

"Alternating Defensive Postures": Feminist and Racial Battles in the Work of Arab-American Women

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This presentation investigates and analyzes the position of Arab and Arab-American women in relation to feminism and racism in the west as represented in the work of Arab-American women writers. The academic and literary work of Arab-American women writers reveals a massive concern with issues of gender and race within an American environment in which prevail stereotypical mis/preconceptions about Arabs and/or Muslims, particularly Arab and/or Muslim women. Their work also reveals that they are constantly adopting, as Alia Malek puts it, "alternating defensive postures" as they fight battles at two opposite and conflicting fronts against the oppressive forces of patriarchy within their communities and racism within the larger American society. Caught between the need to defend their rights as women and the need to defend their communities against racism and stereotyping, they find themselves in a conflicting position where their struggle and resistance on one front may undermine their resistance on the other. Since I have often found myself, as a Muslim Arab woman who comes in constant contact with the western world in my academic work and activities, in situations in which I had to fight somewhat similar battles where dampening and foregoing my feminist sensibilities seemed necessary to defend the humanity of my people and culture who are constantly under siege, stereotyped, misrepresented and denigrated, I propose to use my own personal experience both as a spring-board and a backdrop against which to perceive and understand the experiences represented by Arab-American women and how conflicting fighting on the two fronts may prove to be.