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# From Theory to Action: A Saudi Arabian Case Study of Feminist Academic Activism against State Oppression

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Lana Sirri

Special Issue

Gender, Sexuality, and State Violence: International Perspectives on Institutional and Intersectional Justice

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Article

# From Theory to Action: A Saudi Arabian Case Study of Feminist Academic Activism against State Oppression

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**Abstract:** This article explores the intricate landscape of women's rights in Saudi Arabia, an authoritarian state within the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC), where the pursuit of modernization strategically utilizes women's issues as symbols of national identity and markers of progress. The article focuses on the transformative potential of academic activism, exemplified by the work of Hatoon Ajwad al-Fassi, in countering oppression against women. It demonstrates how women navigate the realms of academia and activism to reshape gender dynamics and shape their nation's modernization trajectory. By emphasizing the critical intersection between academic inquiry and activism, this article dispels the misconception that academia and activism are mutually exclusive. In contexts such as Saudi Arabia, where women's rights face suppression, this intersection emerges as imperative for informed research and frontline advocacy, effectively addressing state-sponsored violence. Furthermore, this article critically evaluates the persistent challenge of feminist neo-Orientalist scholarship, which often distorts the depiction of Saudi women's experiences. It offers a contribution to a nuanced understanding of women's theorization that includes the ethico-political context within which women operate.

**Keywords:** academic activism; feminism; Saudi Arabia; Hatoon Ajwad al-Fassi

## 1. From Tradition to Transformation: Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia within the Gulf Context

In the Gulf countries, patriarchal cultures and societies have historically constrained women's participation in the public sphere. These constraints stem from various factors, including tribal patriarchy, cultural stereotypes, and conservative religious interpretations [1,2]. However, it is essential to recognize that male domination is not an inherent outcome of religious scripture but rather a result of culturally driven interpretations [3]. Over the last two decades, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia, have initiated measures aimed at advancing women's rights within their societies. Efforts to increase women's representation in governmental positions and public services are underway. Nevertheless, persistent significant challenges hinder women's full participation in political, economic, and civic life [4]. Critics argue that these state-led reforms often reinforce existing inequalities rather than achieving true gender equality [5–7].

One key motivation behind these reforms, as highlighted by Tripp [8], is the political agenda of autocratic rulers in the Gulf. These rulers employ women's rights as a central policy focus to stimulate modernization processes and enhance their domestic and international reputation and legitimacy [1]. It is worth noting that all Gulf states have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). However, they have done so with reservations due to perceived conflicts with Islamic Shari'a law [9]. Despite efforts to promote women's rights, persistent gender imbalances and issues such as violence against women continue to be prevalent in Gulf societies. Recent years have seen the emergence of national campaigns in the Gulf aimed at raising awareness about violence against women, reflecting an ongoing struggle to address gender-related challenges within the context of Gulf societies [10].



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The GCC began promoting policies for the advancement of women's roles in society in the mid-1970s. Many feminists have denied or rejected these advancements, often referring to them as "state feminism" [11]. State feminism in the Gulf differs from Western contexts as it frames female education and professional advancement in terms of nation- and state-building processes [5,6]. While these efforts have made significant contributions in healthcare, social welfare, and education, scholars have criticized them for serving state interests and avoiding more comprehensive issues such as female emancipation and the pervasive effects of patriarchy, especially within the context of tribal and kinship structures [2,5,12,13]. While GCC governments promote women's access to education, healthcare, employment, and political participation as part of their modernization agenda, these top-down initiatives have also contributed to shaping societal perceptions of gender roles, complicating traditional notions of femininity and masculinity.

Recent scholarship has explored the link between non-democratic regimes and women's rights legislation, highlighting how political leaders use women's rights to address various political purposes. For instance, leaders use women's rights to counter Islamist extremists domestically and project an image of modernization internationally [8]. Compliance with international treaties, like CEDAW, is a significant point of reference in this context [14]. The pursuit of women's equality is seen as a signal of modernity and can garner praise from the international community [14]. In contrast, grassroots feminist movements adopt a more inclusive approach. They challenge not only male dominance but also the dominance of the state itself, working to empower women, fostering connections among activists, and resisting gender inequalities in everyday life [1,2,7].

Despite the dominant position of ruling families in Gulf monarchies, state–society relations concerning women's empowerment are complex and multifaceted, involving discourses that extend beyond government involvement [15]. Furthermore, the extent of political and civil society coverage varies among GCC states, highlighting sociopolitical diversity despite their similar political systems [1]. Gender roles, gendered laws and policies, the male guardianship system, gender segregation, religious norms, education, and socioeconomic status all contribute to societal acceptance or rejection of violent behavior towards women, creating and reinforcing gender standards at multiple levels, including households, communities, state institutions, healthcare, and legal systems [16].

While every member state of the GCC has its distinctive set of priorities, policies, and approaches to modernization, Saudi Arabia stands out as a key player in shaping the modernization narrative within the Gulf region. Notably, it exemplifies a stark symbol of gender inequality globally. In 2021, it ranked 147 out of 156 on the Gender Gap Index list [4]. Women were facing different constraints and are still fighting rules that authorities often claim are for their protection, but which deprive women of their rights, such as male guardianship policies which deprive women of their legal status to make decisions about their own lives and can cause deep harm. Discriminatory restrictions on women's mobility within their country and to travel abroad violate their rights to freedom of movement, work, study, access healthcare, and marry. Additionally, discriminatory laws and policies against women making decisions concerning their children also harm both women and children [17].

Despite the current strict prohibitions, several new laws in recent years have granted women more rights. Saudi Arabia has pursued various economic, social, and cultural reforms as part of its Vision 2030 initiative, aimed at diversifying its economy away from oil dependence, promoting private sector growth, and modernizing various sectors including education, healthcare, and infrastructure. King Salman and Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) aim to shift the kingdom away from oil dependency via the project Vision 2030, which includes a set of liberalizations for women, such as legalization of driving and economic empowerment. During this period, the religious police experienced a decline in authority, marked by the legalization of cinema and gender-mixed concerts, as well as the significant milestone of allowing women to drive. These reforms garnered favorable reactions from the mainstream media, particularly the latter, as measures promoting women's liberation

are often aligned with a global benchmark of societal progress. Furthermore, within the international community, standards regarding the relationship between women and state institutions serve as delineators between what is considered “civilized” or “Western” societies and others [18]. However, these reforms, while presenting a façade of progress, are critiqued as maintaining the patriarchal structure rather than truly liberating women [19,20].

Critique argues that the Saudi Vision 2030 works not only as a tool to consolidate the prince’s hold on power but also as a top-down social engineering policy to reorient state–society relations, Cerioli [21]. Moreover, these reforms aim at a new nationalism that is disconnected from the united religious ethos and based on a tale of a nation destined to play a grandiose role [19,22,23]. Reasserting the centrality of the state via a new sense of pride of belonging, it calls for people to participate in socio-economic changes altering the traditional rentier social contract that had, for decades, guaranteed regime legitimacy [24,25]. Cerioli [21] claims that the liberalizations for women must be understood in this context and that, despite improving Saudi Arabia’s global status, they are under the wings of this new nationalism that, due to its exclusionary features, can actually damage the kingdom’s international image in the long run. This is further stressed by scholars like Madawi Al-Rasheed, arguing that gender inequality in Saudi Arabia cannot be solely attributed to Islam or tribal traditions. Instead, they contend that a fusion of nationalism and religion has elevated women to symbolic figures representing the nation, akin to the role of secular nationalism in non-Arab countries. Within this framework, the state has harnessed a convergence of tribal values, Wahhabi traditions, and loyalty to the monarchy to perpetuate patriarchal relationships as a facet of the nation’s identity. The state’s intense focus on women’s bodies and segregation reflects its efforts to delineate national boundaries and safeguard its legitimacy [2]. This serves as an illustrative example of the connection between non-democratic regimes and women’s rights legislation, underscoring how political leaders instrumentalize women’s rights for various political purposes.

In 2022, Saudi Arabia implemented a new Personal Status Law (PSL), heralded as a significant reform by the authorities. Despite notable strides such as granting women the autonomy to drive and travel independently at the age of 21 without male guardian consent, these reforms unfold within a landscape where freedom of speech is severely restricted, stifling public discourse on pivotal legal reforms. Furthermore, numerous women and activists advocating for these changes have faced arbitrary detention, travel bans, and appalling instances of torture or mistreatment in prison, including instances of sexual assault. In a detailed analysis, Amnesty International [26] found that while the PSL does introduce some positive reforms, such as setting a minimum age for marriage, it also codifies some of the practices inherent in the male guardianship system, fails to adequately protect women from domestic violence, and entrenches a system of gender-based discrimination in marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance. While Saudi women’s rights activists long campaigned for a codified PSL that would end discrimination against women, the law, passed in 2022, does not reflect any input by them or other independent civil society groups, as the text was not made public before it was adopted. Thus, the new PSL perpetuates the male guardianship system and codifies discrimination against women in most aspects of family life.

Many prominent women’s rights defenders have faced serious government reprisal for their activism and are effectively prohibited from publicly commenting on the law. Lina al-Hathloul, head of monitoring and advocacy at ALQST argued that: “Without women’s rights activists’ valuable input, Saudi officials simply used the Personal Status Law to codify existing discriminatory and problematic practices against women, despite promises to the contrary” [17]. Moreover, these reforms happened in a context in which the space for free speech was restricted, barring public debate on key legal reform. For years, Saudi authorities have arrested, imprisoned, and sentenced brave Saudi women’s rights activists who campaigned and mobilized to confront gender inequality. Even those released after several years of imprisonment today face travel bans and restrictions on their freedom of expression [26].

In conclusion, while the GCC, including Saudi Arabia, have made efforts to advance women's rights as part of their modernization processes and international image-building, these state-led reforms have been criticized for not addressing underlying gender power imbalances. Moreover, in its official narratives, Saudi Arabia portrays itself as a paternalistic agent, supporting women through extensive welfare provisions in health, education, social benefits, and employment. Al-Rasheed [27] argues that in fact the state enforces a type of patriarchy that is neither entirely private nor public but where the two spheres complement and reinforce each other. In response, Saudi women activists who are not satisfied with these reforms, viewed in the frame of state-led feminism, are adopting alternative approaches, including political mobilization, to challenge and reshape gender dynamics within their nation's modernization efforts. Their efforts represent a complex interplay between state-led feminism and grassroots feminist movements in the Gulf, reflecting the ongoing struggle for gender equality in the region. Before delving into feminist movements and activism in Saudi Arabia, it is crucial to first address the perpetuating neo-Orientalist study of Muslim and Arab women, which influences perceptions and narratives surrounding their rights and roles in society.

## 2. Decolonizing Women's Studies: Rethinking Orientalist Perspectives

One of the major challenges facing Saudi women's groups in their pursuit of authentic liberation projects is the dominant Western representation of Saudi Arabian women as oppressed and in need of salvation. This representation undermines the legitimacy of Saudi women's efforts and hinders the potential for effective feminist solidarity that transcends national boundaries [28].

Within the realm of English-language research, discussions on women's issues in the Gulf often reflect the influence of widespread racism, clichés, and stereotypes embedded in Western discourse about the region [2,29]. Regrettably, contemporary research often lacks the nuanced gender analyses needed to unravel the intricacies of women's lives and experiences. Studying women in Saudi Arabia presents a significant challenge due to the prevailing Orientalist views that have long shaped Western representations of them as oppressed or victimized Muslim women in need of rescue [28]. This narrative not only oversimplifies the complex realities of Saudi women but also hinders the genuine efforts of Saudi women to forge their own paths toward liberation. Moreover, it obstructs the potential for effective feminist solidarity that transcends national boundaries.

To gain a more accurate and nuanced understanding of Saudi women's agency, the focus should not involve the Orientalized body sensationalized in Western discourse [30]. Orientalist discursive elements tend to construct a dramatic and exoticized scene in the Western imaginary, at the expense of understanding the rich cultural and historical context of women's struggles and movements in Saudi Arabia. To authentically comprehend Saudi women's agency, it is imperative to break free from Orientalist frameworks and reevaluate the concept of "agency" within the context of their activism [31].

The dominant Western representation of Saudi Arabian women as oppressed and in need of saving undermines the legitimacy of Saudi women's groups striving for genuine liberation projects and limits the potential for effective feminist solidarity across borders. By drawing on notions that bridge structure and agency, we discover that these activists, when challenging existing social systems, work within pre-existing social and cultural frameworks [32]. The concept of "performance" can offer a fresh perspective on understanding women's movements, highlighting the shared knowledge required for these performances and the existing repertoires of meaning [33]. It also directs attention to the role of the body, including its extensions, in reshaping existing systems of meaning—such as signs, symbols, and representations of the movement.

To achieve a more profound understanding of women's movements in Saudi Arabia, it is crucial to abandon Orientalist narratives that overlook the significance of stories, histories, voices, and the bodies of Saudi women in their struggles. These narratives often portray Saudi women as silent and mystical figures before the advent of social media, obscuring



the complex and multifaceted nature of violence. To truly comprehend this complexity, we must ask questions about the historical, political, economic, and social processes linked to the prevalence of violence [28].

Moreover, we must acknowledge the significance of situated knowledge in understanding women's individual experiences. Factors such as social class, racial and ethnic backgrounds, religious and tribal affiliations, nationalities, rural or urban communities, geography, and politics all play vital roles in shaping these experiences [34]. As Abu-Lughod aptly states, "Women's lives show us just how varied and complicated the sources of any one woman's suffering might be" ([35], p. 24).

In the field of mainstream feminist research, the conceptualization of women's resistance to inequality often centers around the notion of a visible and organized collective feminist movement, seen as a catalyst for social change and political revolution [36]. This perspective emphasizes the importance of collective action by groups in challenging male oppression and gender-imposed constraints on women, with the aim of achieving economic, political, and social justice [37]. However, critics have pointed out that this conceptualization tends to be fundamentally "Western" in nature, failing to adequately capture the nuanced forms of individual resistance that may manifest in non-Western contexts [38,39].

In contexts characterized by authoritarianism, where collective political and legal platforms are lacking, gender and feminist resistance often take on covert and low-profile forms, resembling what some scholars have termed "infrapolitics" [25]. This entails a wide array of subtle acts, emotions, and experiences shared among women, partly hidden from the dominant patriarchal gaze. Within the Middle Eastern context, researchers have identified the adoption of more subtle forms of resistance by individuals aiming to achieve social change. This includes the concept of "quiet encroachment," defined as the silent, protracted, but pervasive advancement of ordinary people on the propertied, powerful, or the public, in order to survive and improve their lives [40]. However, both infrapolitical resistance and quiet encroachment are considered unlawful in contexts like Saudi Arabia, where they run the constant risk of suppression, particularly in the absence of support from NGOs and other supportive organizations at the national level [39].

Islamic feminist scholars highlight the limitations of Western-centric lenses in capturing the role of cultural, political, and legal mechanisms in shaping women's working experiences in the Middle East [41]. They argue for engagement with more egalitarian and feminist interpretations of Islam, rather than individualist Western views of equality in religion, business, and culture [42]. Resistance to and liberation from men's patriarchal domination are not synonymous with conforming to secular or Western feminist influences [43]. Women's negotiations of patriarchy in the Middle East involve complex and multi-dimensional trade-offs in cultural contexts, often shaped by what scholars term "patriarchal bargains" [44].

Understanding resistance in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East is crucial, as it is situational and contextual, shaped by historical, economic, and political specificities [45]. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality before the law in many countries in the region (with Saudi Arabia as an exception), women still face systematic legal discrimination across various aspects of life [46]. An ethico-politics of resistance in the Middle East and Saudi Arabia contrasts resistance against ongoing patterns of conformity, compliance, and control, highlighting the need for more inclusive and context-sensitive research [47].

Women's actions, identities, and meanings in distinct cultural contexts redefine what constitutes resistance and when it is deemed impactful [45]. Aldossari [48] argues that future research should explore the ethico-politics of social movements concerned with feminism and social change, particularly in non-Western contexts such as the Middle East, to complement existing scholarship focused on Western movements [49,50]. Closer investigations into the conformity and resistance involved in these struggles may illuminate how Muslim feminisms are mobilized and enacted in ongoing ethico-political work [47,51]. This article, which focuses on Saudi Arabia as a case study of feminist academic activism against state oppression, particularly highlighting the work of Hatoon al-Fassi, serves as

yet another small contribution to understanding how Muslim feminisms are mobilized and enacted in ongoing ethico-political work.

### 3. Feminist Discourse in Saudi Arabia: Beyond Stereotypes

Feminism in Saudi Arabia is a complex and dynamic field that cannot be easily categorized as a singular movement. It encompasses a diverse range of knowledge and engagement, reflecting the multifaceted realities of Saudi women's lives and the myriad challenges they encounter in their pursuit of gender equality and social change. Saudi feminism encompasses various knowledge systems and modes of engagement influenced by a range of social and political factors [52]. This diversity mirrors the intricate tapestry of Saudi society and the intersecting forces that shape the feminist landscape.

One intriguing aspect of Saudi feminist activism is the politics of representation, which generates categories such as "Saudi women" and "activism." These categories exist in a liminal space, reflecting the complex dynamics of women's involvement in public life. Despite the challenging sociopolitical context in Saudi Arabia, women have taken significant strides in establishing women's societies, albeit many of these organizations are led by Saudi princesses, and their memberships often consist of women from affluent backgrounds. Moreover, there is a notable presence of independent women's activism in Saudi Arabia that adopts feminist principles and methods to challenge patriarchal political structures, state security apparatuses, and sectarian control. Many of these groups refrain from labeling their work as activism or identifying themselves as activists, using strategic language to maintain independence from state control and foreign organizations seeking influence. These independent formations and groups are committed to advancing women's equality in both public and private spheres, employing various strategies such as writing, organizing, lobbying, and protesting. However, some independent initiatives eventually become co-opted or integrated under royal patronage or state bureaucracy. Despite sharing a common goal, they often have distinct perspectives on how to define and pursue their social change agendas.

Al Dabbagh [52] describes Saudi independent women's groups as broadly categorized into four political orientations based on their agendas: liberal (*libralliyya*), rights-based (*huquqiyya*), Islamist feminist (*nasawiyya Islamiyya*), and conservative (*muhafitha*). Each orientation has its unique approach and objectives, contributing to the multifaceted nature of Saudi feminism. Saudi women also utilize literature and art as channels to express their resistance to the constraints imposed upon them by society and the political system. However, they all confront a common challenge—a restrictive and highly regulated environment shaped by intersecting hegemonic systems, including familial, security, legal, transnational governance, and global capitalism. Consequently, most independent activism in Saudi Arabia operates unofficially or virtually, relying extensively on digital media and online forums [53].

### 4. Reimagining Knowledge: The Synergy of Academia and Activism

Within academia, a prevailing notion suggests that academia and activism occupy separate and distinct spheres, driven by contrasting aims and governed by different rules. This artificial division has fostered a dichotomy that has persistently framed thinking and reflection in opposition to doing or acting. Furthermore, it not only limits the potential of activism but also restricts the scope of academic inquiry by imposing an unfounded separation between theory and practice, reason and emotion, and the abstract and the concrete [54]. The evolving concept of activist academia, or academic activism, challenges this division, highlighting the inherent interplay between these seemingly separate spheres [55–58].

From a feminist perspective and within the field of gender studies, the intersection of academia and social change has emerged as a dynamic and evolving area of scholarship. Feminist scholars and thinkers have significantly contributed to this field by advocating for gender equity, challenging traditional academic structures, and fostering the synergy between academia and activism. Among these scholars, bell hooks stands as a prominent



figure whose extensive work explores the intersection of education, feminism, and activism. Her notable work "Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom" [59] delves into the idea of liberatory education and the role of critical pedagogy in academic activism. hooks emphasizes the significance of engaging with students as whole individuals rather than passive learners. Another influential figure in this field is Audre Lorde, a pioneering Black feminist writer and activist. Her seminal essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" [60] challenges traditional academic structures and advocates for intersectional activism. Lorde calls for the inclusion of marginalized voices and perspectives within academia, advocating for a more inclusive and holistic approach. The works critique the division between academia and activism, underscoring the artificial nature of this separation and its potential to generate oppressive relations.

While activism is often associated with visible and direct action aimed at achieving political or social change, it is essential to recognize the subtle and indirect aspects of activism that may go unnoticed by the broader public. The refusal to acknowledge the various forms of resistant labor can lead to the marginalization of voices and the perpetuation of oppressive systems. Evaluating the success of activism based solely on its visibility and immediate outcomes can inadvertently reinforce neoliberal ideals prioritizing productivity and rapidity over sustainability, concepts that activism often aims to critique. This perspective disregards the enduring and sustainable effects of activism, which may not always manifest immediately or be easily measurable. Sustainable activism entails continuous endeavors to tackle systemic issues and foster enduring social transformations, necessitating patience, perseverance, and an emphasis on structural changes rather than short-term solutions.

Activism within academia takes on various forms, from curriculum design that foregrounds marginalized scholars to individual self-presentation in academic spaces. Resistant efforts in higher education encompass diverse strategies, including lobbying for curriculum and structural changes, dismantling exclusionary canons of thought, and advocating for the inclusion of scholarship by underrepresented groups. In her book "On Intellectual Activism," Patricia Hill Collins [61] discusses the concept of intellectual activism, which involves scholars using their research, writing, and teaching to challenge and transform oppressive systems. The backlash against such efforts in academia highlights the risks involved in highly visible forms of resistance [62,63]. In "Representations of the Intellectual," Edward Said [64] explores the role and responsibilities of intellectuals in society, particularly within the context of power dynamics and social change, and argues that intellectuals have a crucial role in challenging dominant ideologies and advocating for justice and human rights. Said emphasizes the importance of intellectuals maintaining independence from institutional and political pressures to maintain their integrity and effectiveness in critiquing societal norms and power structures. He also discusses the complexities of intellectual engagement, including the tension between academic pursuits and political activism, and the need for intellectuals to navigate these complexities while remaining committed to their ethical principles.

Critiques often caution scholars against engaging in work deemed "niche," "personal," or "political," reinforcing the idea that academic work should remain detached and objective. However, these critiques fail to acknowledge that such labels are frequently applied in selective and politically charged ways. For example, underrepresented scholars are often unfairly dismissed as irrelevant or overly personal, discounting the relevance and importance of their work [65].

Feminist scholars challenge the division between academia and activism, emphasizing that critical theoretical work can be an integral part of political activism. They have redefined knowledge generation by highlighting the importance of lived experiences, everyday narratives, and the feminist movement itself as sources of knowledge. They have challenged the masculinist notion of objectivity in academia and have pointed to the ways in which knowledge can be produced from the experiences of marginalized groups [57,66–68]. Despite persistent claims of academic neutrality, educational structures

inherently encapsulate ideologies and forms of resistance pertaining to race, gender, and class, thereby highlighting the complex interplay between institutional dynamics and activist endeavors within academia. The concept of “accidental academic activism” sheds light on the complexities of identification and misidentification, particularly concerning race and gender. It illuminates the agency exerted by individuals and the structural forces that shape their identities within higher education.

While activism often conjures images of visible protests, the concept of activism encompasses both overt and subtle acts of resistance. Efforts to subvert constant surveillance may form an integral part of challenging societal structures. Understanding activism in its myriad forms allows for a nuanced appreciation of the different ways people engage in resistance. In the following discussion, this article delves into the work of Hatoon Ajwad al-Fassi, focusing on her as a case study that vividly illustrates how feminist scholarship has the potential to dismantle the artificial barrier between academia and activism. Despite the persistence of this division in mainstream discourse, feminists like al-Fassi passionately advocate for the recognition of the intricate intersection between these two realms. By building bridges across this divide, we not only enhance the practice of academia but also infuse activism with a radical spirit, ultimately nurturing a more inclusive, comprehensive, and sustainable approach to generating knowledge and driving social change. Hatoon al-Fassi, through her fusion of feminist academic and activist pursuits, remains a steadfast challenger of conventional notions regarding knowledge and who holds the capacity to be a knower. She underscores the significance of lived experiences, everyday narratives, and the seamless integration of academic and activist endeavors.

### **5. Hatoon Ajwad al-Fassi: Bridging Academia and Activism for Women’s Rights in Saudi Arabia**

Hatoon Ajwad al-Fassi stands as an exceptional figure in Saudi Arabia, renowned for her influential roles as both an academic and a tireless women’s rights activist. Her journey encompasses diverse realms, including academia, journalism, activism, and education, all converging to champion gender equality and challenge oppressive practices in Saudi society.

Beginning her academic journey, al-Fassi earned her BA and MA degrees with honors from King Saud University in Riyadh in 1986 and 1992, respectively, later obtaining a Ph.D. in women’s history from the University of Manchester in England in 2000. Joining the faculty at King Saud University in 1992, she holds the esteemed position of Associate Professor of Women’s History, conducting extensive research in the field, notably exploring the pre-Islamic Arabian kingdom of Nabataea, shedding light on the historical independence enjoyed by women in that era. Her groundbreaking research in women’s history in Saudi Arabia and the broader Arabian Peninsula has earned her international acclaim. Notably, her monograph, “Women in Pre-Islamic Arabia: Nabataea” [69], remains one of the seminal works in the field, offering fascinating insights into the status and roles of women in ancient societies.

Beyond academia, al-Fassi leverages her platform as a columnist for the Arabic-language newspaper al-Riyadh to address critical social issues within Saudi Arabia, advocating for gender equality and societal reform. Her writings serve as a powerful medium for challenging norms and advocating for women’s rights. She has also been a prominent voice in national, regional, and international media, passionately discussing topics such as Saudi women’s history, archaeology, and the significance of municipal elections.

Al-Fassi’s activism extends beyond the written word. Her participation in various campaigns and associations dedicated to advancing women’s rights is notable, with her prominent involvement in the Women2Drive campaign serving as a compelling example of her dedication to challenging societal norms and restrictions in Saudi Arabia. In her commentary piece, Tamara Cofman Wittes [70] eloquently portrays al-Fassi, saying, “When I think of what women living such a grounded-but-open Saudi Arabia might look like, I think of Hatoon al-Fassi, who showed me from the first moment we met a model of a

Saudi woman who is proud in her heritage, faith, and family, and equally confident in her contribution to public affairs.”

Al-Fassi’s activism spans decades, from establishing forums for Saudi women academics in the 1990s to campaigning against domestic abuse in the 2000s, to educating women for municipal elections in 2015. Moreover, al-Fassi has actively engaged in initiatives such as the “Baladi” women’s rights campaign, advocating for women’s full participation in municipal elections and the lifting of the ban on women driving. Her activism, coupled with her academic scholarship, emphasizes the urgent need to challenge patriarchal structures and promote women’s rights in Saudi society. In recognition of her contributions, al-Fassi was inducted into the prestigious “Ordre des Palmes Académiques” in 2008, a French order of knighthood for distinguished academics and figures in education and culture. Her wisdom, commitment, courage, and compassion have earned her respect and admiration not only in the Gulf region but also throughout the Middle East, North Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America. Hatoon al-Fassi’s journey exemplifies the intricate intersection of academia, activism, and advocacy, highlighting the ongoing struggle for gender equality in Saudi Arabia. As Cofman Wittes [70] aptly notes, she represents hope for a future where Saudi women can proudly contribute to society while embracing their heritage and faith.

Furthermore, al-Fassi’s pivotal role in the Women2Drive campaign, alongside her multifaceted activism, underscores her unwavering commitment to challenging discriminatory practices and promoting women’s autonomy and agency in Saudi society. While al-Fassi has engaged in various activism efforts, including campaigns against the guardianship system, women’s suffrage, municipal elections, and more, the following sections will focus on two specific dimensions of her academic activism: (1) her contributions to feminist academic scholarship and public discourse, and (2) her significant role in the social movement advocating for women’s mobility and the right to drive. These aspects collectively embody her commitment to academic activism and her unwavering pursuit of gender equality in Saudi Arabia.

### *5.1. Cultivating Empowered Students*

In the landscape of higher education in the Gulf countries, there is currently no single university offering a stand-alone undergraduate program in women’s or gender studies. The absence of such programs reflects the broader challenges faced by women’s and gender studies in the region. Institutional inertia, particularly the bureaucratic hurdles involved in introducing new disciplines or curricula, presents formidable obstacles to the development of women’s and gender studies offerings.

Hatoon Ajwad al-Fassi, an academic and activist based at Qatar University from 2009 to 2018 until she was detained in 2018, has been at the forefront of efforts to incorporate feminist scholarship into the academic landscape of the Gulf region. Her journey has been marked by both resilience and resistance as she navigates the deeply ingrained gender norms and conservative societal values. Al-Fassi’s case serves as a prime example of scholarship activism or academic activism, which transcends traditional academic boundaries and underscores the significance of empowering students to actively engage with politics and act as catalysts for change. She cultivated an educational environment that nurtured critical thinking and reflection, enabling students to become active and informed contributors to society, stoking their curiosity about the world and their roles within it. Her efforts faced resistance and controversy, underscoring the cultural challenges inherent in such initiatives. Despite facing backlash and surveillance, she remained steadfast in her dedication to empowering her students and preparing them to become active participants in the global discourse on women’s rights.

One of the significant turning points in al-Fassi’s academic activism was her course titled “Women and Islam,” taught in English since 2011 and in Arabic since 2014, at Qatar University. The course featured writings, deemed controversial, by scholars such as the late Moroccan sociologist Fatema Mernissi and Virginia Commonwealth University professor

emeritus Amina Wadud. These scholars challenged popular perceptions that certain practices within Islam were religiously ordained, highlighting the need for critical examination. Al-Fassi's teaching methods in the course involved close feminist readings of religious texts to challenge prevailing notions. Unsurprisingly, in a socially conservative society with limited tradition in critical education, her approach sparked significant controversy. She was accused of criticizing the Qur'an and distorting its teachings to favor women's rights. In the aftermath of the controversy in November 2016, she was placed under surveillance, and her lectures were recorded to maintain close supervision. The situation escalated when a committee, primarily composed of male scholars from the Shari'a College, reviewed and revised the syllabus of her "Women and Islam" course. Eventually, she was barred from teaching the course altogether, and a male professor was assigned to take her place.

This incident underscored the deep-seated resistance to feminist knowledge and critical scholarship in Gulf region academic institutions. Moreover, research has indicated that Gulf region universities remain highly gendered and are resistant to embracing non-conformist thought, with deeply entrenched gender norms [46]. Studies have documented the resistance to feminist knowledge and critical scholarship in Gulf region academic institutions, with efforts to promote such knowledge being met with varying degrees of resistance at individual, group, and institutional levels [48].

The controversy surrounding al-Fassi's academic work at Qatar University serves as a stark illustration of the cultural challenges posed by teaching women's and gender studies in the Gulf region. Her willingness to engage with feminist activist education and empower her students reflects her commitment to advancing gender equality and critical scholarship in the face of formidable resistance. Al-Fassi's commitment to fostering a dynamic learning atmosphere is exemplified by another controversial incident when she endorsed an article authored by two of her former students, asserting that Qatar had not yet fully granted women their rights. This endorsement led to a Twitter campaign by students advocating for her removal from an upcoming event where she was scheduled to debate a male professor from the university's Shari'a college on the topic of women and Islam. Ultimately, the president of Qatar University canceled the scheduled debate in response to the controversy [71].

These two instances, namely teaching the course "Women in Islam" and endorsing students' initiatives to combat gender inequality, stand as evidence of the transformative power of academic activism in challenging societal norms and cultivating a more inclusive and equitable educational setting. They also epitomize Hatoon Ajwad al-Fassi's journey. Her academic activism in the Gulf region illuminates the intricate dynamics between institutional resistance, cultural norms, and the pursuit of feminist knowledge within higher education. Her endeavors to introduce critical scholarship and empower students underscore the transformative potential of academic activism in challenging deeply ingrained societal norms and nurturing more inclusive educational environments.

### *5.2. The Women2Drive Campaign: A Catalyst for Societal Change and State Power*

The multifaceted societal transformation underway in Saudi Arabia as part of Vision 2030 unveils the lifting of the ban on women driving as a pivotal milestone. This move not only signifies a leap towards gender equality but also outlines a strategic blueprint for economic reform. Spearheaded by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2015, Vision 2030 reflects a forward-thinking approach aimed at diversifying the economy and reducing dependence on oil wealth, acknowledging the impermanence of such riches amidst evolving global dynamics. The lifting of the driving ban was intended to boost women's participation in the workforce, thereby projected to increase the domestic product by 65 percent. Within this context, the evolution of social media platforms into channels of empowerment is evident, as demonstrated by trending hashtags such as "drive and the nation is behind you" on Twitter, symbolizing a surge of support for this significant policy change and aligning with the broader societal shifts envisioned under Vision 2030 [72].

However, the narrative of women's driving activism in Saudi Arabia extends beyond recent reforms. Contrary to Western portrayals, the Women2Drive campaign has deep historical roots dating back to the 1990s and the broader Arab women's movement. During the early 1990s, amidst the Gulf War, female activists launched campaigns to raise awareness about the driving ban, aiming to assert autonomy and challenge the foreign presence in the region. In this anti-colonial history, "Saudi women's driving protest occurred as a reaction to the sight of female American soldiers driving in Saudi Arabia" ([73], p. 467). Notably, Hatoon Ajwad al-Fassi was a prominent advocate of this movement, championing the cause through various avenues including writing, lobbying, and active participation in campaigns such as "We the Women".

Although the lifting of the driving ban in June 2018 was celebrated as a step towards gender equality, this momentous occasion was overshadowed by a crackdown on women's rights activists, including prominent figures like Loujain al-Hathloul, Aziza al-Yousef, Eman al-Najfan, and among them, Hatoon al-Fassi. The heavy-handed response underscored the government's fear of empowered women challenging the status quo. In an article titled "Despite Worthy Reforms, Saudi Women are Still Second-class Citizens," al-Fassi articulated her concerns about the superficial nature of recent developments, arguing that they were insufficient to address the structural and political violence Saudi women faced, perpetuating their second-class citizenship status [74]. This dichotomy highlights the role of the state in perpetuating gender inequality.

Surveys have indicated that Saudi society, in general, does not oppose women driving [75]. Hence, the driving ban is not a societal issue but a governmental one, as evidenced by media representations that shifted dramatically post-ban lifting, reflecting the state's influence in shaping public discourse. The emergence of women activists campaigning on social media for driving since 2011 has added momentum to the movement. Figures like Manal al-Sharif and Loujain al-Hathloul defied the ban and faced repercussions, including arrests and legal action, highlighting the risks associated with challenging established norms [2,76]. The arrests of al-Fassi and other prominent women's rights activists in May 2018 underscored the precarious nature of dissent in Saudi Arabia, casting a shadow over the government's progressive reforms [16]. In conclusion, the Women2Drive campaign, with its historical roots and involvement of activists like Hatoon al-Fassi, serves as a testament to the enduring struggle for gender equality in Saudi Arabia. It also underscores the imperative to critically examine the role of the state in perpetuating gender inequality and shaping societal attitudes [74].

Through her multifaceted contributions encompassing teaching, scholarly endeavors, and activism, Hatoon al-Fassi has played a pivotal role in preparing a generation of Saudi women to participate in this change. Her arrest and imprisonment for almost a year serve as poignant reminders of the challenges faced by women advocating for their rights in a society undergoing rapid transformation.

## **6. Combating State Oppression through Academic Activism while Challenging Neo-Orientalism—Conclusions**

In many Middle Eastern states, so-called "state feminism" claims to liberate women while inadvertently reinforcing patriarchal structures [7,77]. This paradox underscores the challenges faced by feminist scholars and activists striving to address gender issues within these societies. In the context of Saudi Arabia's complex socio-political landscape, gender inequality manifests itself in various forms, including limited political and economic participation [2]. One particularly emblematic symbol of systemic gender-based oppression was the ban on women driving, a restriction that not only hampered women's mobility but also enforced traditional roles, portraying them as symbols of the state's piety [2]. Recent developments, such as lifting the ban on women driving in June 2018 and modifying the guardianship system in 2019, represent significant strides towards empowering Saudi women. Nonetheless, these reforms are just a starting point in addressing deeply entrenched gender inequality. Saudi culture, shaped by a stringent interpretation



of Islam and a capitalist economy, has historically exploited women, relegating them to second-class citizenship.

Hatoon al-Fassi, a prominent Saudi scholar and activist, has been at the forefront of critiquing these dynamics. She astutely observes that public discourse often celebrates female role models while sidelining critical feminist concerns. A significant area where gender inequality persists is in the involvement of Muslim women in religious matters. Historically, women have been excluded from positions of religious authority, often justified by the propagation of selective Hadiths that contradict the Qur'an. These practices have not only perpetuated male dominance in religious hierarchies but have also sanctified their exclusion, creating a longstanding imbalance. Hatoon al-Fassi staunchly argues that women, like men, are integral to Islam and should not be barred from religious and organizational roles that contribute to their participation in society's development. Her advocacy calls for a more comprehensive approach to teaching and research, one that acknowledges these complexities. Hatoon al-Fassi's tireless efforts to challenge such norms and her persistent advocacy for women's rights serve as an exemplary model of feminist academic activism. Her work transcends the boundaries between academia and activism, embodying the essential intersection this article aimed to explore. Contrary to the conventional belief that academia and activism are mutually exclusive, this micro case-study reaffirms their intrinsic connection, particularly in contexts where women's rights are suppressed.

While research on public spheres and the media in autocratic regimes grows, there remains a gap in connecting these insights with discourses on women and their interactions with academia and feminist activism within non-democratic contexts [78,79]. Bridging this gap holds the potential to enhance our understanding of women's experiences and struggles in repressive environments. Fundamentally, activist education empowers individuals by recognizing that power and resistance manifest uniquely in specific contexts. Intellectual work from outsider-within social locations, as seen in the work of Hatoon al-Fassi, highlights the creative tension of navigating intersecting systems of oppression, offering distinctive oppositional knowledge.

In our pursuit of a deeper comprehension of women's movements in Saudi Arabia and the deconstruction of Orientalist narratives, it is essential to recognize the significant contributions made by scholars and activists. Among these individuals, Hatoon Ajwad al-Fassi emerges as a guiding light, offering insights into the multifaceted dimensions of feminism in the Gulf region. Her comprehensive research, scholarly endeavors, and activism seamlessly bridge the gap between theory and action, embodying the intersection we aim to explore. Al-Fassi's work not only challenges stereotypes and oppressive structures but also paves the way for a more authentic understanding of women's issues as we navigate the complex terrain of feminist discourse. Her contributions chart the path towards a thorough examination of women's movements and gender dynamics, underscoring the significance of her scholarly endeavors in shaping our perspective and inspiring future research in this critical field. Al Fassi exemplifies her dedication to translating her research into tangible action and advocating for a more equitable and inclusive society, epitomizing the transformative potential of feminist academic activism and transcending boundaries to advocate for women's rights.

Academic inquiry provides a vital theoretical foundation, complemented by the lived experiences and insights of activists, creating a symbiotic exchange that informs and inspires research. This nuanced perspective, grounded in historical context and amplifying the voices of Saudi women, offers a more comprehensive understanding of feminist practices. Beyond Saudi Arabia, this approach informs a broader comprehension of feminist movements globally, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

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