

## TRADITIONS OF MODERNITY AND FEMALE TEXTUAL POLITICS

Sahar SOBHI ABDEL-HAKIM\*

As the programme of this symposium states, the theme of this session is "The role of tradition, law and religion in women's political lives." By "tradition" it is usually understood that body of static dogma that has been handed down, delivered to those who live within its limitations and which sometimes entails respect, but is more often used dismissively. The now predominant view of tradition as confining dogma that we need not abide by was first implicated in forms of modernisation theory. The term, therefore, is rarely used in reference to modern knowledge, although it is generally held that it takes only two generations to make anything "traditional."<sup>(1)</sup>

Tradition means both, a passive static body of knowledge delivered by an elder generation and an active process of handing down knowledge or passing on a doctrine. The latter meaning implies a continuous change or, at least, a process of accumulation that usually erases as it writes new usages and theories. In this sense, we should speak of "traditions" in the plural rather than the singular "tradition", or, at best the "plural singular" which uses the grammatical plural form to refer to one static body that vaguely belongs to the past. I wish to call to play the earlier meaning of traditions as active processes of "handing down knowledge(s)," <sup>(2)</sup> as an alive entity that changes over time and therefore covers a longer and more diverse stretch of history than we usually anticipate; and, last, as different perceptions stemming from different cultures and being communicated through the complex web of cultural interactions. I chose to speak of the traditions of modernity whereby I apply a concept of modernity to the theories that it generated as well as draw attention to diverse the traditions of the different cultures and times.

---

\* Assoc. Prof. University of Cairo, English Department.

1) Raymond Williams, *Keywords*.

2) Raymond Williams, *Keywords*.

My topic today is one that, it seems to me, having gone through some of the publications of REUNIR, has been overlooked (although it does not seem to be totally absent) in the context of co-ordination between Mediterranean women and which (to me) needs to be addressed, namely, the legacy of the duality of perception between East and West. The efforts exerted for the re-unification of the Mediterranean and the revival of a long-ignored culture are indeed plausible. Yet, having established this initial concept, is our reactionary vision to evolve mainly around the benign and much empowering idea of solidarity? The phrase “Shore to Shore” betrays our obsession with continental duality and our fixation on the two familiar margins of culture and gender reveals our preoccupation with the legacy of modernity. [Modern tradition is still fresh in our memory, guiding us as we try to break away from its legacy.] (For this, I will be focusing on a specific moment in the modern history of the cultural relations between East and West and its communication between women.)

We are aware of the fact that what we now refer to as the Mediterranean “basin” has formerly been the “gulf” of separation between East and West, a metaphor that was contemporaneous with the crucial role of the Mediterranean as the route to communication. In our efforts to change the implications of that geographic phenomenon, we need to take into consideration the metaphoric etymology of that proper name. Given the historic duality of the role of the Mediterranean, it might prove useful to examine the discrepancies of the North-South relation in a balanced way in our efforts for the reconstruction of a new theory of relations. The historic legacy of hierarchic thought needs to be addressed rather than suppressed, challenged so that it can be countered.

My point is to foreground the historic inter-action between our respective cultures by way of focusing on a point in the relations that is now being over-shadowed by our right interest in cultural and gender sameness and the common perception and shared interests that it generates. ( This will be effected by re-examining the theory of social evolutionism as communicated by a woman writer and its application to Oriental women.) Harriet Martineau is a renowned first-generation feminist who in 1846-47 toured parts of the Eastern Mediterranean, namely Egypt, Palestine and Syria and recorded her reflections and findings in a text that is not merely a descriptive travel book, but rather, is a reconstruction of the history of the East along the lines of evolutionary theory. **Eastern Life: Present and Past** (1848) is a book allegedly descriptive of the writer’s voyage in the East, but one that is also a narrative of Oriental history as an early chapter in the history of humanity. In the 1830s Martineau became familiar with the work of the French Saint-Simonians and was later to translate, condense and,

therefore, popularise the voluminous writings of Auguste Comte. Besides, she gave prominence to these theories by applying them in her own writings. Drawing on the available thought of the French theorists, Martineau constructed the history of humanity as an evolutionary paradigm that started in Egypt with the birth of the ancient Egyptian civilisation and ended in modern Europe. However, this long stretch of history is subdivided into three major phases: the "organic" phase which she relates to ancient Egypt, the "critical" phase embodied in Oriental theosophy and the "Golden Age" of positive Western scientificity which she was prophesying. Relying on the then popular Recapitulation Theory, she traced the progressive phases of Oriental history from infant Egypt to childish Palestine to juvenile Syria, inscribing a linearly progressive paradigm of human civilisation that geographically ran parallel to her itinerary.

Nevertheless, just as Western philosophy supplied Martineau with a theoretic outlet, it was also a stumbling stone for her. Writing from a gender-defined position, the patriarchal philosophers posed a problematic to the female-writer. Comte advocated the superiority of the white race. He wrote reinforcing the conception of Europe as the seat and destiny of high civilisation: "Why is Europe the scene, and why is the white race the agent, of the highest civilization?" In answer to this question he drew on the then emerging sciences of phrenology and sociology, prompting:

No doubt we are beginning to see, in the organisation of the white, and especially in their cerebral constitution, some positive germ of superiority... we observe certain physical, chemical, and biologic conditions which must have contributed to render European countries peculiarly fit to be the scene of high civilization<sup>(3)</sup>.

Martineau shared with Comte his racial prejudice but his theory posed a problem elsewhere. Parallel to his racial impartiality, Comte was also genderly biased. As both a sociologist and a phrenologist, he drew on the social pattern of male predominance together with the then popular phrenologist argument of the inferiority of the female mind as revealed by the small size of women's brains<sup>(4)</sup>. From these two arguments he concluded:

Biological analysis presents the female sex, in the human species especially, as constitutionally in a state of premature infancy, in comparison with the other; and therefore more remote, in all important aspects, from the ideal type of the race.

3) Auguste Comte, *Positive Philosophy*, 3:5.

4) See Megan Vaughan, *Curing their Ills: Colonial Power and African Disease*.

Sociology will prove that the equality of the sexes, of which so much is said, is incompatible with all social existence, by showing that each sex has special and permanent functions which it must fulfil in the natural economy of the human family<sup>(5)</sup>.

Entrapped between her belief in Western philosophy and her struggle for gender equality, Martineau used the East as a text that narrates Western women's alliance to white maleness, removing the burden of her gender by stressing racial difference. Martineau "translated" and "condensed" Comte's racial and gender prejudice, stressing the former to subvert the latter in the Western context. By focusing on the racial pole of the binaries in her Eastern text, she was suggesting white gender proximity in relation to Orientals.

In writing **Eastern Life, Present and Past**, Martineau adopted social evolutionary philosophy and applied it, as it were, on a global matrix. **Eastern Life** is a history of the East, one that traces the ever-present, needful to counter embryonic stage of human civilisation. Her temporal distinction between Europeans and Orientals together with her Comtean belief in social ordered stability and progressive dynamics were responsible for her perception of Orientals as lacking coevalness with Westerners<sup>(6)</sup>. She represented the labour pool of the Oriental males she encountered as children, creatures that were still imprisoned in the early phase of humanity, yet ones that could be guided and looked after. (Martineau patronisingly held that children could be helped by able masters.)

Moreover, following the orthodox gender division which she was struggling to subvert, she delineated a distinction between Oriental males and females. The predominance of interest in Oriental males in her text is counterbalanced and foregrounded by the inclusion of a chapter on the Oriental harem, one that bridges her evolutionary paradigm of Oriental history, suggesting socio-cultural stagnation and oneness between the female component of populations that are otherwise subdivided and classified as constituting evolutionary phases in the history of humanity. Throughout **Eastern Life** time and space are related in a consolidating, doubly emphatic paradigm that narrates a pre-given history. It is only in the chapter on the harem that the construct is broken privileging social staticity over progressive evolutionism. In that chapter, the geographic specificity of each country as the birth place of a given civilisation and the evolutionary history of Oriental temporal space are obstructed and substituted by a homogenising timeless Oriental present. This is achieved by applying a

5) Comte, *Positive Philosophy*, 2:284-5.

6) See Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*.

strategy of lumping that comprises the infantile Egyptians and the juvenile Syrians. Syria, Martineau's sign for Oriental present and Egypt, the human nursery, are both related through a gendered tempo-space that relates the East throughout history.

On entering the hareem, Martineau noted that the "scene was on the whole, exceedingly striking, as the realisation of what one knew before, but as in a dream" <sup>(7)</sup>. The hareem was already imaginatively familiar. Its reconstruction is a substantial, active, fixing, a realisation of that dream. Besides, like a dream, it is a silent enactment, a succession of scenes that are related but not necessarily inter-related, associated through a drive ulterior to it. Martineau associated the hareem with "Deaf and Dumb Schools, Lunatic Asylums, or even Prisons." <sup>(8)</sup>. Her communication with the inmates was a communication with the deaf and dumb. In an actual suspension of vocal communication, her eyes did the work for all her senses. Her eyes configured the dream and in concert with the phrenologist, she wrote of these women:

I noted all the faces well during our constrained stay; and I saw no trace of mind in any one.... How should it be otherwise, when the only idea of their whole lives is that which, with all our interests and engagements, we consider too prominent with us? There cannot be a woman of them all who is not dwarfed and withered in mind and soul by being kept wholly engrossed with that one interest,—detained at that stage in existence which, though most important in its place, is so as a means to ulterior ends <sup>(9)</sup>.

"Dwarfed" and "withered" as bodily signs of the degeneration of mind and soul are conditioned by these women's detention in the physical phase of humanity with its preoccupation with the body here exclusively written as a sexualised confinement: a confinement of the body in a given gendered space and the confinement of their existence in the body as an exclusively sexual object. She also argued that that detention in the physical phase of humanity could not be helped for "here humanity is wholly and hopelessly baulked" by their very fleshy bodies <sup>(10)</sup>. Her empirical deductions left but one solution. She wrote, the working of the Oriental institution "is such as to make one almost wish that the Nile would rise to cover the tops of the hills, and sweep away the whole abomination" <sup>(11)</sup>. Rather than her desire

---

7) Harriet Martineau, *Eastern Life, Present and Past*, 238.

8) Martineau, *Eastern Life*, 235.

9) Martineau, *Eastern Life*, 239.

10) Martineau, *Eastern Life*, 240.

11) Martineau, *Eastern Life*, 241.

for exploiting the physically stronger portion of the population, she wished for female elimination. (The women's extermination would be carried out by a flooding of the life-giving principle, the purifying waters of "Father Nile," that would drown them and prevail, filling their geospace <sup>(12)</sup>.) The female dwellings is a voiceless space that she had written to efface, thrown out of history and wished to eliminate.

In her strive to create a space for herself, Martineau defined white femaleness by opposing it to Oriental maleness, advocating the elimination of those who were genderly similar to her. Herself troubled by her cultural product, she selected herself by stressing her precedent position in the racial hierarchy. (Martineau did not, could not, break away from the theoretic production of her time.) Her efforts she ended up adopting, rather than a subverting the strategy of supremacy and domination. Hers was a feminist readoption of hierarchic thought, largely the outcome of the predominance of a linear cultural definition and prejudice as well as her own subjugation to gender politics.

Harriet Martineau was a generation feminist whose writing should be taken into account as a valuable page in the history of the feminist movement, one expressive of the theoretic outlook of her age and the precedence of racial-national sentiment and boundaries. Her perception is marked by its nationalist fixation that needs to be crossed but cannot be disregarded. (Rather than applauding or ignoring the aspects of earlier feminist writing in which we take no pride, today's feminists should face the legacy, acknowledge and reveal it to establish firmer grounds for its countering.)

Martineau's sub-division of Oriental history ends by its lumping as constituting one term that tempo-spatially defined Europe by opposition. Despite the ostentatious net of diverse but inter-related Oriental cultures, with the linear ordering and classification of human civilisation, the southern Mediterranean was defined by its opposition to the northern Continent. This begs the question, should not the historic depths and geographic breadths of the Mediterranean cultures be stressed to signal each culture's multiple affiliations, hence constructing a complex web of a historically and geographically undefinable entity? Our earlier and shared history tells of the continuity of the Mediterranean culture, a concept which was replaced by a writing off of the southern contribution in the process of articulating oneness. The diversity of these cultures and their alliances to different terms is as important as their association. The over-simplification of the alliances in the relation might result in readily supplying a word for

12) Elsewhere in the text she genders Nile and desert and points out their joint responsibility for the birth of the Egyptian (human) civilisation.

the definition of yet another term in a fresh hierarchy. It might end up as a mere "translation" of the earlier paradigm. The Mediterranean basin might, in this assimilation, help the trans-Atlantic gulf, widen.

Oriental women's history has "traditionally" been regarded as synonymous to blankness, both in mainstream Western thought and by Oriental patriarchy. The plausible current efforts of Oriental feminists to retrieve their effaced legacy and reinscribe their history should be encouraged and taken into consideration.