

Reflections on the Global Women's History Project Presentation
and
Guest Lecture with Manal Hamzeh
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After spending a day participating in the events that were put together as part of the presentation by the Global Women's History Project, I walked away with a lot of new knowledge, but this new knowledge was not what impacted me the most. What stayed with me well after the events and lectures were over was the new perspective that was introduced to me through these events. What are the underlying issues, especially with regards to gender, that influence and control our world around us. In the past I had always considered history from a surface, chronological point of view. What I left Manal's lecture with was a desire to begin examining history at a deeper level than that surface level.

I liked beginning the day with a much smaller introductory lecture. It set the mood for the day, and got the wheel's turning in my head. I went into the day viewing the veil as a physical and social barrier separating women and men. After speaking with Manal shortly after her first presentation I began to view the veil as more of a concept. That it's more than just a physical object. Manal told me an interesting story when we were talking after the presentation. She said that growing up her veil was a pair of shorts. This perplexed me at first, but she then proceeded to explain that she had been a very good tennis player growing up, and wanted to pursue her dreams of playing tennis in the Olympics. One major issue that held her back was the concept that because of her religion and her status as a Muslim female, it would be inappropriate to wear shorts while playing tennis and that she must wear pants. This was my first concrete example that day of what I later identified as a reoccurring theme throughout the day. That veil's take many different shapes and women may be suppressed by "veils" that they didn't ever realize were affecting their day to day lives. Skipping ahead in the day for a quick minute, during the question and answer section after Manal's evening lecture, one professor asked her a question that stayed with me, and in a sense summed up a number of the revelations I had personally had

throughout the day. She said that while she was listening to Manal talk about hijab she couldn't help but wonder what some of our own internal hijab's may be. So often, as women of the west, we consider ourselves free and liberated, especially by comparison of what women across the world experience, and sometimes because of that mentality our own personal and internal hijab's are ignored.

There were two parts of the early afternoon lecture that stayed with me. The first were the pictures that were part of the "Gender and Arab Pro-Democracy Movements". Manal was absolutely right, these photos were definitely not part of the main stream media's coverage of what was going on in Egypt. One photo in particular really left an impression in my mind. It was the image of woman, in a headscarf and big sunglasses, yelling very passionately in the face of what appeared to be a security force member of some kind. That kind of female empowerment that was captured in that photograph exposed me to something I hadn't seen before. So often the mainstream media in the United States paints this picture of how Muslim women are so completely stifled and suffocated, this picture completely contradicted that concept. The other aspect of that lecture that completely contradicted that concept, and I also most likely wouldn't have known about if I hadn't attended this lecture, was the youtube video of Asmaa Mahfouz. That video was so eye opening, powerful and in a sense refreshing. I actually went home and re-watched that video a few times. As a female, it generated a sense of pride in me, that one of our own sisters had the courage and passion to ignite such a powerful movement. I watched her in amazement, so happy to hear her calling out her fellow Egyptians. Emphasizing honor and shame as concrete staples in her statement was such a solid approach. I especially liked the line when she said "to all of you who say that women shouldn't go to protests because they will get beaten where's your manhood and honor?!" She was basically saying show up and be supportive

as one nation, standing together for our basic human rights. I was so happy to have been exposed to this video clip.

Keeping with the theme that veils work in many different ways, right before the start of the movie *Caramel*, Manal asked us to keep an eye out for how this was exemplified in the film. At the start of the film it was evident subtlety in the scene where the girl had to make sure her shirt was fully buttoned up and sleeves were rolled down before she was allowed to go to dinner with her fiancé's family. It was also evident in the harassment of the police officer who demanded they have proof of their engagement if they wanted to sit in the car and continue their conversation. The barriers between men and women were exemplified throughout the film through what were treated as social norms. For example, when Layale wanted to get a hotel room and she wasn't able to do so unless she provided proof of her marriage, I'm sure that if a man wanted to get a room at the same hotel by himself he wouldn't need to be married. Another example of a different form of a veil was shown through the character that kept frequenting the beauty shop who had really long hair and was afraid to cut it off because of what her family would say and that the expectation is that woman should have long hair. It was so refreshing to see the movie end with her cutting it all off. The most impacting example of a veil working in different ways was the issue of virginity until marriage. The fact that the girl who was getting married had to undergo a procedure to get herself re-stitched was heartbreaking. It was the absolutely epitome of a double standard, and a painful one at that.

Participating in these events, as well as the global café, set me up to really appreciate all that Manal's lecture had to present. When Manal introduced her two goals for this presentation, which were to divert the stereotype of the hijab and emphasize that the veil (both the visible and invisible veils) are taken for granted as Godly when they were really socially constructed, I

couldn't help but draw parallels to Leila Ahmed's "Early Islam and the Position of Women". Especially with regards to the concept that the hijab is Godly wasn't socially constructed. The fact that a number of the Islamic laws that dictate the hijab were created during a very patriarchal and androcentric time period was first introduced to me by that piece by Leila Ahmed. In her lecture "DeVeiling the hijabs: An Exposure of a Genderizing discourse in the Lives of Muslim girls" Manal dug into that idea much deeper and provided a lot of supporting evidence in the form of actual verses from the Koran. I mentioned at the beginning of this paper that I walked away from this day with a new perspective but also with a lot of new knowledge in terms of facts that I previously was unaware of, the majority of this knowledge that I am referencing came from this lecture. I found it fascinating how the manipulated the text has become. It's very frustrating that the Koran was made inaccessible to women, and its literal meanings weren't honored but rather it was exploited. I really liked how Manal broke down the number of verses that discuss the hijab directly and in which context they were discussed. I found it very interesting that there were only 2 verses found regarding the visual, spatial and ethical meaning of the hijab and that there were 10 regarding it's spiritual aspect. One can't help but wonder how something like the hijab, that is multi-dimensional and clearly has more textual emphasis on it's spiritual dimension, ended up having so much more emphasis on dimensions such as the visual and spatial aspects. When you start to examine it in the historical context of what society was like during this timeframe it starts to all come together a little clearer. I think the work that Manal is doing with these young Muslim girls is incredibly necessary. These girls deserve to understand their religion in its purest sense, and in order to obtain that sense one needs to see the Koran and it's verses as a whole, not by exposure only to select texts. Especially when the exploitation of the selected text are keeping them from experiencing life and their passions to the

fullest. I think Manal's approach of providing this new information to these girls in conjunction with leading them down a path of self-discovery is the ideal way to provide them with this new perspective. It is a respectful, and cautious yet enlightening approach.

Overall I was very pleased with program as a whole. I think the variation in activities while still maintaining a common theme balanced the program well. I personally learned and grew a lot with regards to a different perspective, knowledge and ideas to initiate conversation. I am grateful I am taking those things away from this experience.