Hubertine Auclert: a Champion of Algerian Women’s Rights or an Imperialist Feminist?

The lives of Muslim women have long been a source of fascination and have aroused feelings ranging from curiosity, to erotic desire and sometimes repulsion. This fascination is nothing new, but goes back to centuries before to the first encounter between Islam and Europe in the Middle Ages. As Mohja Kahf documents in her book, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman* (1999), western interest in the Muslim woman goes back as far as the Middle Ages. This representation has shifted from the bold queens of the medieval and renaissance literature to the 19th century colonial images of “victimized”, secluded and veiled women.

Specific aspects of the Muslim women lives, the veil, women’s morality and polygamy, have received particular interest from westerners, lay and specialists alike. Polygamy, in particular, has always stood as a symbol of women’s oppression and subjugation in the western imagination. The fascination with this practice acquired a special urgency starting from the 19th century with the intensification of the European colonial ventures in the land of Islam. The image of veiled and powerless Muslim women laid the ideological background for western imperialist intervention to rid these “voiceless” creatures from their misogynist societies and polygamous male oppressors.

These images, and others, are found in force in many women’s travel writings, whose position as women gave them access to the private world of Muslim women, a sphere their male counterparts could not aspire to penetrate. This article will explore how
the lives of Algerian women, and their issues, were reflected in the French feminist and travel writer Hubertine Auclert’s book *Les femmes arables en algerie* (1900). This book is a vindication for the rights of Algerian women, who, according to Auclert, were caught between French colonial authorities indifference and their society’s oppression and its archaic practices. It will investigate how this feminist, despite her sisterly compassion towards the native woman, whom she referred to as “notre soeur musulmane” or “Muslim sister” was not completely exempt from western snobbery characteristic of her time.

Despite her criticism of French colonial practices, she did not reject the colonial project altogether, and overall her work bears the imprint of a Eurocentric colonial perspective when it comes to her outlook to Islam.

**Hubertine Auclert’s Life and commitment to women’s rights:**

Born into a well-to-do family in 1848 in the Allier département, Hubertine Auclert planned to become a nun but she eventually left the convent at the age of 16 probably because of her rebellious nature and unconventional way of thinking. She would soon become involved in the burgeoning women’s movement and would become one the most ardent activists and campaigners for French women’s suffrage and full citizenship. It was at the age 28 that she would found *Société le droit des femmes* which would, a few years later, change its name to *Société le suffrage des femmes*. Auclert’s ideas and positions on women’s civil rights and suffrage were channelled through her monthly suffragist newspaper, *La Citoyenne* (The Woman-Citizen), which she co-founded in 1881.

Auclert believed in the need to “subordinate women’s civil emancipation to their political emancipation” (Edith Taieb, 2002:271) and fought to bring changes to the Napoleonic Code which subordinated women’s lives, bodies, property and assets to their husbands. She was firmly convinced that women’s emancipation would make them the equals of men in the civil, economic and political spheres. She was also one the pioneer feminists
who spoke of the need to provide proper support for mothers and children by the state. (Helen Rappaport, 31)

**Sojourn in Algeria and les femmes arabes en algerie:**

Already considered a champion of women’s rights in her home country, Auclert came to Algeria in 1888 to join her husband Antonin Lévrier who was appointed as juge de paix (justice of the peace) in Frenda in western Algeria and was to remain there till the death of her husband in 1892. She resided first in Frenda, then in the oasis of Laghouat and finally moved to Algiers where her husband worked in Le Radical Algérien newspaper. (Julia Smith-Clancy, 59-60). It was during her stay in Frenda that she became increasingly interested in the lot and lives of Algeria women. Auclert recorded her observations and thoughts on Algerian women’s situation which she published as newspaper articles in La Citoyenne during her four-year stay in Algeria.

It is these articles that form the substance of her book, Les femmes arabes en algérie, which Auclert published in 1900. The title of the book is actually misleading because Auclert used the term “femmes arabes” to refer to Algerian Muslim women in general and not only Arab-speaking women. Throughout the book, the term “arabe” is erroneously used interchangeably with the term “musulman(e)”.

Auclert begins her book by stating that before she came to Algeria, “this earthly paradise”, she anticipated an egalitarian society but what she found utterly shocked her. She despondently observes that Arabs in Algeria suffered from racism and bigotry. The country had become a vast prison where Arabs were constantly abused and denigrated. “La race arabe, si belle et si bien douée, est absolument méprisée par les européens qui, rarement cependant, sont aussi beaux et possèdent autant d’aptitudes naturelles que les arabes. (Auclert, 1900:32-64). Rare were those who viewed them with sympathy and compassion or considered them as fellow human beings,
En Algérie, il n’y a qu’une petite élite de français qui classe dans l’humanité la race arabe… pour les étrangers, les fonctionnaires, les israélites, les colons, les trafiquants, l’arabe, moins considéré que ses moutons, est fait pour être écrasé. Le refouler dans le désert pour s’emparer de ce qu’on ne lui a pas encore pris, tel est le rêve. (Ibid, 3)

If Arabs, Auclert maintains, were uncivilized and backward as Europeans claimed, the fault was not theirs. The fault lied rather with the other side, the Europeans, because they resisted any effort to bring civilization and modernity to the Arabs on the pretext that the latter were beyond any reform because their culture and religion were innately different from western values. Their assimilation into mainstream French society, thus, was not possible.


The issue of political representation, so dear to Auclert’s heart, draws her scorn. She tries to draw parallels and affinities between male injustice against French women (because they were deprived of political representation) and the absence of Arab representation. She states that observing race-based prejudices against Arabs in Algeria has convinced her of the absurdity of gender-based prejudices French women. (Ibid, 63). As with her combat for the right of French women to vote and her right to sit in the Chamber of Deputies, Auclert believed that colonial subjects deserved to become full citizens through granting them the right to vote and representation. She writes that excluding Arabs from such rights was undermining them socially and economically,

Les arabes qui forment presque la totalité des habitants du pays – ils sont trois millions sept cent cinquante mille sur quatre millions quatre cent trois mille habitants dont se compose la population de l’Algérie – ne sont pas, ou ne sont que dérisoirement représentés, dans les assemblées qui ont pour but de s’occuper des intérêts de l’Algérie … inutile de dire qu’ils ne peuvent défendre avec profit les intérêts de leurs mandants ; aussi ne cessent-ils de réclamer contre l’injustice des vainqueurs. ..pourquoi les arabes qui représentent par leur nombre le dixième des habitants de la France n’auraient-ils pas leur place au Parlement ? …leur exclusion politique en les rabaisant socialement, les écrase économiquement (Ibid, 9-10).

The situation of Arab women was far worse than that of their brethren, according to Auclert, for they were burdened with a double yoke of domination: colonial and gender.
Auclert maintained that the condition of Arab women did not ameliorate but rather deteriorated with French colonization. During her four-year stay in Algeria, she observed the misery and wretchedness caused by harsh and unjust colonial practices to many of these women,

Femmes d'expropriés, bouches affamées de trop dans leur tribu, elles vaguent, pauvres femelles, repoussées de partout, traquées brutalisées, insultées dans toutes les langues, par toutes les races qui se sont installées sur le territoire de leurs pères. (Ibid : 2)

Auclert’s sympathy though should not be interpreted in any way as a rejection of the French colonial project. It is true that she criticized colonial practices and excesses, and opposed France’s subjection of Algeria and the impoverishment of its population, but it is also equally true that she saw in the imperialist project a hope for rescuing and improving Algerian women’s lives through the intervention of French women in Muslim households. Camille Sabatier, a former judge in the Kabylie region, recognized the weight Arab women had in any real subjugation of Algeria when he said that, “it is through women that we can get hold of the soul of the people”. But General Bugeaud understood that this was not possible. He complained that “the Arabs elude us because they conceal their women from us”. (Qtd in Joan Wallach Scott, 2010:55).

This is where Auclert’s proposition for involving women comes in handy. For contrary to men, women, because of their gender, were given access to the private sphere of native women. Auclert proposes entering Muslim households on different pretexts,

Pour connaitre véritablement l’avis du monde arabe sur l’administration à donner à l’Algérie, il faudrait à coté des hommes, des femmes enquêteuses. Ces femmes, quelque peu initiées à la langue arabe, n’exciteraient pas plus la méfiance qu’elles ne blesseraient la sensibilité musulmane. Sous un prétexte quelque, en vue par exemple d’établir l’état-civil des femmes indigènes elles porteraient la francisation à domicile. (1990 :26).

**Polygamy Synonymous for Women’s Oppression?**

For all her sympathy and enthusiasm towards Arabs in general, and their women in particular, Auclert seems oblivious to any cultural specificities of the latter and continued to
assert French gender construction as a model. She seems at the loss as to why French colonial authorities would not prohibit the practice of polygamy as was the case in France. The issue of polygamy has long been a convoluted one, even among Muslims themselves. Westerners, in general, have always regarded it as a sign of Muslim societies’ promiscuity and licentiousness.

The practice of polygamy is nothing new and is not an Islamic invention. The Old Testament speaks of King Solomon who had hundreds of wives and concubines “And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines.” (1 Kings 11:3). King David also had many wives, “And David took him more concubines and wives out of Jerusalem, after he was come from Hebron: and there were yet sons and daughters born to David.” (2 Samuel 5:13). Different traditional societies around the world have long been practicing, and still practice, polygamy today without raising an eyebrow in the West.

Right from the beginning of colonization, the French considered this practice as archaic, and denoting an inherent inferiority of the local Muslim society and an uncontrolled sexuality of Muslim males. Along with Muslim women condition, polygamy was made to stand as a gauge for the degree of development of the local Muslim society. Numerous French ethnographers studied polygamy and its social consequences in Algeria. The Saint-Simonian writer Michel Chevalier wrote in 1865 that, “polygamy in Algeria prevents the development of social institutions, social movement, refinement of usages, culture of the spirit, and the progress of arts, literature, and science.”(Smith-Clancy, 1999:162). It is these same ideas on polygamy that Hubertine Auclert would later take up and develop in her book Les femmes arabes en Algérie.

Julia Smith-Clancy(Ibid:167) contends that “Auclert seized upon the social and sexual oppression of Muslim women as a political cause”. This is quite true in fact. Auclert, like many other feminist activists of her time, used the situation of Muslim women to
advance things back at home. She belongs to a category of feminists, known as imperialist feminists, who claimed and fought for political equality in part as a means to protect their colonized ‘sisters’ subjected to oppressive treatment by their patriarchal societies. She believed that were French women able to sit in parliament and pass laws, they would probably help their Muslims sisters to abolish and rid themselves of a number of oppressive and “archaic” practices like polygamy for instance,

Si les françaises votaient et légiféraient, il y a longtemps que leurs sœurs africaines seraient délivrées de l’outrageante polygamie et de l’intolérable promiscuité avec leurs co-épouses. (Auclert, 1900:63).

Auclert accuses the Republic of turning into a cruel stepmother “marâtre”, instead of being a mother country, when it comes to Arab women. She wonders why such an “abominable” practice as polygamy, which was illegal in Metropolitan France, should be allowed and accepted in a French territory like Algeria without much ado. She refuses the pretext of the existence of fundamental differences between European and Arab men to explain the practice of polygamy,

Les Français perment aux Arabes de pratiquer la polygamie, qu’ils s’interdisent à eux-mêmes. Pour masquer leur illogisme, ils affirment que les Africains ont des besoins que ne connaissent pas les Européens et que c’est pour faire droit à ces besoins qu’on leur laisse épouser tant de femmes. (Ibid, 64).

The view that Muslim men differed from their European counterparts was in fact held by many in this period. Many colonial male writers believed that Arab males were “oversexed”. In his book *De la prostitution dans la ville d’Alger depuis la conquête* Edouard Duchesne, for instance, wrote that the natural conditions in Africa were partly to blame for this perverse nature of Arab sexuality, in fact, “in [the Algerian] climate, passions run higher”. (Smith-Clancy, 1999:159).

Auclert dismisses all these preconceptions and argues that polygamy denotes an inferior state of civilization development. She concedes that polygamy was once widespread, but she argues that once those people who practiced it reached a higher stage of civilisation they insistently forsake it,
Tous les peuples ont pratiqué la polygamie. Les rois d'Israël furent polygames. Salomon eût soixante femmes légitimes et quatre-vingts concubines. Les Francs aussi furent polygames. Charlemagne avait huit femmes... La civilisation chasse devant elle la polygamie aussi anti-naturelle que contraire à la dignité humaine. (Auclert, 1900-60-3). Auclert was convinced that polygamy led to health and health problems and intellectual degeneracy of those who engage in it. All the more reason for abolishing it,

Des arabes bien portant pendant qu'ils avaient une seule épouse, s'affaiblissaient, perdaient la santé, dés qu'ils prenaient plusieurs. La polygamie ne hâte pas seulement la décrépitude physique elle amène la dégénérescence intellectuelle. En concentrant toute l'activité cérébrale des arabes sur l'instinct bestial, elle annihile leur intelligence et atrophie leur cerveau.(Ibid, 64-5).

Auclert was very active writing and petitioning for the abolishing polygamy. For her a true assimilation of the Arabs would inevitably pass through forsaking what she terms “la loi koranique” and adopting French law. In one petition, in her relentless efforts to end this practice, Auclert writes,

Messieurs les Députés, Messieurs les Sénateurs. Permettez-nous d'appeler votre attention sur la situation des femmes arabes, qui sont, avec la tolérance de la France, si barbarement traitées. La femme arabe vendue tout enfant à un mari est séquestrée par ce mari dans le chenil conjugal avec ses co-épouses, puis répudiée sans motifs pour faire place à une autre. On a déjà laissé trop longtemps les arabes garder leurs lois, leurs moeurs, leur langue Ne croyez-vous pas qu'il est urgent d'en faire des enfants de la République, do les instruire, de les assimiler aux français? » Nous vous prions, Messieurs, de bien vouloir substituer sur notre territoire africain l'état de civilisation à l'état de barbarie, en décrétant la suppression de la polygamie que les femmes arabes subissent par force et qui est outrageante pour tout le sexe féminin.(Ibid, 69-70).

Auclert’s call for Muslim women rights had virtually no resonance with French colonial authorities. She accuses the latter of complicity with Arab religious elite (especially Sufi orders) to undermine any efforts to end what she considered practices that oppressed women such as polygamy, seclusion, early marriage… For her, Arab leaders had everything to lose from any eventual assimilation of the Arabs, into the mainstream French society. These leaders, who served as intermediaries between the indigenous people and the colonial authorities, benefited from a tenth of the taxes imposed on the locals, [S]es maîtres, eux, ont à perdre en même temps que leurs privilèges, leur meilleure source de revenus. Car, les chefs collecteurs n'ont pas seulement l'honneur de porter le bâton surmonté d'une pièce de cinq francs, ils ont droit au dixième des impôts qu'ils prélèvent. Sur un seul des impôts arabes, ils touchent 1.297.600 francs.(Auclert, 1900 :22-3).
The French had not yet forgotten the pivotal role religious orders played in previous popular insurgencies. The rebellion of Abd-el-Kader, the Kabyles’ resurrection of 1857, Almoqran resistance in 1871 were all triggered by charismatic religious leaders who called on their followers to declare jihad on the “infidel” invaders. All this had convinced the French that they should win these religious orders over to their side if they were to conquer the hearts and minds of the local populations. Julia Smith-Clancy (160) writes that by the turn of the century (twentieth), French authorities had come to form an alliance with some of these powerful Muslim Sufi orders. This alliance was important in their endeavor to pacify the natives. Tempering with Islamic law and the traditional patriarchal system, thus, was met with increasing hostility and resistance from the part of French authorities, because this would mean an inevitable rebellion of religious leaders who were keen on maintaining the status quo.

**Native Women and Prostitution:**

Under the entry “Ouled Nail” of the 1986 edition of Webster dictionary we read the following, “an Arab prostitute and dancing girl of the north African cities usually dressed in brightly colored, bespangled costumes and ornamental often feathered headdress” (Webster, 1519 qtd in Smith-Clancy, 1996: 52). Smith-Clancy (185) argues that the attention of the French was drawn from the onset of the invasion to the Ouled Nail tribe with its unusual sexual practices. “The daughter of Ouled Nail” would soon become synonymous for prostitute. In fact, it is reported that the young women of Djebel Nail in the Algerian Sahara were in the habit of leaving parental home at puberty accompanied by an older women. These girls travelled from one place to another dancing in cafés and consorting with men in order to amass sufficient money for their dowry. (Judith Lynne Hanna, 1988:53).
The stigmatization of Arab women and accusing them of moral decadence was by no means limited to the Ouled Nail girls. The governor-general of Algeria claimed, in 1898, that native women were driven by their instincts and uncontrollable sexuality and were, like Arab males, oversexed and the very embodiment of licentiousness. This unacceptable behaviour, the French chose to think, was sanctioned by their religion and its polygamous Prophet (PBUH). The French claimed that prostitutes in the streets of Algiers was a common sight. One French administrator of the Arab Bureau for the Algiers area wrote,

There exists a large number of girls who indulge in prostitution in all classes of the population. This is one of the saddest consequences of ... extreme poverty ... such poverty is caused by some vices inherent in Islamic law, and the great ease with which ... [Muslim Judges] allow repudiation. For women who are essentially ignorant, lazy, and unskilled, there is no other means of subsistence than prostitution once their husbands have repudiated them. (Joan Wallach Scott, 2010:56-7).

This view is echoed in Edouard Duchesne’s book, *De la prostitution dans la ville d’Alger depuis la conquêté* published in 1853, when he writes that he observed striking numbers of prostitutes in the Algiers. This was caused, according to him, by the general debased moral state of the natives in general and their women in particular, the product of Islamic legal and sociosexual practices. He further notes that “sexual activity on the part of young people enervates them and leads to the degradation of the race; this also leads also to premature aging.” (Smith-Clancy, 1999:160). He also refers to polygamy as a major reason behind the phenomenon. Many women, who were repudiated after their husbands took younger wives, were left with little financial support and thus found themselves in brothels to support themselves. (Ibid).

Such observations are characteristic of the way most French people perceived the natives. And though the aforementioned administrator has hit the nail straight on the head when he linked prostitution to poverty, he seems to forget that this poverty and chronic immiseration of the local population, and women in particular, had nothing to do with
religion and Arab indolence. It was the unfair and harsh colonial economic policies that were mostly to blame. Joan Wallach Scott (2010: 56) writes that the number of prostitutes increased throughout the country as European settlers dispossessed the locals of their lands and took over their farms. As a result, many Algerians were left to their fate and found themselves without any source of revenue.

We should also not overlook the role French authorities played in the propagation of prostitution in Algeria. From the beginning of colonization, French colonial authorities saw the need to legalize prostitution to serve and attend to the increasing number of French troops. In the 1840s General La Moricière ordered the commanding general in Tlemcen to “proceed with the recruitment and settlement of a female ‘personnel’ who can cater to the pleasures, if not health, of the men.” (qtd in Smith-Clancy, 1999:159). Marnia Lazreg (1994:55) writes that though prostitution existed on a small scale in pre-colonial Algeria, under French colonization, “it became part of a system of social coercion that targeted families unwilling to collaborate with the new rulers”.

Auclert’s take on the question of native women’s morality is rather, if not completely, different from most of her fellow citizens. Though she reproduces some of these stereotypes on Arab women, she seems to take a genuine interest in their plight. She blames the generalized poverty, with all its ensuing problems like prostitution, of the population on the unfair colonial policies of dispossessing the locals of their lands and imposing heavy taxes.

Les indigènes sont écrasés d’amendes et d’impôts spéciaux, qui s’additionnent pour eux aux impôts algériens. Ils ont d’abord à acquitter la dime des bestiaux le Zekkat, la dime des récoltes l’Achour, la Lezma en Kabylie…Des acharnés mourant de faim sont soumis parfois à de grosses taxes.

She also approaches the theme of the Ouled Nail girls with much lightheartedness. Instead of the gloomy atmosphere found in most writings related to prostitutes, Auclert paints
a colorful image of the ones she terms “des prêtresses de l'amour”(Auclert, 1900:112), and describes them in Orientalist terms,

They stretched out on pillows, adorned and covered with jewels, offer themselves, like madonnas on an altar, to the admiration of passersby...[I]t is not rare to see couples smile at one another, embrace, entwine and tumble to the pavement ...abandoned to the transports of love.(qtd in Joan Wallach Scott, 2010:57).

Despite this sympathy Auclert does not hide her bias against Islam. She claims that this moral behavior of the Muslims is sanctioned by their religion, because, she argues, it is a well-known fact that “sous, l'égide de la loi Koranique, le musulman peut afficher les moeurs los plus dissolues,” (Auclert, 1900:58-9). She also blames polygamy for the widespread of prostitution. She claims that because many Muslim men took more than one wife, women became a rare commodity in some places,

Chez les arabes où l'on compte vingt-deux femmes pour cent de moins que d'hommes, et où la polygamie qui excite l'appétit sexuel et fait on raison de l'accaparement de quelques-uns, la rareté pour tous du sexe féminin sur le marché du mariage, il ne faut pas s'étonner si sacrifier à l'amour est œuvre pie, si la prostitution est en Algérie un sacerdoce. (Ibid, 111-2).

Her prejudice against Islam reaches its climax when she declares that the Ouled Nail girls exercise prostitution not out of poverty but solely to please Allah,

Ce n'est pas seulement un besoin inhérent à leur pauvreté, qui a engendre la coutume générale chez les Oulad-Naïl, d'offrir à prix d'or leurs filles à tout venant, c'est une croyance qu'en agissant ainsi ils honorent Allah. Ils sont persuadés, que les femmes font œuvre méritoire en se prostituant et ils les encouragent dans cette voie ; car selon eux, renoncer à cette habitude attirerait sur la tribu les plus grands maux. (Ibid, 115).
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