Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research
Vol. 9, No. 1 (Winter 2023)

fragments of liberation and wayward rhythms of a reluctant traveling feminist

Hanna Al Taher

acknowledgements
I would like to thank Jonah Garde for the thoughtful reading of an early draft. Many thanks also to Noura Salahaldeen and Nama'a Qudah for reading and imagining liberated futures with me. I am especially grateful to Sara Salem for her detailed and thorough engagement with my writing, and appreciation to the editors Alina Sajed and Sara Salem for thought-provoking critique and for making this special issue happen, and thanks to Kohl and Ghiwa Sayegh for creating the space for it.

Jamila's hands are tied behind her back while she is being interrogated: who are your comrades, where are they, tell us. Jamila remains silent. Jamila is threatened by the French prison guard: do you choose freedom or torture? Jamila laughs. They bring in her younger brother, plunge him into a barrel of water, pressing Jamila to confess. Jamila refuses to name her comrades. Close up on Jamila's face in black and white. The feature film *Jamila, the Algerian* (1958)[1] ends. So, the teacher asks, what would you choose? Freedom or torture? Would you betray your cause or your family? Twenty children in a 5A classroom at the peripheries of Amman stare at the teacher.

I take this vignette of *Jamila* as a starting point to think through the complex relations between liberation dreams, anticolonial politics, and (post)colonial state, and want to imagine this process as an "errant path taken by the leaderless swarm in search of a [better] place" (Hartman, 2019, p. 227). Weaving together personal reflections and memory fragments with feminist theorization, I ask, what does freedom mean? Where is it located? Are we creating it? Did we inherit it? Whose freedom and liberation are we talking about in the kitchens and streets of Amman? The messiness of resistance and love, the messiness of the ties between battle, struggle, and care, they were never abstract. This essay began its life with a question: what is an anticolonial feminism between and in contrast to the entanglements of today's (post)colonial Hashemite state, its capital Amman that encompasses almost half of the state's inhabitants, and its gendered citizenship practices and laws? The memory of *Jamila* in my mid-1990s Ammani classroom surfaces unexpectedly as I am writing and rewriting this text on anticolonial feminism in Amman. Perhaps I recall this now because the absence of one-dimensional answers is one of the many absences that hold the messiness in my analyses and desires towards freedom and liberation. The possibilities of liberation were and remain fragmented, fraught, and complicated.

With echoes of the Intifada (1987-1993) still reverberating through streets and prisons on the other side of the river the teacher asks again: so, what would you choose? Would you betray your comrades and protect your brother? Or would you watch and bear your brother being tortured to free your country, like Jamila? What is more important, liberating Palestine, or protecting your family? I rewatch the film for the first time in many years, surprised by how deep and detailed the memory of this one scene is ingrained into my consciousness, and taken aback by how violent it is, a violence my memory had somehow glossed over. 5A heatedly and loudly discusses Jamila: Jamila laughing at the prison guard. Jamila is a hero, because she remained silent, Jamila would be a traitor if she had revealed her comrades. Jamila sacrificed her brother when it was her duty to protect him. The teacher watches the discussion with crossed arms: all of you are wrong, she says, and the class ends. *"This collection aims,"* write Alina Sajed and Sara Salem (2022), *"to revisit and reimagine the location of gender and sexual politics in anticolonial*

[1] The film *Jamila, the Algerian* was released in in 1958, just one year after Jamila Bouhired was imprisoned and tortured. *Jamila* is a feature about the Algerian War (1954-1962); it was produced by Magda Sabahi who also stars in the titular role of Jamila, and directed by Youssef Chahine. *Jamila* is the first and perhaps only film that specifically deals with the role of women/women fighters in the Algerian War of Independence. This can be attributed to producer Magda Sabahi, who sought out writers for the script. Magda also went on to play an important role advocating for women in (Egyptian) film. The film was produced with support of the Egyptian government and censored in Algeria, even though it garnered support for Algeria in the Arabic-speaking world. Possibly the film's portrayal of women as fighters in armed resistance did/does not fit the misogynist official narrative relegating women to onlookers instead of active participants in liberation.

revolutionary struggles": Why was it Jamila's duty to protect her brother and her comrades? Would we expect the same of a man? And why was I shown this film in school? I recall Jamila's laughter, and the tensions in a teacher making simple distinctions between wrong and right impossible while leaving us with the vague but urgent desire to revolt, to be fearless like Jamila. I wonder if the absence of an answer within a state-sponsored school curriculum built around nationalist allegiances and definite answers aimed at producing docile subjects was an intentional pedagogical tool or the teacher's own ambiguity. In what ways would that matter?

A specific space and time

If theory is a response to a specific social and historical situation (Said, 1983, 2000), how can feminist theory be retrieved radically in Amman? If I am a sub-human object to the state making me its citizen, can I be human in my interactions in relation to those interpellated as fully human? Understanding space as a social relation rooted in materiality (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 31), it is important to discuss the social and historical context of the questions raised in this essay. The creation of Hashemite Jordan is often portrayed as a top-down colonial process, and while the inception of Jordan was not a result of popular anticolonial resistance, its making was a dialectical one shaped by British-Hashemite state-making as much as opposition to that process.[2] Anticolonial feminism cannot be detached from wider political liberation struggles. And searching for vestiges of an anticolonial feminism in Amman requires a recognition that, in order to be understood as anticolonial, feminists must include in their political imagination: liberation for non-Jordanians, especially non-Jordanians exploited in gendered and bonded labor – it is my understanding that neocolonial state-sponsored feminism depending on exploiting bonded labor is by definition limited in its scope. Anticolonial feminism needs to be decidedly liberatory in that it expands imaginatively across and against borders in a way that creates space for what could be, instead of being coopted into a neoliberal and docile compliance with what is. In the process of neoliberal adjustments since the 1980s, struggles for political rights have been depoliticized. With a state-sponsored neoliberal feminism, topics perceived as women's issues have been incorporated into a charity and NGO machine, resulting in a defanged feminism detached from its radical and anticolonial origins.[3] In this essay, I argue that feminism needs to claim, forge, or retain that anticolonial moment and expand it into the present and future. By being coopted into neoliberal reforms, feminism gets divorced from its revolutionary pasts.

In my work, I trace the effects and affects of gendered citizenship in and across specific locations to understand alterations, both intended and unintentional. I understand citizenship to be one of the more tangible arenas to understand structures of state power and "despite the almost unavoidable tendency to speak of the state as an 'it', the domain we call the state is not a thing, system or subject but a significantly unbounded terrain of powers and techniques" (Brown, 1995, p. 174). Within that terrain, how do gendered citizens and non-citizens interact? Citizenship, not as liberal carrier of rights, but as a feudal

[2] For further discussion on the dialectic process in the making of Jordan, see for example the work of Tariq Tell, Jillian Schwedler, and Eugene Rogan (Rogan and Tell, 1994; Tell, 2013; Schwedler, 2022).

[3] In the 1970s with Black September there was a moment of an alternative development. In imagining otherwise, I suggest looking back to the spatial imaginaries present at the time.

relation of ownership and power. Citizenship as colonial, imperial, racial and gendered restriction. Rhetorically employed to claim support for Palestinian identity and liberation, Jordanian citizenship and personal status laws deny full citizenship and personhood to women, relegating them to legal minors – objects to be owned rather than subjects in their own right. A persisting claim brought forward is that allowing Jordanian mothers to pass on their citizenship would weaken the Palestinian cause as it would diminish the *Palestinianness* of their children. A colonial legal practice[4] in which children follow the nationality only of the father is maintained to not only deprive citizenship of children of Jordanian women married to foreigners, but to essentially diminish women's citizenship. While this set of laws and public discourse practically prevents all Jordanian women from passing on their citizenship, it is meant to target Jordanians married to Palestinians. According to Jordanian lawyer Hala Deeb, the argument is deeply flawed and, considering Jordan's diplomatic relations with Israel, at best cynical (Deeb, 2016). It is important to bring these laws into focus because they act as linchpins between past and contemporary forms of patriarchal (and colonial) governance.[5] Citizenship laws come into the life of citizens most tangibly in the form of a passport, the border we all carry in our pockets. The absence of a *pocket border* does not translate into the absence of borders on a national or societal scale. Borders are recreated in every moment – in the relation between government practices, or official narratives of belonging to the city, and everyday practices and imaginations of the city's inhabitants. In techniques and power, in scripts of law and customs. While these scripts themselves are not documented, we can attempt to extract them by focusing on the gendered performativity of everyday practices and experiences of citizenship. How laws and bodies interact, what possibilities of gaps occur in official national scripts, in contradicting scripts, and how this makes openings for wayward alternatives in creating and imagining the fabric of Amman. What is an anticolonial feminist? What would anticolonial feminism look like in this context?

Reluctant Claiming – a traveling feminist, or travelling feminism?

Why are you not a feminist?! a fellow student asks incredulously in my first weeks as an undergrad of political science and international law at a German university. I do not know if I am a feminist. Feminism, the word did not speak to me. I rejected it more than it rejected me. What came to me with the label was fused with anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian racism. I did not want to be a feminist at the cost of being co-opted into neoliberal white feminism, even before this became a theoretically informed choice. Before I learnt the languages of black, indigenous, and radical feminist theory, Feminism did not speak my language. I continue to struggle and learn with and from those languages.

[4] The current Jordanian Citizenship/Nationality Law from 1954 is based on the British Nationality Law of that time and lifted almost verbatim into Jordanian law. The Jordanian Nationality law has always been connected to the shifting territory and resulting borders under Hashemite rule. The development of the Jordanian state and citizenship laws must be seen in the context of the declining Ottoman Empire over the course of the 19th and early 20th century, European – specifically British and French – colonialism, as well as different local understandings of belonging and spatial imaginaries. To understand gendered norms and boundaries resulting from these laws, it is important to pay attention to these legal and geographical spatial contestations.

[5] Thanks to Alina Sajed for the image of the linchpin.

How do the ways we understand "anticolonial," "freedom," and "feminist" travel between times and geographies? Biography does not explain everything, Vergès writes, and often, it does not explain very much at all. But in a book on feminism, she owes it to herself to say something about her trajectory, not because it is exemplary, but because women's struggles have played a major part in it (Vergès, 2021). Struggling women and fighting women have been foundational in my education, but I became an anti-imperialist before I was a feminist. If anticolonial feminism, however, is justice work, it is one and the same. Possibly, outside of the narrow confines of academe, there is no requirement to gloss over tensions with a word: how do I translate this? Do I need to? Can I be a feminist in English and an anti-imperialist in decolonial vernaculars?

Teta taught me feminism. She did not do it on purpose, Teta is not bothered with the terminologies of occidental or academic epistemes. Never having thought of myself as a feminist, I only really encountered the word at a university in Europe. Whether or not to claim feminism, to call yourself a feminist, is not a question of identity but a question of work, of what tools are available to us, and which ones we create or abandon in how we move through the world in an errant path, striving to jointly dismantle structures of power. It will always be fragmentary, and it will be travelling. How can we grow families, friendships, and love in a "state-patriarchy-capital matrix" that relegates some of us to half-citizens and non-citizens in a world where citizenship rights are thought to be human rights? Are there alternative spaces, or does power permeate all? Making spaces as well as bodies porous? How might we use this porousness? *Is teta a feminist if she would never call herself one? What kind of feminist does that make me if I learnt feminism from her?*

There is a genre of writing that pastes the word "feminist" onto grandmothers, and while listening to their stories and struggles can be a process of becoming one, this isn't a romantic view of my grandmother; there are no secret potions and heirloom recipes or ancient feminist knowledge she passed on to me. There are no practices that need to be defined or redefined as feminist, there is no primordial feminism that I attempt to extract, make palpable, and press into English. Teta is not the "first feminist" in my life, but feminist theory taught me to be attentive to my grandmothers' lives, to the silences in their lives, to their everyday performances of "feminine" weakness and strength, to their strategic employment of those weaknesses and strengths, to the barriers and limits of those strategies, to smiling masks hiding genuine smiles, hiding, at times, also plain contempt. How are they interpellated by specific spaces and laws? How do unequal non/citizens embody spaces differently? What happens when these bodies come together? Not only in city spaces but in intimate relations within those spaces? Speaking with my grandmothers, fighting with them and against them, being frustrated by them and frustrating them, fighting the norms they accepted and that I indignantly felt they confined themselves to. Being surprised, or ashamed, to realize how their quiet sliding through expectations can be a form of refusal. How refusal can be productive. How I adopted these forms of refusal, sometimes unknowingly. Analyzing and understanding the violent world they survived and in which they continue to survive and adapt through the lens of anticolonial feminist theories allows me to imagine and demand that other worlds are possible, must be possible, are a material necessity.

I did not come to feminism or feminist theories because my grandmother taught me – that sentence opening the previous paragraph is false. What is true though, is that radical and revolutionary feminist theories draw on experiences and material realities resembling both Jamila's and my grandmothers' –

anticolonial feminism as refusal and claim. Reclaiming not in the sense of extracting, but in the sense of understanding more deeply; to disrupt the gendered rhythms of belonging imposed on us, be it by law, society, or the residue of histories of empire. What justifies an appropriation of the term "feminism," is to insist that feminist theories and practices be rooted in anticolonial struggles. A feminist, then, is invested in a political project of what *could be* (Olufemi, 2020). How necessary is it to retrieve feminist pasts and their relation to anticolonial struggles and possible futures (Sajed and Salem, 2022)? What would it mean, to retrieve? How is retrieving different from extracting? Retrieving would require us to re-understand, to embrace cognitive disorientation rather than glossing over tensions and messy pasts. How do we move through this terrain? Beyond it? Can we hide, build underground networks, be inspired by the root systems of trees, collaborating in ways that are not (yet) visible?

Towards a wayward feminism

Where does the desire to be coherent and whole come from, when feminism is complicated and messy? Jamila was a freedom fighter. To the colonial state she was fighting, she was a terrorist. To today's Algeria she remains a militant. To white and liberal feminism, she seems to be non-existent. Decolonial feminists like Françoise Vergès include her in a canon of feminist heroines. Something about her gets lost in that word, smoothed out. Does it make her legible to be named and claimed as a feminist? Is a feminist a coopted freedom fighter? Is a feminist more acceptable in contrast to an anticolonial freedom fighter?[6] To become legible is to become decipherable, categorizable, transparent almost, and thus less dangerous. To become, or be forced to be, transparent in conditions of ongoing unfreedom often means trading radicality for survival. If being identified and claimed as a feminist smooths out the fundamental dissent of the freedom fighter, if the feminist is invited into the halls of academia and state sanctioned feminism, while the militant remains excluded, what does this mean for anticolonial struggles? Describing her research in Jordan and Palestine, Sara Ababneh (2022) documents how she was perceived as less threatening when she appeared to be researching depoliticized women's issues as opposed to unionized strikes deemed to fundamentally critique the workings of the state. However, instead of accepting resistance as foreclosed, perhaps this orientalist and sexist structure can be turned against itself when supposedly apolitical women's rights activists under the guise of tame domesticity retained oppositional critique. "The term 'feminist' is not always easy to claim," Françoise Vergès writes in *A Decolonial Feminism*; "the betrayals of Western feminism are its own deterrent." "Why," she asks, "call yourself feminist, why defend feminism, when these terms are so corrupted that even the far right can appropriate them (2021, p. 5)?"

In a different century and different country, Jamila laughs in the face of threats, imprisonment, and torture. Laughter, read with Arendt, is resistance against ideology *and* terror (Knott, Meyer and Arendt, 2017). Laughter as a reaction when rational thought reaches the limits of what can be said. Laughter escapes, opens up a crack for freedom, the prison guards get angry. Irony as a weapon. I encountered Jamila

[6] A freedom fighter, qua existence, fundamentally questions the status quo. Someone who radically questions the world as is, is dangerous, hence put in proximity with terrorists and placed out of the zone of being, onto the zone of non-being. An anticolonial feminist would not be so different from a freedom fighter.

Bouhired, an Algerian anticolonial freedom fighter, in a Jordanian classroom, and with her was introduced to the messy entanglements and gendered landscapes of anticolonial struggles. Back then, perhaps the pedagogical efforts were directed towards the Intifada and aesthetics of resistance, but some of the complexities in the one scene described at the beginning of this essay remained with me. Care and resistance are not opposites. What are the repercussions of this, in a patriarchal nation, insisting its monarch is my father and the capital city my mother? Laughter might move us beyond the "paralysing evil of the world" (Boulous Walker, 2021) towards uncompromising resistance. If feminism is to be anticolonial, what language would feminists need to speak? Practically and epistemically? Is waywardness an option? Is laughter a language of waywardness, conversing across boundaries, enabling new vocabularies? Waywardness as a practice of possibility at a time "when all roads except the ones created by *smashing out*, are foreclosed" (Hartman, 2019, p. 227). *A small group of Palestinians sits at a lunch table of an academic conference sharing stories of how they were almost shot at a checkpoint at various times in their lives, and they laugh. The laughter in proximity of death irritates the onlookers.* Laughter as a strategy to briefly detach, and rearrange, waywardness as an ongoing exploration of what might and could be. The contradictions of silence and speaking. They remain, ambivalent. Laughter, however, might offer the crack needed to return to both silence and speaking.

References

Ababneh, S. (2022) "The Fear Factor: Fieldwork Away from the Safety Blanket of Depoliticized Notion of Gender and Women's Issues," in S. Joseph, L. Meari, and Z. Zaatari (eds), *The Politics of Engaged Gender Research in the Arab Region: Feminist Fieldwork and the Production of Knowledge*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Boulous Walker, M. (2021) "The laughter of Hannah Arendt," *ABC Religion & Ethics*, 20 June. https://www.abc.net.au/religion/the-laughter-of-hannah-arendt/13401584

Brown, W. (1995) *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in late Modernity*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

Deeb, H.A. (2016) "Qanun Al-Jinsiyyah Al-Urdoni: Al-Tamyeez did Al-Maraa 'Difa'an 'an Filastin'," *7iber*, 14 January. https://www.7iber.com/politics-economics/jordanian-citizenship-law-discrimination-against-women/?%3E

Hartman, S.V. (2019) *Wayward lives, beautiful experiments: intimate histories of social upheaval*. First edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Knott, M.L., Meyer, N. and Arendt, H. (2017) *Verlernen: Denkwege bei Hannah Arendt*. Erweiterte Neuauflage. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz.

Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The Production of Space*. Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Olufemi, L. (2020) *Feminism, interrupted: disrupting power*. London: Pluto Press (Outspoken).

Rogan, E.L. and Tell, T. (eds) (1994) *Village, Steppe, and State. The social Origins of Modern Jordan*. London and New York: British Academic Press.

Said, E.W. (1983) *The world, the text, and the critic*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Said, E.W. (2000) *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. London: Granta.

Sajed, A. and Salem, S (2022) "Anticolonial Feminist Imaginaries," *Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research* vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 1-8.

Schwedler, J. (2022) *Protesting Jordan: geographies of power and dissent*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press (Stanford studies in Middle Eastern and Islamic societies and cultures).

Tell, T. (2013) *The social and economic origins of monarchy in Jordon*. First edition. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan (Middle East today).

Vergès, F. (2021) *A Decolonial Feminism*. Translated by A.J. Bohrer. London: Pluto Press.