

Practices of Counter-Conduct as a Mode of Resistance in Middle East Women’s Life Writings

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ABSTRACT

Middle East women life writings have been downplayed for their oversimplified representations of female subjects as purely passive, submissive and unresisting. This article explores the allegation in three contemporary memoirs by Jean P. Sasson (1992) (the ghostwriter of Saudi princess Sultana), Zainab Salbi (2005) and Manal al-Sharif (2017) who recount similar observations on subordinated women’s daily experiences in phallogentric Arab communities, and whose stories have similarly been the subject of much controversial criticism. In the present study, I aim to examine the practices exercised by marginalized Arab women to destabilize the patriarchal status quo and redefine the established ways of being. To do so, I draw on Michel Foucault’s notion of counter-conduct, often associated with the issues of women and their socio-political and religious position, to identify acts of defiance that are exercised simultaneously with strategies of governmentality through practices of moral self-reflection, or what Foucault describes as the art of being governed differently. The article concludes that in creatively documenting their life stories and through tactical elements such as counter-history, counter-society and reversed obedience, the so-called passive women interrogate the totality of prevailing hierarchies of power, and resist against the unequal society as well as the operating practices of subjugation.

Keywords: Jean Sasson; Zainab Salbi; Manal al-Sharif; Michel Foucault; Counter-Conduct

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary eyewitness testimonials describe the situation of Muslim women in Arab countries as socio-politically “enslaved and sexually victimized” (Amy 1999, p. 527). This grim reality is reflected in the growing number of life narratives by both Middle East non-/diasporic women writers and Western ghost-writers who are entrusted with local women’s life-stories. Many of these works, however, have been downplayed for their presumably oversimplified representations of female subjects as purely passive, submissive and unresisting. Jean P. Sasson’s (1992) *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia*, Zainab Salbi’s (2005) *Between Two Worlds Escape from Tyranny: Growing up in the Shadow of Saddam*, and Manal al-Sharif’s (2017) *Daring to Drive* narrate similar accounts of Muslim women as “suppressed prisoners of a male-dominated society” (Stenslie 2011, p. 69). The first describes the shocking human tragedies experienced by Sultana, a pseudonymous native woman of the royal family in Saudi Arabia; the second is a personal account of the author’s life under the tyrannical regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and the third describes the high levels of discrimination that Saudi women suffer because of the strict and narrow-minded teachings of religious fundamentalism. Sultana, Salbi and al-Sharif’s similar observations on subordinated women’s everyday life experiences in phallogentric communities have been the subject of controversial criticism.

By “controversial,” I point to the general tendency to dismiss these works as politically compromised: Sultana’s story for its Euro-American vantage point (Amy 1999), Salbi’s for its biased liberal-humanist perspective (Shehabat 2011, p. 21) and al-Sharif’s for its conventional “ignorance, fetishization, and condescension” of Eastern women (Aziza 2017, para. 1). This article aims to examine the allegation by exploring the resistant practices

exercised by marginalized Arab women to destabilize the hegemonic status quo and redefine the established ways of being. To do so, I draw on Michel Foucault's notion of "counter-conduct" that is very often associated with "the problem of women and their status in society, in civil society, or in religious society" (Foucault 2009, pp. 7-196). This critical method is different from the more common "resistance approach" that defines resistance in the light of opposition against domineering systems of power and explores practices that progressively interrogate the hegemon. Rather, in applying "counter-conduct" approach, this article aims at identifying acts of defiance that are exercised simultaneously with strategies of governmentality through practices of moral self-reflection, or what Foucault describes as "the art of not being governed like that and at that cost" (2007, p. 45). The selected life narratives can therefore be described as protests, or "public performances of opposition or rejection of dominant actors, policies, or norms" (Death 2016, p. 202). This means that in creatively documenting their life stories, the subordinated women interrogate the totality of prevailing hierarchies of power and resist against the unequal society as well as the operating practices of subjugation

Hence, a counter-conduct approach is worthwhile not just in better interpreting these revolting narratives on their own terms, but in appreciating specific modalities of power in which they are entangled. This means that a study of this kind will help to better understand the operating strategies of resistance in the so-called pre-deterministic life writings of Middle East women. In what follows, I will first review the critical controversy that these works have provoked. Then the article turns to elaborate on Foucault's concept of "counter-conduct" and highlight the way the term will be applied in the ongoing analysis. Finally, the theories are applied on both works with a particular attention to the moral and formative ways of "becoming" as portrayed in the texts, and the way these works depict "the art of not being governed like that" within the contemporary socio-political discourse of the Middle East.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many scholars have depreciated Muslim women's life narratives by attributing their overwhelming scholarly and public reception to wider socio-political shifts. In her doctoral thesis, Ameri (2012) criticizes the contemporary Muslim fiction in English for their oversimplified and stereotypical representations of Islam and its believers. In many of the life narrative, Islam is arguably depicted as a primitive, "backward and violent religion," and its female followers as the passive victims of monstrous, sadistic Muslim Arab men (p. 2). She argues that these memoirs pursue the dominant Islamophobic discourse in the West that Muslim women under Islamic misogynistic tradition "are oppressed, abject and in need of liberation by Westerners" (p. 61).

Using a similar perspective, Bahramitash (2005) faults these narratives for providing a worryingly simplistic and generalized depiction of Muslim women as sheer "victims of religious dogma" (p. 221). She suggests that even though these memoirs profess to fight for women's rights, they are infused with "classic Orientalist stereotypes" (p. 221). Drawing upon theories of feminist Orientalism and Oriental feminism, Bahramitash observes that both Western women as second-hand story tellers and native Muslim female writers use women's rights as a pretext to authorize the traditional colonial presence of the West in the Middle East and, in the context of post-9/11 events, "to raise support for the neo-conservative agenda ... [and] to promote the war on terror" (pp. 221-2). This urge for Western intervention is even more straightforward in the life writings of neighbouring countries like the Iranian memoirist Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and the Afghan writer Latifa's *My Forbidden Face*.

Other scholars have similarly noted and raged at the pro-Western stand of these memoirs. Newns (2017) believes that they “are filtered through the lens of Western publishing houses” to contribute to the conventional, not least the post-9/11, discourse of “a homogeneous world of veiled and oppressed Muslim women in need of saving” (p. 2). In these memoirs, the disempowered and oppressed women attain agency within male-centred societies only in giving up “the visible signs of their religious belief, especially any form of veiling or hijab” (p. 2). Hasan (2015) makes a related point by questioning the “actual authorial source” of the growing number of what he calls misery stories of patriarchal governmentality and repression in Islamic countries. He argues that in many of the Muslim women writers’ narratives that are written in collaboration with Western writers, the latter “control the presentation of the content and use the authorships of the [former] in order to place a seal of authorial authenticity on their work” (p. 90). Hasan criticizes how these neo-Orientalist writings depict Muslim men’s monstrous and chauvinistic treatment of women, who “are perceived as passive, complicitous, submissive, silent, voiceless, invisible, waiting to be rescued by a passing Westerner, or as rebellious and escaping to the West” (p. 91).

Notwithstanding their considerable insights, I suggest that the cynical analyses of these memoirs only reveal the unsympathetic approach of the critics towards life narratives of/by Muslim women. In fact, I agree with Majid (2015) that besides the existing disagreement over the authenticity of these memoirs, “there must be a space for critical interaction and discussion instead of resorting to denouncement and condemnations” (p. 43), which has often led to the immediate dismissal of the works’ literary, socio-political and individual values. As Armstrong (1987) observes in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, narratives of personal saga have rendered silenced female subjects with a voice in patriarchal societies. By telling their personal stories, in effect, the oppressed Arab women liberate themselves from the shackles of conventions and traditional values (Nash 2007, p. 154). The selected memoirs reveal how the subordinated female subjects reassert their agency, achieve “individual identity” and attain their “position in history”—albeit temporarily in Sultana’s case—in articulating their personal experiences (Faqir & Eber 1998, p. 8). Hence, much of the existing objection on the narrow world of the memoirs, as Ahmad (2009) rightly asserts, emanates from the critics’ “error of reading them ethnographically” or geopolitically, meaning that they erroneously generalize memoirs to understand a cultural body (p. 127). Contrary to this general misinterpretation, Sultana, Salbi and al-Sharif’s persistent attempt to articulate their personal saga, according to Ahmad’s argument, offer significant “observations that have failed to register within the general American understanding of Islam and the Middle East” that overlook the agency of Muslim women and recognize them stereotypically as “exotic and passive” (p. 113). Gorman (2015) also believes that notwithstanding their central preoccupation with Islamic fundamentalism, these autobiographical accounts explore the creative spaces opened up by deviant individuals “for acting in ways that are otherwise closed” in patriarchal structures (p. 255). Gorman, however, does not elaborate on the specificities of the defiant practices.

Building on these discussions, this article demonstrates how a counter-conduct approach will make it possible to interpret the stories in a different way, as “forms of conduct which subvert dominant techniques for the production of responsible subjects” (Death 2016, p. 202). The concept of counter-conduct is used to explore how subjugated beings take action-oriented strategies or encourage other repressed individuals to enact forms of opposition that are crucial in human rights struggles (Zembylas 2017, p. 11). Hence, in contrast to the general unsympathetic treatment of the memoirs, this article argues that they instead, combat “the previous stereotype of exotic and passive Muslim women” (Ahmad 2009, p. 113). In a revelatory note at the end of the book, Sasson appreciates Sultana’s bravery and activism, and shares with the readers how “Sultana’s passion for life and her

amazing mental capacity” altered Sasson’s Western-centred erroneous perceptions of the veiled women (1992, p. 292). Salbi is also rightly praised for her feminist perspective that “challenges and/or calls for other women to break their silence,” and for her showing how subjugated female writers “can rebel, act, and create true change instead of keeping their works limited to the theoretical realm” (Shehabat 2011, p. 72). And last but not least, al-Sharif’s story deviates from the conventional narrative of individual passivity and recounts instead stories of veiled women’s daily struggles to bend the imposed patriarchal rules and alter the status quo by restructuring their subjectivity (Aziza 2017). This article aims to show how these narratives succeed to depict Muslim women’s aspirations and constant struggles to interrogate political and ethical axes of patriarchal communities. My analysis focuses precisely on everyday forms of resistance that the female subjects autonomously and creatively exercise in spite of the domineering social restrictions.

MICHEL FOUCAULT’S NOTION OF COUNTER-CONDUCT

Michel Foucault has a profound, yet controversial influence on the political analyses of power, gender, modes of domination and technologies and practices of resistance (Asl & Abdullah 2017a & 2017b, Binkley 2009, Heyes 2013, Scott 1990). His overt preoccupation with radical politics has provoked some scholars to be critical of his tenuous grasp of the subjects of feminism and resistance. Pointing to his problematic critique of the body as his primary target of power, many have found fault with his failure to explore the gendered character of disciplinary technologies (Asl 2018, Batmanghelichi 2017, Deveaux 1994, McNay 1992). Other intellectuals are similarly troubled with his failure to examine the crucial role of resistance within the relations of power. In agreement with scholars like Noam Chomsky, Edward Said (1986) criticizes Foucault for “thinking about power from the standpoint of its actual realization, not of opposition to it” (p. 151). Notwithstanding criticism, Foucault has become a vital source for exploring feminist politics, in particular the politics of feminine resistance. More specifically, his theories on the mutual functioning of power has inspired contemporary feminists like Judith Butler “to develop a more complex analysis of the relations between gender and power which avoids the assumption that the oppression of women is caused in any simple way by men’s possession of power” (Armstrong n.d., para. 5). These feminists are mainly inspired by Foucault’s proposition that power works in a collaborative act between the dominator and the dominated, meaning that those under governance have a mutually formative relationship with those exercising power. This notion of the functioning of power renders it possible for the subordinated, silenced women, like the marginalized women in the Middle East Arab countries, to forge alternative subjectivities.

Foucault developed this collaborative model of power relations in his March 1, 1978 lecture on the relationship between religion and politics. He defined power as a form of conduct, a concept with triple meanings that refers to the constituting practice of conducting (*conduire*) or conduction (*la conduction*), letting oneself be conducted (*se laisse conduire*) and the practice of self-orchestration viz., the way “one conducts oneself (*se conduit*)” (2009, p. 193). The notion of conduct implies that the target individuals and groups are orchestrated within a moulded space to operate as “instruments, objects and agents of conduct” and facilitate the process of their own subjectification (Binkley 2009, p. 5). At the heart of this model, however, is also the implicit recognition of the subjects as agents with the freedom and capacity to accept or counter such structuring. Here, Foucault introduces the complimentary concept of “counter-conduct” as the subjects’ “will not to be governed thusly, like that, by these people, at this price” (2007, p. 75).

Foucault developed this “counter-conduct” model to describe “specific revolts of conduct” as different from radical forms of political or material resistances. Counter-conducts are “movements whose objective is a different form of conduct” (2009, p. 194). Through these movements, the individuals and groups pursue to “be conducted differently, by other leaders (*conducteurs*) and other shepherds, towards other objectives and forms of salvation, and through other procedures and methods” (pp. 5-194). They want a different form of conduct with objectives other than those offered “by the apparent and visible official governmentality of others” (p. 199). Counter-conducts are hence different from the too strong or too passive forms of resistances such as revolts, insubordinations, dissents, disobediences and dissidences. Counter-conducts are not complete refusal of the process of government; rather, they are struggles “to claim and obtain an *other* conduct, in order for the individual to be conducted (or to conduct him/herself) *autrement*” (Lorenzini, 2016, p. 11). This means that counter-conducts look “*within* government to see how forms of resistance rely upon, and are even implicated within, the strategies, techniques, and power relationships they oppose” (Death 2016, p. 210). On the one hand, therefore, a counter-conduct approach suggests the workings of a governmental strategy that constantly seek to govern the conduct of individuals and groups. On the other, it indicates the possibility of the subjects’ defiance of “being governed quite so much” (Foucault 2007, p. 45), and of their struggle for a different form of conduction by using the same principles, tactics, instruments and methods “made available by the very form of power that they seek to undermine” (Thompson 2017, p. 8). An illustrative example is the way the oppressed women in Middle East use creative forms of veiling in their struggle against forced hijab as a mode of conduction to contest it, and seek to refuse “being governed like that anymore” (Foucault 2007, p. 14). Even though hijab is meant to be worn by women to avoid men’s gaze and attention, some women use creative design to retain their individuality. As Sultana tells us, “[m]any purchase scarves with jewelled decorations, and the movement of trinkets turns the heads of most men Young women, in particular, strive to set themselves apart by their unique selections” (Sasson 1992, p. 84).

Counter-conduct is thus a “positive” and “productive” form of resistance, and not a “negative” or “reactive” one, as it uses the same means of governing to forge a different form of conduction with different objectives and “through other procedures and methods” (Foucault 2009, p. 195). As counter-conducts seek to conceive different forms of conduction, they restructure the relationship of the subject to itself, because the individuals’ struggle to form a different way of conduction leads to their rejection of the imposed way of governmentality. In his examination of the religious dissidents’ revolts of conduct against pastoral power in the Europe of the Middle Ages, Foucault lists five main forms of counter-conduct as asceticism, community, mysticism, Scripture, and eschatology. What they all have in common is an attempt “to redistribute, reverse, nullify, and partially or totally discredit pastoral power in the systems of salvation, obedience, and truth” (2009, p. 204). These forms of counter-conduct are not “external” to pastoral power, but are indeed “border-elements” that are persistently redeployed, re-instilled and re-structured in a particular direction. In other words, as the subjugated individuals use these strategic elements to revolt against governmental mechanisms of power and forge a different conduct, governmentality—now jeopardized by practices of counter-conduct—continually struggles to neutralize, restructure, re-use and re-implant them in its own mechanism (p. 215). Hence, the act of opposition and the struggle to form alternative subjectivities is an increasingly difficult task, and as a result, the subjected women’s heroic efforts to break governmental relationships of obedience and articulate “I do not want” (to be governed like that) through their life narratives is of enormous significance.

Foucault, however, also emphasizes that liberation paves the ground for the formation of new hierarchies of power, “which must be controlled by practices of freedom” (1997a, pp. 4-283). For instance, within the discourse of feminism and women’s liberation, constant work needs to be done to transform patriarchal societies and expand their capacities for the exercise of freedom (McWhorter 2013, p. 71). For Foucault, practices of freedom are inseparably linked with the Greek percept “*epimeleia heautou*, which means taking care of one's self ... [and] ‘working on’ or ‘being concerned with’ something” related to the self, such as the person’s habits and relationships (1997b, p. 269). In the care of the self, the subjects’ freedom is demonstrated as “the ontological condition of ethics” (Foucault 1997a, p. 284). This is how resistance, in Foucauldian parlance, becomes both a political and a moral attitude.

Foucault’s notion of counter-conduct is applicable to the situation of women in Middle East Muslim countries, where the oppressed women constantly struggle to forge for themselves an *other* subjectivity. A counter-conduct approach helps us understand how Middle East women’s life narratives operate not as sheer political revolts against power but as resistances of conduct with distinctive forms and objectives. By this I mean that a counter-conduct approach does not examine these narratives within a power versus resistance binary or within a discourse of either liberating or conservative, because as Foucault aptly clarifies,

we need to escape the dilemma of being either for or against. One can, after all, be face to face, and upright [debout et en face]. Working with a government doesn’t imply either a subjection or a blanket acceptance. One can work with and be intransigent at the same time. I would even say that the two things go together. (2000, pp. 6-455)

Foucault’s model is pertinent to the exploration of the analytics of resistance in Middle East women’s life writings because of its particular attention on the orchestrated fields of visibility, the invoked forms of knowledge, the mobilized strategies of governmentality and the (re-) constituted subjectivities.

DESTABILIZING POWER NETWORKS IN MIDDLE EAST WOMEN LIFE NARRATIVES

Middle East women life writings recount the ways in which oppressed women disrupt the dominant forms of knowledge to repossess their visibility in mainstream perspectives. The selected narratives of Sultana, Salbi and al-Sharif reveal how the so-called passive women destabilize networks of power through various forms of counter-conduct such as counter-history, counter-society or secret-society and reversed obedience.

COUNTER-HISTORY

Through the unorthodox act of documenting their life experiences, the silenced women not only avoid pure obedience in their patriarchal communities, which proscribes public articulation of women’s personal feelings, but, as the Iranian memoirist Azar Nafisi writes in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, conceive for themselves “a parallel fantasy” and “a paradise to escape into” (2003, p. 281). Salbi, al-Sharif and Sultana’s personal stories are thus movements by which these silenced women, in Foucauldian parlance, give themselves the right to interrogate the established “truth on its effects of power and to question power on its discourses of truth” (Foucault 2007, p. 47). Their unorthodox act of life writing becomes in this sense “the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability” whose primary aim is to desubjugate them “in the context of ... the politics of truth” (p. 47). This is

why these memoirs, with regards to the oppressive patriarchal discourse of the authors' homeland, take on a paramount political value.

Therefore, the very act of documenting their personal accounts against the totalitarian male-gendered regimes that curtail female writers' freedom and silence their voices is political. In writing memoirs, Arab women pursue the fundamental feminist principle that the "personal is political" (Shehabat 2011, p. 7). They interrogate the structured connection between the individual and the other, "the private individual's relationship to a history and/or a culture from which she finds her experience of herself and her life excluded" (Buss 2002, p. 3). Salbi's story interrogates both the forbidding, legislative, punitive and censoring power of the tyrant and the unjust deeds perpetrated by him and his agents on Salbi, her family and the Iraqi people. Despite the regime's demand for absolute obedience, Salbi undermines, both openly and in disguised ways, prevailing strategies of governmentality like orders, prohibitions and conducts. Sultana's account can also be read similarly, as a socio-political satire on the decadence of the Saudi royal family and their monopoly of rule. Much like Salbi, Sultana challenges the sovereign power and the patriarchal order of the society through hidden/disguised acts of non-compliance, destabilizing values and resistance against the institutional conduct of behaviour by deviating from the standards of discipline. Yet among the three writers, al-Sharif offers a more visible form of defiant activism which is most evidently elucidated in her famous quote that "the rain begins with a single drop." In *Daring to Drive*, al-Sharif not only challenges the male-gendered norms of driving but rails against gruesome culture of domestic abuse, female circumcision, narrow-minded teachings of Wahhabi-Salafi ideology and overwhelming government suppression.

All three introduce a counter-perspective that brings to the fore experiences that have been marginalized or erased by prevailing hegemonic practices. The act of remembering is indispensable for revolting against oppression and existing ideologies which constantly push certain forms of knowledge to the margins as unworthy of epistemic attention (Medina 2011, p. 9). Through the act of remembering, the three Arab women use their made invisibility to resist against the structured socio-political omission and contribute to liberate and desubjugate personal and historical experiences. In their memoirs, as Foucauldian "narratives of the self," Sultana, Salbi and al-Sharif expose the silenced and dark moments of their oppressed lives as they speak from the darkness. For Foucault counter-conduct is "the active intervention of individuals and constellations of individuals in the domain of the ethical and political practices and forces that shape us" (Davidson 2011, p. 32). Both *Between Two Worlds* and *Daring to Drive* are outright calls for other oppressed women to break their silence and take action against hegemonic power, abuse, inferior education and legal discrimination. This call for a new way of living is a centre of counter-conduct. *The Princess*, however, is much more noticeably counter-historic. The degree to which Sultana recounts the moments of defeat, rather than those of the victories, reaffirms the intensity of women's debasement in Saudi Arabia. A counter-history, as Foucault observes, is yoked to those "epic, religious, or mythical forms which ... formulate the misfortune of ancestors, exiles, and servitude" (2003, p. 71). While the patriarchal Saudi men keep women and their experiences in shadows and margins, Salbi's counter-historic narrative articulates the erased discourse of Saudi women.

COUNTER-SOCIETY

Notwithstanding the writers' agency in articulating their life stories, these memoirists remain highly susceptible to be moulded "by the discourses of their surroundings" (Lilja & Vinthagen 2014, p. 117). This can take a simply improper form of excavating and presenting the subjugated memories—insufficient elaboration of events—or it can take prominently pro-

Western form, promoting the stereotypical principle of white man saving the brown woman from the brown man. In his *The Government of Self and Others*, Foucault (2010) relates such risky practices of truth-telling, or what he calls *parrēsia*, to the care of the self, and explains that *parrēsia* is a strategy exercised by a “person who spiritually directs others and helps them to constitute their relationship to self” (p. 43). *Parrēsia* is thus a mode of counter-conduct, because public truth telling becomes an example of how the subordinated female subjects begin to refashion their selves against the subjectivity assigned to them by dominant networks of power. Failing to speak out represents women’s inability to “resist epistemic and sociopolitical subjugation” (Medina 2011, pp. 7-16). One way to enhance this ability and assert agency in more oppressive societies like Saddam Hussein’s and the Saudi’s monarchical states is through development of counter-societies, or secret societies, a privileged example of which, according to Foucault, is Freemasonry. These groups have their own “dogmas, rituals, hierarchy, postures, ceremonies, and forms of community” (Foucault 2009, p. 198).

Salbi, al-Sharif and Sultana aim to cultivate care of the self in other oppressed women of their home countries and of other nations not only through the secret world of their memoirs but also through their international women’s organization (Women for Women), women’s driving campaign (Women2Drive) and Lively Lips club, respectively. Salbi actively encourages women survivors of war to self-examine, forge a new identity, free themselves from “being governed like that,” and make a difference in their lives. As she tells us,

I created a whole new identity for myself as the founder and president of a nonprofit women’s organization called Women for Women International, which supports women survivors of war. For over a decade now, I have gone around the world, meeting with victims of war and the awful mass rape the world seems to accept as an inevitable consequence of war. Seeing the criminal patterns behind such violence, I began encouraging women to break their silence and speak out so their oppressors could be punished. (2005, p. 3)

In a similar way, al-Sharif invites the oppressed Saudi women to raise their voices, express their basic aspirations and “stand up to repression, authoritarianism, and tradition” (2017, p. 225). Intrigued by the effects of social media on the eruption of Arab Spring, in which people in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt protested against years of dictatorial rule, al-Sharif first launches a Facebook group for her female colleagues at Aramco to articulate their complains and demands, and then administers another Twitter account to publicly document anything related to the nationwide Facebook event that calls on all Saudi women to defy the ban on driving, and “gain a basic right: the right of mobility, for the women” in Saudi Kingdom (p. 285).

In a more disguised way than Salbi’s and al-Sharif’s socio-political activism, Sultana forms a secret club, called Lively Lips with a few of her girlfriends to combat the “silent acceptance of the role of women” in Saudi Arabia (Sasson 1992, p. 103). Akin to Salbi’s Women for Women organization and al-Sharif’s Women2Drive, The Lively Lips aimed at re-imagining Saudi women’s relation to themselves and to others by pursuing the following common and strategic goals:

- (1) At every opportunity, let the spirit of women's rights move our lips and guide our tongues.
- (2) Each member should strive to bring in one new member per month.
- (3) Our first goal would be to stop marriages of young women to old men.

(Sasson, 1992, p. 103)

The project is to originate collective self-examination, produce a new social order and constitute a new woman that counters the subjectivity that the governmentality fosters. The

members of the club, according to Sultana, “surmised that it was the responsibility of each individual woman to foment desire for control of her life and other female lives within her small circle. Our women are so beaten down by centuries of mistreatment that our movement had to begin with an awakening of the spirit” (p. 104). Notwithstanding their clandestine nature, such practices of the care of the self pursue socio-political objectives with an aspect of what Foucault explains as “the pursuit of a different form of conduct: to be led differently ... and towards other objectives than those proposed by the apparent and official and visible governmentality of society” (2009 p. 199). In one illustrative example, Sultana recounts how her female friends sought social change for their own sex through many “activities they did for diversion” (Sasson 1992, p. 113), which included approaching strangers as “pick-up lovers” or dialling random phone numbers to find a foreign man to spend time with. For these girls, as Sultana tells us,

Any man would do, so long as he was not Saudi or Yemeni. They would ask him if he was alone and longing for female companionship. Generally, the reply was yes. ... [Then] the girls would ask him to describe his body. Flattered, usually the man would graphically describe his body and then ask them to do the same. Then Wafa and Nadia would portray themselves from head to toe, in lewd detail. It was great amusement, they said, and they sometimes met the man later, in the same fashion as the carpark lovers [and] did everything except penetration. (p. 113)

When compared together, however, in all these counter-societies, the exercised revolts of conduct seek to “produce and police particular ‘legitimate’ forms of behavior, visibility, knowledge and identity” (Death 2016, p. 212). Whereas in Salbi’s organization the acts are mainly liberal—voicing the silenced voices—and liberating in al-Sharif’s campaign—gaining the basic right of mobility—in Sultana’s club, they are more radical as they aim at destabilizing patriarchal networks of power, encouraging non-compliance and enforcing violence wherever needed.

REVERSED OBEDIENCE

The appeal to be conducted differently is also repeated in some seemingly religious but rather political modes of counter-conduct. The religious code of *Hijab* or veiling, and its extreme form *Burqa*, which is presumably the sign of Muslim women’s oppression and subordination, takes on a more political and strategic role (Whitlock 2005, p. 55). Both Sultana and al-Sharif use hijab as an element of reversal to refuse total submission to hard-line Wahhabi fundamentalism, and to challenge the very normative structures of power relations. For al-Sharif, the traditional black cloak and the burqa or niqab are patriarchally institutionalized impositions on female subjects. Hence, the phenomenon of de veiling proves to be an effective resistance against the religious propaganda that promotes facial covering as “what distinguishes a free woman from an infidel woman or a slave” (al-Sharif 2017, p. 99), and against such interventions of the state “in a person’s private life” (p. 142).

Sultana similarly goes beyond the restrictive qualities of hijab and believes veiling is what makes “Arab women become overwhelmingly tantalising and desirable to Arab men” (Sasson 1992, p. 85). Hence, she suggests using hijab as a sort of tactical element, or in Foucauldian terms “reversed obedience” (2009, p. 207), to disrupt the social order of Islamic fundamentalism in two distinctive ways. First, through individualizing the traditional form of veiling to keep the spirit of forming alternative subjectivities alive. Much like many other young women in Saudi Arabia, when Sultana is unable to escape from donning veil and *abaaya*, she individualizes her veiling not only to repossess part of her lost identity but also to control hypocritically religious men’s attention. Despite the more orthodox black colour for a veil, as Sultana explains,

For women with a need to express their individuality and fashion sense, there are ways to avoid that endless sea of conformity in dress through creative design. Many purchase scarves with jeweled decorations, and the movement of trinkets turns the heads of most men. Expensive eye catching decorations are often sewn to the sides and back of the *abaaya*. Younger women, in particular, strive to set themselves apart by their unique selections. [italics original] (Sasson, 1992, pp. 84)

Secondly, women also daringly re-form the standards of veiling by leaving certain parts of the body partially unveiled—albeit for a short time—regardless of its dangerous punitive consequences. With an increasing determination to alter the status quo and create new subjectivities, a few of the middle-class modern-thinking Saudi women “no longer covered their faces, discarding their veils and bravely staring down the religious men who dared to challenge them. They still covered their hair and wore *abaayas*, but the bravery of these few gave hope to us all” [italics original] (Sasson 1992, p. 219). Such a deviation is completely incompatible with Wahhabi fundamentalism that demands absolute obedience and wilful renunciation of the self. Hence, through this second step, the veiled women change veiling from a totally internal challenge to a partially external one, to an anti-fundamental Islamism.

In Salbi’s world, however, hijab has a slightly different function. Many young and secular Iraqi women progressively resort to covering their bodies as a counteraction against the corrupt and dissolute regime that has no boundaries. Saddam Hussein and his Tikritis tribesmen are described as “rapists” who are “known for rape, ightisab. When they see meat, they are like dogs! They’re not used to women in these short sleeves and skirts. They will jump on any woman! They will take a sister, take a wife. They feel they can just take any woman because they have power” (2005, p. 79). Here, some of the Iraqi women’s wilful act of covering their bodies does not seem to be as being compliant to Islamic law, but as a means of protecting themselves from sexual abuse.

Despite their differences, both practices of veiling and unveiling allow the subjugated women to forge new subjectivities and have “a completely different game of visibility” than the one hegemonic power prescribes (Foucault 2009, p. 212). The female body is not offered as a passive object for the patriarch’s examination through unquestioning obedience to veil or unveil. Rather, it follows a progression from passivity to activity, from inability to ability, from obedience to disobedience and from conduct to counter-conduct through continuous alternations and a persistent will so as “not to be governed like that” anymore.

CONCLUSION

Middle East women life narratives of Sultana, Salbi and al-Sharif utilize tactical elements such as counter-history, counter-society or *Parrēsia* and reversed obedience to protest against and destabilize patriarchal governmentality. The distinctive quality of these strategies consists in opposing the doctrine of patriarchal power, in disrupting the act of being conducted through the normative discourses propagated by the patriarch. From a Foucauldian perspective, all these modalities of counter-conduct seek to refashion the relationship of the female subjects to themselves, because the struggle to be conducted differently, by other means and towards other objectives, involves the negation of prescribed modes of subjectivity that patriarchal governmentality forms and implants on the subjectivity of Arab women. Hence, in the subjugated women’s unorthodox acts of life writings, with respect to their contemporary authoritarian governmentality, one can easily identify a common form of defiance to compliance, together with constant struggles to forge an alternative subjectivity, to play a re-structured “game of visibility,” and to bestow the relationship of the repressed female subjects to themselves a new identity. Another structural commonality among these

works is their particular emphasis on the subject of self-sacrifice. In all these works, the female subjects' voluntary act of self-denial and re-formation shape the crux of their socio-political activism, which is not for sure an individual matter, but "a relationship between the individual who is sacrificed and the community that is the beneficiary of that sacrifice" (Fierke 2013, p. 5). Hence, exploring Middle East women writers' life narratives through a counter-conducts approach makes it possible not to categorically disqualify them as pro-Western, neo-conservative, fetishizing, predetermined and strategic, but to accept them as counter-histories, which are centred around individuals' relationships to socio-political macro-structures in the process of their personal struggles to forge alternative rationalities, and to being otherwise.

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