World women (203). Just as oppression varies in type, degree, and circumstance, feminism is not a term that applies in the same way to all women across all cultures. Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that “to define feminism purely on gendered terms assumes that our consciousness of being ‘woman’ has nothing to do with race, class, nation, or sexuality, just with gender.” (12) A frequent misapprehension among Western feminists. Many Third World women’s apparent inability to speak out and rebel against their patriarchal communities finds its causes in a set of complex issues that go beyond gender. For example, the feminist struggle within the Arab world takes place against the backdrop of political struggles against imperialism.

To accommodate the particular nature of Third World feminism, avoiding simplification, I will maintain a holistic approach, neither privileging issues of gender over those of class and race (Amireh 185), nor privileging class and race over gender. The postcolonial, Arab, Muslim woman has much to negotiate in terms of her identity politics. The key is not to simplify any or all of these factors into cliches, such
as the Arab woman's total oppression under Islam. A student not properly informed might easily perceive erroneously simple solutions to what are actually extremely complex sets of cultural, religious, and historical circumstances.

The two films I have chosen to screen, one generously provided by the Women Make Movies "Response to Hate" campaign, will serve to help my students develop an appreciation for these complex realities, separate truth from media myth, and facilitate more complete understanding of the literature they will read. Below I discuss both films and place them within the context of the ideas and issues dealt with in my literature course.

**Covered: The Hejab in Cairo, Egypt**

The hejab, or veil, as it is commonly referred to in the West, is a problematic symbol. The West, and Western feminists in particular, fixate on this garment as a supreme symbol of oppression, seeing the covering of women solely as a gender issue. However, a more thorough understanding of the hejab is necessary to my course, since many of the novels we will read feature veiled or covered women as central characters.

Historically, the hejab has been a symbol for "Islamic" authenticity in the face of Western imperialism, since "European colonial and imperial powers that intervened in the Arab World in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often claimed that the advancement of women was a special concern of, and justification for, their intervention and rule" (Tucker x). Some Arab feminists see a disturbing similarity between colonial discourse and that of some Western feminists who "devalue local cultures by presuming that there is only one path for emancipating women—adopting Western Models" (Abu-Lughod 14). To this Western school, the hejab can have only negative, oppressive connotations.

The reality, however, is much more complex. The hejab can also be seen to put women in the position of representing the authenticity of the nation, if not Nation itself. During the Algerian struggle for independence, for example, the hejab became a tool for covert acts of rebellion (hiding guns, among others). Thus it stood for national independence in the face of imperialism, the fortification of a nation that must veil itself as protection from cultural rape by the imperial West. As one Algerian feminist states: "[F]aced with colonisation the people have to build a national identity based on their own values, traditions, religion, language and culture. Women bear the heavy burden of safeguarding this threatened identity" (Helie-Lucas 107).
However, as Helie-Lucas herself warns, “this burden exacts a price” (107). Thus, we must not idealize or romanticize the hejab as a noble symbol of anticolonial struggle and national independence. To ignore gender as a factor is also to disregard the sometimes oppressive nature of the hejab as it undermines women’s agency and sexuality. Yet to view it simply as it relates to gender is to undercut its social, political, historical, cultural, and even economic significance. This is a complex phenomenon, the examination of which must be seen within the context of the region and its history. I would like my students of all backgrounds to engage in a discussion that examines and critiques the hejab in a more nuanced manner than one typically finds in Western circles. To this end, Tania Kamal-Eldin’s film reveals some of the varied and complex reasons why women wear the hejab.

Covered opens to a panoramic bird’s-eye view of Cairo. The narrator, Kamal-Eldin, is heard during this shot telling us that she was born in Egypt and returns there to visit occasionally. This time, she returns to Cairo to “find out the reasons behind the veil” (Covered). The filmmaker’s biographical note establishes her as an “authentic subject” who can claim “the ‘birth right’ to represent [her] Arab sisters to a non-Arab audience” (Amireh 186). However, apart from this brief confession at the onset of the film, Kamal-Eldin’s personality and identity are not revealed. On the contrary, she allows the women interviewed to speak for themselves. We do not hear her questions, and so cannot know how these conversations might have been initiated or manipulated. We are left to wonder about the filmmaker, whose quest it is to interrogate her subjects about their attire and appearance but who leaves us curious about her own. One is inclined to believe that Kamal-Eldin is not covered, but is that a safe assumption? Might her appearance on camera with or without a hejab damage the film’s objectivity? Between sections of the film, we see artistic footage of a woman veiling and unveiling herself as the camera revolves around her: is this significant? I mention such things because I want my students not only to examine what is said in Covered—the reasons behind the wearing of the hejab—but also the way in which it is presented. What do they make of Kamal-Eldin’s rhetoric, her choice of words and images, the absence of a visible interviewer or narrator? How does this Arab woman present and study her own society?

The women interviewed in Covered express varied reasons for donning the hejab. The hejab is an “order and injunction” from god, and therefore some comply in accordance with what they see as religious law. Others see it as a sign of respect for god and themselves or a symbol of spirituality. For others it is more clearly a duty. Some offer more
practical reasons. It protects them from victimization by men, who because of poor economic conditions have turned to drugs. It protects them from harassment, temptation, pestering, vanity, changes in the weather, and unwanted male attention. (The narrator points out that, ironically, with regard to the last case, the hejab can have the opposite effect: men sometimes find covered women more mysterious and therefore more alluring.) Societally, the hejab legitimates women’s appearance in the public space, says one interviewee, and thus allows them to participate in economic activity; hence the hejab “neutralize[s] that threat that comes from the male dominated society” (Covered). For some women, it is not a choice, but something imposed on them through pressure from family and peers.

Very interestingly, some women view the hejab as a powerful statement about their identity. They are proud to be Muslim and they want the world to know it. To one woman in Covered, the hejab is her rebellion and resistance against the “commercialization” of women’s bodies that is so prevalent in the West. This particular interviewee, a journalist fluent in English, posits her feminism against the Western conception of women’s liberation, which in her view has resulted in objectification, commercialization, and oversexualization of women. One point that I hope will emerge in class discussion is that this woman, despite her independent spirit, still defines herself in relation to the West. Her feminist identity is contingent on opposition to Western influence and a colonial legacy connected implicitly to veiling and unveiling. Certainly there are contradictions in the achievements of Western feminism, but ironically, in opposing this feminism, she has (like those who have opposed Western imperialism) reacted by embracing a traditional symbol of her culture. Can she really adapt that symbol to her own ends by discarding some of its conventional meanings? Either way, the students will see a strong, educated, clearly intelligent and independent woman who chooses to wear the hejab for well-defined, and feminist, reasons.

Another interesting interviewee is an American woman who converted to Islam upon marrying an Egyptian. She states that wearing the hejab is good for the survival of the family unit: if the husband sees only veiled women and therefore cannot compare his wife to anyone else, he will continue to find his wife desirable. I am hoping that the perspective of an American convert will give my students pause to think about how closely these ideas might relate to them. This woman grounds her belief in the notion that women are in fact more tempting and beautiful than men (an idea heard frequently in Covered), and that males are more easily tempted and perhaps not even fully respon-
sible for their own actions. In this argument, one can clearly hear echoes of the “she asked for it” rape defense heard in Western courts. One woman in Covered speaks of “accidents,” by which she clearly means sexual relations or perhaps rape. Her logical conclusion is that to prevent such accidents, women should cover or veil themselves. These covered women do not identify the other solution, offered by Shala Haeri, professor of anthropology at Boston University, that men should be educated on how to interact with noncovered women, to respect them regardless of their dress (Covered). I hope that my students will be able to identify these dilemmas, which are hardly unique to Muslim countries, and engage in a discussion of the shared similar experiences of women worldwide.

Another interviewee, who is completely veiled from head to toe, states that women must be protected from the “wounding” gaze of men; the hejab ensures her respectability and the sanctity of her private space. Such reasoning is quite attractive. However, it also assumes that the male gaze, the male desire, is more important than its female counterpart—if in fact, that female gaze and desire are perceived as existing at all. The male gaze, in contrast, is an assault that can take something away from its object. Not only does it exist, but it has a powerful, almost physical, presence. I hope to engage students in a class discussion of the “Gaze.” Whose desire is important? Who is in control? Whose gaze is more significant and why? In attempting to deobjectify themselves, do these women in fact deny their sexuality and thus their agency and subjectivity, dismissing as well the female gaze, female desire, and female sexuality? How important is sexuality in the shaping of one’s identity? How does it relate to other elements of identity such as class, race, and ethnicity? How can the students relate these issues concerning sexuality to their own lives and experiences?

These and other questions raised by Covered speak directly to issues that are central to a study of Arab women’s literature. However, in addition to discussing the hejab itself, I want my class to critique and analyze the way in which Kamal-Eldin made this film. Is her goal simply to present points of view, or does the filmmaking and camera technique make judgments that are not made verbally? For example, at one point we see a slow-motion panorama of an Egyptian street in which a group of men stare lasciviously, even menacingly, into the camera. Their gaze seems truly “wounding,” as one man slowly passes his palm over his mouth as if salivating. How are we to understand this scene? Does the camera, and by extension the audience, represent the uncovered woman being subjected to the hungry gaze of these “lions”? Is Kamal-Eldin’s portrayal of Arab men objective? Stereotypical? Realistic?
In short, our class discussions of literature will involve the nature of the hejab; the way it is conceived in the West; the way it is conceived in the Arab world and the reasons behind it, implicit and explicit; and its historical, political, social, and sexual significance. Covered offers an ideal point of entry into such issues.

**Hollywood Harems**

The other film I will screen in class, *Hollywood Harems*, also by Tania Kamal-Eldin, will facilitate a graceful entry into discussion of Orientalism, a key concept in the examination of postcolonial literatures in a Western space. I hope that when students are confronted with one source of their own preconceptions—movies—they can begin to question those images of the East that through the years have been misused, distorted, or even invented by the Western lens. The film also highlights a myriad of issues of concern to Arab/Muslim women and women in general, for example, sexuality, agency, and subjectivity. Kamal-Eldin’s film becomes even more directly relevant to the course, considering that several of our literary texts focus on harems, segregation, and confinement.

This short, intriguing film “takes critical aim at Hollywood’s abiding fascination with and fantasies about all things east. Juxtaposing film clips from the ’20s through the ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s, Kamal-Eldin explores the organization of gender, race, sexuality in Hollywood’s portrayal of the exotic East, an indiscriminate fusion of things Arab, Persian, Chinese and Indian” (Hartouni). To Hollywood, the “East” is a world of segregated women and vamps who perform “bizarre rituals.” They are twirling dancers whose “eroticized performances were a hodgepodge of Arab, Persian, Chinese, and Indian dances.” Hollywood presented “a collective portrayal of the exotic East undifferentiated by cultural plurality” (*Harems*). The women of this world are sexual, sensual, erotic, and sometimes violent. Their home, the East, is a world of orgies and lax morality. This world, and its women, are “hot,” “exotic,” “lavish,” a “feast,” and “wild” and are filled with “intrigue,” “treachery,” “beauty,” and “glamour” as the 1942 trailer for *Arabian Nights* tells us. Such imagery catered directly to “Western male fantasies” (*Harems*). In a sense, these clips illustrate the power of the gaze—Western, male, and voyeuristic. The East is woman, the West is man, and the camera’s lens the site of their heated liaison, the fulfillment of these male fantasies.

As Kamal-Eldin points out, Hollywood’s film excursions into the Orient, especially ancient and biblical epics, were referred to as “T&S”
(Tits and Sand) movies. The very conjunction of these two words evokes the correlation between Woman and Land, and by extension Woman and Nation. In the colonial and colonized mentality, control of a woman and control of a land, the rape of a woman and of a nation, go hand in hand. Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in a song featured prominently in Hollywood Harems. The male singer declares in Vegas-lounge style, “Go east, young man!” in a clear reference to the pioneer cry of “Go west, young man.” Kamal-Eldin sets these lyrics over a scene from Son of Ali Baba depicting exotic harem girls catering to the whims and fancies of a group of young males. Is the Eastern woman then uncharted territory in need of discovery, cultivation, and appropriation—just as indeed was their homeland to its European colonizers?

It would seem so, as Arab males are typically portrayed by Hollywood as primitive barbarians ruled by their sexual urges. As one clip taken from the silent movie The Sheik informs us: “When an Arab sees a woman he wants, he takes her!” Kamal-Eldin follows this with a number of scenes of Arab men ravaging and kidnapping tender exotic women—who are invariably later rescued by “white Western males” such as in The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad, The Desert Song, and The Mummy (Harems). Viewed in a larger context, it would seem that the white Western hero, in rescuing the Eastern woman from the Eastern man, undertakes the “white man’s burden” of rescuing a colonized people from its own devices.

Another point in Hollywood Harems is Hollywood’s paradoxical portrayal of the harem as a private female space that is nonetheless easily penetrated by men. Just as a woman’s veil, “a symbol of inviolability” (Harems), is frequently seen being torn off, women are seen being denuded of their privacy in the harem quarters, historically off limits to men. Both transgressions elicit notions of rape, in which the woman’s private sphere is subject to casual violation. In typical Hollywood fashion, the female often coquettishly repudiates the male while making it perfectly clear that she is quite happy to be “violated” or “taken.” In fact, some clips portray women, often slaves or concubines, who are more than happy to oblige their masters and waive any rights they may have.

However, as the clips show us and as Kamal-Eldin tells us, “Eastern” women sometimes play more dominant roles; on rare occasions they are powerful femmes fatales whose aim is to bring about the “ruin of man and civilization” using their feminine and sexual wiles (Harems). Such assertive characters as Cleopatra, Sheba, Delilah, and Salome raise interesting issues about women’s sexuality, its nature and power,
and how it is perceived and presented. Does the representation of the sexually powerful Eastern vixen speak to any perceived relationship between East and West? Can the students identify a similar relationship between sexuality and politics in Western life and literature?

Before the close of this film, Kamal-Eldin reminds us that these images of the East from Hollywood’s Golden Age have modern-day successors, with barbaric nomads and femmes fatales replaced by hijackers and terrorists, as in Executive Decision and The Hostage. These more recent films, given only brief mention in Hollywood Harems, will likely prove more relevant to my students, who are several generations removed from the Sinbad and Ali Baba epics. After September 11, the “Arab as terrorist” image has more power and more resonance than ever in Western media. Although it perhaps falls outside the scope of my course, we may continue discussion where Kamal-Eldin leaves off, applying her mode of critical analysis to more modern cinematic farce.

Finally, it is of stylistic interest that Kamal-Eldin’s final narration in Hollywood Harems is accompanied by a black screen. We see neither the narrator nor a clip. How will students understand the significance of the filmmaker’s refusal to allow us to gaze at her as she delivers her final monologue, rather presenting us with no image at all? Is she denying our gaze, our interest in her physicality as an Arab woman?

I hope that Hollywood Harems will first and foremost open my students’ eyes to questions about their own preconceptions, and likely misconceptions, of the Arab world. How have they incorporated such images into their understanding of the Arab woman and the Arab world? How, as a result, do they relate to the Arab woman and the Arab world? Beyond these questions of personal subjectivity, the film raises several issues that will find echoes in the literary works we will examine. Of special interest is the way in which woman’s sexuality is perceived and the role of that sexuality in the interaction between men and women. Does the power of the male gaze, in this case that of Hollywood, undermine or even eradicate the female gaze, and thus deny female agency? Is this indicative of a larger pattern? The film also touches upon the correlation between Woman and Nation, a significant theme with regard to novels on my syllabus that feature women relating to or taking part in nationalist movements. Finally, I hope the students will critique the gaze of the filmmaker herself: who is she; is she an insider or an outsider; what is she trying to do; how and to what end?

Visual Text, Printed Text
Although the examination of literary texts is the core of the course, the approach to these texts must take place within a cultural context.
Kamal-Eldin’s films will help a class begin to establish that context. First, they invite us to critique ourselves and our misconceptions. Second, while not exhaustive studies, they do succeed in raising historical and theoretical ideas, which will be central to my course. Covered exposes us to some Muslim women’s lives, their needs and ideas, providing a more complex approach to a commonly oversimplified phenomenon. Hollywood Harems invites us to explore representations of Arab women, the East, and Islam, and opens the door to Orientalist ideology. I hope that these perspectives will promote a better understanding of and appreciation for the complexity of the Arab world, Arab women, and Islam—an essential ingredient in approaching the literature. For example, the films will particularly inform our discussion of Assia Djebar’s Women of Algiers in Their Apartment (Algeria) and Fatime Mernissi’s Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood (Morocco). These two novels deal with issues of the harem (a real and not a mythical, idealized representation), the hejab, women’s sexuality, the quest for independence in a patriarchal space, and women’s role in national struggles. We can find similar themes in the other novels of the course: Ulfat Idilbi’s Sabriyya: Damascus Bitter Sweet (Syria) also deals with the hejab, or veil, and national struggles; Hanan Al-Shaykh’s Story of Zahra (Lebanon) deals with, among many other things, women’s agency and sexuality in a state of war; Nawal El-Saadawi’s Woman at Point Zero (Egypt) also focuses on sexuality and agency. Fadia Faqir’s Pillars of Salt (Jordan) centers on women’s confinement in a colonized, patriarchal community.

I have learned a great deal from watching these films and applying them in the formulation of this course. I have gained a more nuanced understanding of issues that even I, as an Arab Muslim woman raised in an Arab community, did not fully appreciate. I anticipate that the films will prove to be a nonthreatening, deceptively simple vehicle through which a class can explore and discuss complex issues facing Arab women yesterday and today.

**READINGS FOR ARAB WOMEN WRITERS COURSE SYLLABUS**


**REFERENCES**


**Diya Abdo** was born in Jordan, where she completed her undergraduate education in English literature and language at Yarmouk University. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Drew University and teaches composition and literature. Her doctoral dissertation will focus on Chicana and Arab women’s literature.

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