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Cyberfeminist resistance against hegemonic and anti-feminist discourses: the case of Kuwait

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ABSTRACT

How do Kuwaiti cyberfeminists resist hegemonic and anti-feminist discourses? This article seeks to answer this question by exploring the contestation between Kuwaiti feminists and their Islamist opponents on Twitter. Viewing cyberfeminism as constructive resistance, I argue that feminism is practiced and performed online by a variety of women actors who do not necessarily self-identify as feminists or activists, constructively and continuously producing new discourses and subjectivities, establishing a salient embodied feminist presence that can trigger an anti-feminist counter-mobilization. In a Twitter Space hosted by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs on December 23, 2021, an anti-feminist lecture portrayed Kuwaiti feminists as alienated from religion and society while downplaying the extent of violence against women in the country. In response, Kuwaiti cyberfeminists attempted to reclaim feminism by placing it within local and national frames using a Twitter hashtag. Resorting to a reverse discourse strategy had some shortcomings, including reinforcing hegemonic discourses and the binary of “us” (feminists) versus “them” (Islamists), which may have been an inevitable outcome of an antagonistic narrative. This article adds to the existing literature on cyberfeminism by exploring an understudied domain and offering significant insights into feminists’ online resistance in socially conservative contexts.

ملخص

كيف تقاوم النسويات الكويتيات المنخرطات في النسوية السيرانية الخطابيات المهيمنة والمناهضة للنسوية؟ تسعى هذه المقالة البحثية للإجابة على هذا السؤال من خلال استكشاف النزاع بين النسويات الكويتيات وخصومهن الإسلاميين على تطبيق تويتر. وبالنظر إلى النسوية السيرانية على أنها مقاومة مُولدة ، تُناقش المقالة كيف أن فاعلات متنوعات يشاركن في عملية أداء وممارسة النسوية في الفضاء الرقمي من دون أن يُعرّفن أنفسهن بالضرورة على أنهن نسويات أو ناشطات، وهنّ بذلك يقمن بتشكيل خطابٍ ودوائٍ جديدة على نحو بناءٍ ومستمر، مما يؤسس حضوراً نسوياً بارزاً متجسداً يمكن أن يُناهض من خلال تعبئة مضادة للنسوية. في مساحة نقاش على تطبيق تويتر نظمتها وزارة الأوقاف والشؤون الإسلامية الكويتية في 23 ديسمبر 2021، صُورت محاضرة مناهضة للنسوية للنسويات الكويتيات على أنهن مغتربات عن الدين والمجتمع، في حين قللت من حجم العنف ضد المرأة في البلاد. ورداً على ذلك، حاولت النسويات الكويتيات استعادة لفظة النسوية عن طريق تأطيرها ضمن الأطر المحلية والوطنية باستخدام هاشتاغ على تويتر. كان اللجوء إلى إستراتيجية الخطاب المعكوس فيه بعض أوجه القصور، بما في ذلك تعزيز الخطابيات المهيمنة وثنائية “نحن”، النسويات، مقال

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الإسلاميين "هم"، والتي كان من الممكن أن تكون نتيجةً حتميةً لسرديةٍ معادية. تُشكل هذه المقالة إضافةً إلى الأدبيات الحالية حول النسوية السبيرانية من خلال استكشاف مجالاً غير مدروس وتطرح رؤى مهمة حول المقاومة الرقمية للنسويات في سياقاتٍ محافظةٍ اجتماعيًا.

KEYWORDS Cyberfeminism; constructive resistance; anti-feminism; reverse discourse; Kuwait

الكلمات المفتاحية النسوية السبيرانية، مقاومة مؤلدة، معاداة النسوية، خطاب معكوس، الكويت

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Introduction

This article is motivated by the following question: how do Kuwaiti feminists resist hegemonic discourses and anti-feminist mobilization in cyberspace? To address this question fully, the article explores a particular case of contestation between the Kuwaiti Ministry of Awqaf (endowment) and Islamic Affairs (AIA) and feminists that took place on Twitter in December 2021.¹ The Kuwaiti case is significant because it is emblematic of a larger phenomenon and practice of cyberfeminist resistance: engaging with new technologies to challenge power (Daniels 2009; Khamis 2013; Khamis and Mili 2018; Matos 2017; Tazi 2020) and the global anti-feminist backlash offline and online (Ging and Siapera 2019; Mellström 2016). By taking Kuwait as a case study, my article contributes to the burgeoning literature on cyberfeminism by advancing a more nuanced conceptualization of the latter beyond the context of the Arab Spring while exploring the understudied phenomenon of anti-feminist discourse in Muslim-majority countries and feminists' resistance to it.

As a rentier state, Kuwait has a political system that is unique among other Gulf countries. It has a democratically elected National Assembly, a parliament composed of elected political blocs with power (Buscemi 2017). Nevertheless, Kuwait cannot be considered a democracy. The "executive power" ultimately lies in the hands of its "autocratic ruling family [of] Al-Sabah," particularly the emir (a member of the Al-Sabah family) (Shultziner and Tétreault 2011, 1). Kuwait's hybrid political and constitutional system, combining authoritarianism and aspects of limited democracy (Buscemi 2017), has made it one of the few Gulf Cooperation Council states to host a relatively robust homegrown feminist movement throughout its history (Welborne 2022, 139).

While women's organizations of the past century have tended to be elitist, the internet has allowed grassroots decentralized feminist activism to emerge in the last few years, with young women from diverse backgrounds practicing cyberfeminism. Drawing on the work of Carrie Rentschler and Mona Lilja, I view cyberfeminism as a set of embodied social media practices that constructively resist patriarchal powers and discourses, constituting a salient feminist presence over time. I contend that online practices such as hashtags, blogging, and the circulation of conventional feminist texts are not limited to

a group of elite women's rights activists. Diverse women actors from different socio-economic backgrounds, who may not necessarily self-identify as feminists or activists per se, can practice and perform feminism online. The increasing online anonymity in cyberspace amid a growing set of challenges further complicates the relationship between the latter and embodiment. In this regard, I argue that the online anonymity of women actors does not erase the online and offline bodily, material, and emotional dimensions.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Kuwaiti cyberfeminism focused on combating increasing cases of femicide (Al-Mukhled 2021b), constituting a visible and embodied feminist presence and triggering an anti-feminist counter-mobilization (see Al-Rawi 2014). The anti-feminist counter-mobilization occurred in an online lecture organized by the AIA. At first, the ministry announced that it would hold an offline lecture titled "Alfikir al-niswi wa khatarih 'ala almujtama Islami" ("Feminist Ideology and Its Danger to the Islamic Society") (Shu'un Islamiya 2021). However, it decided to cancel the lecture after facing pushback from Kuwaiti feminists and women's rights activists supported by a campaign by the liberal-leaning *Al-Jarida* daily newspaper (Al-Jarida 2021), moving it to a Twitter Space on December 23, 2021, and simultaneously streaming the lecture on YouTube (Shu'un Islamiya 2021). Utilizing the same tools that feminists employ to communicate their messages, the ministry saw this as an opportunity to deliver its message to a broader audience, including feminists. As I show in the article, the lecture incited sentiments of irrational fear toward feminist activists – what I term *feminismphobia* – to misrepresent feminism and strategically use language to convey the excommunication of Kuwaiti feminists from religion and society while downplaying the extent of violence against women in the country. These accusations can have dangerous ramifications, including triggering a *takfiri*² discourse against Muslim feminists, as happened recently with the Jordanian feminist and human rights advocate Hala Ahed for her involvement in raising feminist awareness of women's rights and gender equality, impeding feminists' ability to convince others to pursue social change (Suleiman 2023). In response to the lecture, Kuwaiti feminists created an Arabic hashtag, *al-niswiya alkuwaitiya tumathlani* ("Kuwaiti feminism represents me"), retweeting their resistance for days. Their reaction aimed to reclaim their feminist identity, mostly resorting to a reverse discourse strategy (Foucault 1978). To what extent was this response effective? This is another question addressed in the penultimate section of the article.

The analysis of the case study under scrutiny focuses on two data sets. The first is a transcript of the 90-minute-long Arabic-language AIA online lecture. The second consists of 47 tweets posted using the Arabic hashtag that were manually collected between December 21 and December 28, 2021, after removing identification handles to follow ethical procedures around using social media for research (Townsend and Wallace 2016). I translated both data sets into English verbatim. Examining the discourse of the Twitter

Space in question, I employed critical thematic analysis (Lawless and Chen 2019) to identify the recurrent themes of the lecture and their underlying dominant ideology. Additionally, I used frame analysis (Benford and Snow 2000) to guide the interpretation of the data set of tweets.

Throughout the article, the analysis is also informed by my online ethnographic observations and interaction with Kuwaiti women activists through Twitter (see Danley 2021; Rybas and Gajjala 2007). My visible presence on and use of Twitter as a scholar-activist since 2014 allowed me to connect with many women activists from the region. An online activist ethnography enabled me to recruit eight feminists from Kuwait for online interviews after securing ethical approval from my institution. Through my professional experience on social media as an Iraqi activist, I have built a network of connections with women activists from Iraq and other countries. From there, I used a snowball sampling method to reach the target sample of eight young Kuwaiti women interviewees who identify as feminists. To amplify the voices of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups, my sample included five Bedouin (tribal) women (four of whom are Bidoon “stateless” people).³ In the article, I rely on insights from these interviews, which were conducted between April and June 2022, and follow-up conversations with the interviewees to reflect on their (dis)engagement with the hashtag under analysis.

My article first traces the trajectory of the women’s rights movement in Kuwait. Following a theoretical discussion of contemporary cyberfeminism, I analyze the main case studies of this article: the anti-feminist discourse of the AIA lecture and the cyberfeminist resistance.

From centralized organizations to decentralized activism

The dawn of Kuwaiti women’s activism dates to the 1940s, when girls’ education spread despite the opposition of conservative forces. It was inspired by the cultural movement in Egypt and Bilad al-Sham, spearheaded by men intellectuals who supported women’s rights in their writings. During the 1950s, women’s rights activism intersected with the revolutionary anti-colonial, nationalist, and pan-Arab movements. However, it was limited to upper-class women and a few gatherings or newspaper articles (Al-Najjar 2003). Historically, attempting to accommodate both modernity and the “political demands” of tribes and Islamists (Buscemi 2016, 186), the state has strategically co-opted women’s rights as a vital tool for its survival (Al-Mughni 1996, 2010).

The oil boom of the 1950s and 1960s and the country’s independence necessitated women’s support to decrease reliance on foreign labor, opening the door for women to push for their rights and full citizenship (Al-Mughni 1996; Tétreault 2001). In 1963, the first two women’s rights societies, the Women’s Cultural and Social Society (WCSS) and the Arab Women’s Development Society (AWDS), were founded. Both societies were

composed of elite and upper-class women, and “their efforts to raise women’s rights issues [were] hampered by class conflicts and institutional rivalry” (Shultziner and Tétreault 2011, 2). While the former organization worked mainly under the auspices of the state and focused on charitable work, the latter opposed government policies toward women and demanded political and social emancipation, including suffrage and gender equality (Al-Mughni 1996; Tétreault 2001).

In 1973, with the formation of the Girls’ Club (another upper-class women’s rights group), which sided with the AWDS’ demands, the secular opposition, composed of “nationalist and leftist groups,” supported the women’s rights movement, posing a threat to the state (Al-Mughni 2010, 169). Consequently, the state started to tighten its grip on women’s organizations and activities. State control was compounded by the growing influence of Islamists in the National Assembly and in society (Al-Mughni 1996), impacting the course of the Kuwaiti women’s rights movement.⁴ In the 1980s, Islamist women’s groups were founded, replacing the more secular ones (Tétreault, Rizzo, and Shultziner 2012). In this regard, Mary Ann Tétreault (2001) maintains that the state used Islamization and tribalism as a bulwark to deter secular and liberal opposition. In light of this political atmosphere, there were many failed attempts to push for women’s suffrage over several decades.

In 1990, Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait was a “transformative event,” providing a combination of internal and external factors that helped to unite a group of well-educated middle- and upper-class activists of secular, liberal, and Islamic backgrounds around the suffrage goal (Shultziner and Tétreault 2011, 2; see also González 2013). Though discussing these factors is outside the scope of this article, it is worth noting that this new group of activists strategically pressured the government rather than the parliament, which was divided over the issue, to push for women’s right to vote until women’s suffrage was finally achieved in 2005.

Women’s activism took a new turn in the twenty-first century, away from organizations and associations, as young, independent women started to engage in street protests and campaigns for democratization and political reforms (Buscemi 2016). Moreover, the Arab Spring uprisings increased women’s visibility in society both online and offline as women activists engaged in oppositional politics, joining the largest protest movement in contemporary Kuwaiti history in 2012, known as Karamt Watan (A Nation’s Dignity), mobilized by social media sites.⁵ The protest movement was met with a security crackdown. Repressive measures included “detention of protestors, increased censorship over the internet, traditional and social media, stripping nationals of their citizenship and cracking down on freedom of expression” (Buscemi 2017, 267; see also Human Rights Watch 2015).

Despite such measures, new forms of resistance emerged, with women activists focusing more on their social and legal struggles. For example, in

2015, a group of five women activists led a campaign to abolish Article 153 of the Kuwaiti penal code stipulating lax punishments for the perpetrators of so-called “honor killings,” treating these femicides as misdemeanors (Al-Sharekh and Al-Mukhled 2023). The campaign has continued offline and online, intersecting with growing cyberfeminist activism at the grassroots level, benefiting from social media accessibility and diffusion in society (Buscemi 2017), and making use of online anonymity to evade censorship and suppression (see Khamis 2019).

Cyberfeminism as embodied constructive resistance

In a clear departure from formal elite organizations, feminism in Kuwait took a new turn as women from different backgrounds started to center their voices in cyberspace, identifying as *niswiyat* (feminists) or with *niswiya* (feminism) through the practice of cyberfeminism. The latter is understood in this article as a set of practices and processes of “making and doing feminism online” (Rentschler 2019, 130). These practices include blogging, tweeting, using hashtags, and distributing feminist texts, which fulfill at least three functions: “mobilization, education, and documentation” (Khamis 2016, 139). The term *al-niswiya* has become more visible, in contrast with the earlier reluctance of women activists to describe themselves as “feminists,” favoring instead “agents of social change” (Buscemi 2016, 189). I made a conscious decision to use “feminism” here interchangeably with “women’s rights activism” to echo the new voices of women activists in Kuwait and elsewhere, many of whom choose to identify as feminists. That said, I conceive of feminism as more of an intellectual theory, a vision, and a field, preceding and simultaneously intersecting with women’s rights movements (Delmar 1994) – hence the significance of identifying with feminism, and not necessarily as feminists.

Cyberfeminism is an everyday, decentralized grassroots activism. It is not monolithic but rather heterogeneous. In other words, it mirrors the multi-layered and diverse feminisms that exist in different contexts offline (Khamis 2019). Cyberfeminism blurs the dichotomy of the elite and the subaltern (see Gajjala 2002). Making and doing feminism online is not restricted solely to urban upper-middle-class, well-educated women’s rights activists. It includes women from diverse “socio-economic and geographic segments and other demographic profiles” inside their home countries or abroad (Khamis 2016, 140). In the Kuwaiti context, previously marginalized groups of Bedouin and Bidoon activists have participated in online feminist activism, challenging the “classist” discourse of the feminist movement in Kuwait and the Gulf more generally (Al-Hashem 2021). They do so individually or collectively by adopting an intersectional approach to advocate for the rights of the most vulnerable women in society, including domestic workers (Bakhsh

2021). For example, a collective account on Twitter known as Kuwaiti Niswiyat (Kuwaiti Feminists, @naswya4) was launched and run by a group of Bedouin feminists to oppose the institutionalized patriarchal structures of both the government and the tribe (Bakhsh 2021). In 2021, a group of three Bidoon feminists formed a collective Instagram account dedicated to the political, social, and legal struggles of Bidoon women.⁶

In this article, therefore, I conceptualize cyberfeminism as a type of constructive resistance that “undermines oppressive forms of power through the construction or enactment of alternatives” (Koefoed 2017, 39). This approach constructively challenges hegemonic and patriarchal powers, albeit more slowly and subtly than explicitly oppositional forms of resistance, by producing new knowledge, alternative discourses, and new subjectivities or institutions (Lilja 2020; Sørensen 2016). It can be less direct, confrontational, or overt than non-cooperative forms of resistance, unfold individually or collectively, and involve both large-scale and small-scale events (Baaz et al. 2021; Lilja 2022a). Though it may not produce immediate and radical change, it opens up future possibilities for social or political transformations (Lilja 2021).

Understood in this way, cyberfeminism can be expanded to include those who may not identify as feminists but with feminist causes (Rentschler 2019), including challenging sexual harassment, raising awareness about women’s legal and social rights, and mobilizing others to act (Khamis 2016, 2019). For example, the anti-sexual harassment campaign Lan Askut (I Will Not Be Silent) was launched on Instagram by Shaymaa Shamoo, a young doctor, calling women to share their accounts and testimonies (Osman 2021). Since then, the page has gained more than 15,000 followers. The campaign was inspired by Ascia al-Farraj, a famous Kuwaiti-American fashion blogger with millions of Instagram followers, who released a video in which she revealed her fears of being subjected to men chasing her car, a “common form of harassment in Kuwait” (Al-Mukhled and Alshammari 2021). Having a significant number of followers helps to circulate the message faster among a broader audience, moving it across multiple platforms and bringing together women from different backgrounds around one cause. The campaign pushed for a legal bill against sexual harassment, but it was not passed (*Arab Times* 2021). Moreover, the campaign was criticized by my Bidoon interviewees for mimicking the #MeToo movement without necessarily speaking to the specificities of the local context. One of my Bidoon interviewees feared that exposing harassers online may backfire should the perpetrator sue their victim, exploiting the broad and controversial provisions of 2015’s cybercrime law (Human Rights Watch 2015).

Women with anonymous accounts form the backbone of Kuwaiti and, by extension, Arab cyberfeminism (Khamis 2016, 2019). These women resort to pseudonyms or anonymous identities for protection. They can have varying numbers of followers, and practice and perform feminism online by

posting or interacting with feminist hashtags or campaigns. Though they are primarily invisible (Khamis 2019), their participation is nevertheless crucial because it helps to generate momentum for cyberfeminism; a notable example is the Saudi women's movement for the right to drive (Khalil and Storie 2021). Online anonymity has certain drawbacks, including the potential to de-legitimize a movement (Khalil and Storie 2021). In this regard, though outside the scope of this article, it is worth mentioning that the voice feature enabled by Twitter Spaces or Clubhouse has contributed to legitimizing feminists with anonymous identities. Speaking in such spaces has different potentials from writing, enhancing the embodied dimension of cyberfeminism and challenging earlier assumptions that equate anonymity with disembodiment (Haraway 1985). In other words, online anonymity does not necessarily erase the bodily experience from cyberspace; on the contrary, the relationship between embodiment and anonymity can be enhanced. Hyungjoo Yoon's (2021) concept of "the digital flesh" helps to capture the blurred boundaries between anonymity and embodiment in contemporary social media activism. Instead of viewing online spaces as separate from reality, they should be regarded as "a continuum of reality ... [signifying] the continuity between body and the virtual space through emerging information technologies" (Yoon 2021, 585). A Bedouin feminist told me that feminists hiding their identities does not mean that they are "fake" or not "real people"; rather, they resort to pseudonyms or anonymity as a compromise as they grapple with increasing online sexist attacks, shaming, bullying, and political or social censorship. In this sense, women activists in the virtual world are not merely online actors but embodied activists whose activism cannot be separated from the offline socio-political, economic, and legal barriers.

The embodied and emotional dimension of Kuwaiti cyberfeminism intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Kuwaiti feminists from different backgrounds came together to challenge gender-based violence, which spiked regionally and globally (Gemen 2021). In 2021, outrage exploded online and offline after the release of a video capturing a woman yelling in agony in a Kuwaiti hospital in response to the devastating news of her sister's murder by a man. "We told you he'd kill her, and he killed my sister. Where is the government?" shouted the woman. It soon emerged that the victim, Farah Hamza Akbar, had been abducted from her car with her two daughters and stabbed to death in broad daylight in April 2021. Her abductor and killer then drove her body and the two girls to the hospital before fleeing the scene. Her sister and lawyer, Dana Akbar, shared details about the heinous crime, shockingly revealing that Farah had been subjected to multiple kidnapping attempts by the same perpetrator. Even though he was detained twice after being reported to authorities, he was "released on bail each time" (Al-Mukhled 2021a). Her rhetorical question "Where is the government?" highlighted the government's failure to protect her sister and, by extension, other

women, exposing the deeply entrenched institutional patriarchy and echoing the distance between women activists and the government. More significantly, the question helped to unite Kuwaiti women, including the Bidoon. The latter in particular attribute their suffering principally to the government. “Any discourse that supports the government does not represent me,” a Bidoon activist told me. Therefore, Farah Akbar’s death constituted a “moral shock,” generating intense emotions and a collective response (Castells 1996; Rahimi 2011).

Kuwaiti women launched an online campaign called ‘Azaa Al-Nisaa (Women’s Mourning), sharing pictures of themselves wearing black clothes, a sign of their grief. The title of the campaign was influential as it captured the feelings of sorrow and anger inside Kuwait and other countries in the region, where women were simultaneously being killed amid the absence of laws and legal resources to protect their lives. Through this online assembly, women could bring their physical experience to cyberspace and express their emotions of sadness, rage, and fear. In doing so, they changed and reconfigured the function and purpose of social media platforms (see Butler 2015), turning them into sites of virtual mourning and reinforcing the embodied dimension of cyberspace. When the bodily experience is performed, enacted, and signified online through emotions such as these (Butler 2015; Lilja 2017), it deconstructs the bifurcation of body and mind and of the material and the discursive (Brophy 2010). In other words, like resisting bodies in public spaces (Butler 2015; Lilja 2017), emotional dynamics can connect cyberfeminists in the online space, where they voice their struggle.

Online mobilization extended to public spaces when women protested at al-Irada Square, just outside the man-dominated National Assembly building, wearing black clothes and holding banners and posters that condemned gender-based violence and demanded changes in discriminatory laws (Al-Mukhled 2021a).⁷ As Lilja (2020) reminds us, constructive resistance can intersect with direct opposition to challenge dominant powers. Occupying public spaces helped to legitimize the cyberfeminists who use anonymous identities online. One of my Bedouin feminist interviewees reflected on the power of offline visibility:

For the first time, people were able to see that we were real, that we did exist. Our anonymous identities can sometimes undermine our effort because others can see us as fake accounts. When we took to the streets and protested alongside well-known activists, academics, and members of the WCSS, we could prove our presence.

The online and offline protests prompted two Islamist members of parliament (MPs) to join the protests, promising action at the legal level.⁸ A bill was introduced later to combat violence against women and abolish Article 153 (Al-Mukhled 2021a). However, the draft law has not yet materialized into legislation.

The position of these Islamist MPs was short lived and did not translate into action. Nour Al-Mukhled (2021a) describes it as “capitalizing” on women’s rage. Further, it was not reflective of the stance of other Islamists toward women’s rights. A few months later, the AIA announced its anti-feminist lecture. The following section turns to the central case study of this article.

The Twitter Space lecture: feminism is a danger to society

Overview

When the AIA canceled its offline lecture and moved it online, some Kuwaiti feminists hailed it as a “triumph” because the cancelation showed that the government did not support it, a Kuwaiti feminist and academic told me. Kuwaiti writer Sara Mubarak (2022) had a different position, viewing the cancelation as unfruitful. The lecture was then held in a Twitter Space on December 23, 2021, and streamed on YouTube. It was hosted by Dr Mutlaq al-Jasir and delivered by Dr Muhammed Dhawi Al-Osaimi, a lecturer in the College of Sharia at Kuwait University (Shu’un Islamiya 2021). Dr Al-Osaimi belongs to the Salafist group of Islamists “with the strictest position towards women’s rights” (González 2013, 13).⁹ The host attempted to ignore the social media campaign against the event, obviously downplaying its influence. Instead, he thanked the *Al-Jarida* newspaper for inadvertently allowing the ministry to share the lecture with a broader audience on Twitter. In other words, by capitalizing on the Twitter Space to host the lecture, recording it, and uploading it on YouTube, feminists’ opponents used similar digital strategies to circulate their counter-mobilization in cyberspace. According to Mubarak (2022), who attended the online lecture, the host did not open the space for the audience to ask questions even though she and other women requested to speak. Therefore, he and his invited lecturer could construct and control one antagonistic narrative, alienating Kuwaiti feminists from society through an ideology of “biological essentialism” (Sanders and Jenkins 2022), as discussed below.

Othering through biological essentialism

The lecture sought to demonize feminism as an idea and as a social movement, and to alienate Kuwaiti feminists from society, Islam, and other women. To achieve this goal, the lecturer and the host borrowed their references and examples from a Western context, dismissing Muslim women’s struggle. Violence and abuse were downplayed as “exceptional” or “rare” cases rather than a general phenomenon that must be urgently addressed. Instead, they focused on traditional gender roles for men and women in light of the Sharia, deflecting attention away from the major concerns of

women in Kuwait. Western references bolstered the narrative of morality and “cultural authenticity” that feminists allegedly seek to break away from in favor of “Westernized” ideals and individual preferences (Abu Raideh 2021, 4). For example, in his opening remarks, the host contextualized feminism within a purely Western context:

The story started with the contempt for women in the Middle Ages in the West, associated with concepts existing in the Nusairi [Christian] religion, where there is a belief that Eve was the one who seduced Adam to eat from the tree and was, therefore, the reason why Adam was forced out from heaven ... This has resulted in hatred towards women. Contempt for women is also reflected in the work of the Enlightenment philosophers, who vilify women.

He then listed some of these philosophers’ names, including Nietzsche and Hegel, briefly citing examples of their misogynistic discourse. Ironically, Islamists’ and other conservatives’ positions on the role of women echo some of Hegel’s central claims about women and his emphasis on women’s domestic role within the “natural” family. Even though Hegel speaks about the differences between the sexes through a metaphysical lens rather than a biological one, he is still criticized for confining women to familial positions and roles (Stone 2010). As Haneen Ghabra and Hadeel Al-Shammari (2020) contend, despite the similarities between patriarchal and masculinist structures and discourses in the West and the Middle East, they are performed differently in the two contexts. In the latter, they constitute a “deep-rooted collective and overt [sic] system of domination,” manifesting themselves at micro and macro levels to control and stigmatize women who do not conform to traditional gender attributes, norms, and roles (Ghabra and Al-Shammari 2020, 164).

The lecturer’s assertion that biological differences between men and women dictate their traits and activities, emphasizing the significance of the “natural” family and the centrality of women’s role in the family institution, immediately invoked a broader ideology of biological essentialism. This discourse entails that “people do not have socially constructed gender roles or identities; instead, they have biologically immutable sex differences that should be enforced coercively through law” (Sanders and Jenkins 2022, 371). Moreover, anti-genderism (see Kuhar and Paternotte 2017) was promoted at the same time as the concept of gender was harshly attacked. Concluding the lecture, the host stressed that feminists “have come up with a new thing shared by both male and female – that is, gender – which is a tool for destroying morals because it melts the differences between men and women.” He went on to criticize seminars or lectures held in Kuwait around gender.

Emphasizing anti-genderism through the ideology of biological essentialism was a tool for disconnecting Kuwaiti feminists from other women and the

community. Thus, they were portrayed as foes of the “natural” family who seek to “corrupt” it by calling for equality despite the “biological and physical differences” affirmed by the Qur’an and the hadith (prophetic texts). Islamists and conservative Muslims generally do not accept equality because it defies the idea that men and women complement one another, each having specific roles and rights (Afary 1997; Hashim 1999). Accordingly, women are considered inferior to men (Ahmed 1992). Such a view finds its roots in a hegemonic and “masculinist” reading of religious texts that marginalizes women and reduces them to a source of pleasure and desire (Faraj 2017).

Additionally, the lecturer lashed out against feminism as a concept. He claimed that feminism, which he simultaneously associated with capitalism, has transformed from “a suffrage movement to sexual liberation, pushing Muslim women to flee to other countries.” Fleeing home was attributed to sexual desires or motives. The claim that feminism is a product of capitalism and the exclusion of experiences of violence are discursive strategies adopted to construct an alternative reality through manipulation, deception, and disinformation (see Kenney 2021). Furthermore, reducing feminism to homosexuality, pejoratively labeled *shudud* (deviation), was intended to slander Kuwaiti feminists by depicting them as a danger to the divinely ordained heteronormative family.¹⁰ It was further coupled with a negative portrayal of feminists as “spiteful” and “hateful” of women. In his concluding remarks, the host said:

Feminism despises women. I repeat. This ideology that calls for equality in everything had to do so because it views men as more perfect than women. This is an inferior view of women because *al-niswiya* is grounded in contempt for women.

Implementing the above discourses contributed to demonizing Kuwaiti feminists, accusing them of being anti-Islamic (see Mubarak 2022). For example, Dr Al-Osaimi reiterated that “feminists blindly imitate everything existing in the West,” stressing in several instances that “feminism has defied Islamic Sharia ... allowing for mocking the prophet ... [F]eminism is hostile to religion.” As a result, the lecturer and his host advocated social resistance to feminism to immunize society against its ills. It was a menacing accusation, I would argue, inciting hatred against and fear of Kuwait feminists, or what I call *feminismphobia*, through a selective and manipulative discourse. When these attitudes harden, they lead to indignation, reinforcing the polarizing narrative of “us” versus “them” and shaping the resistance discourse (Alter and Zürn 2020, 749), as explored in the following section.

Kuwaiti feminists’ response: reclaiming feminism as an identity

This hostile atmosphere prompted Kuwaiti women to respond online, incorporating elements of a reverse discourse strategy to legitimize their presence

and struggle by “speaking in [their] own behalf ... often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which [they were demonized]” (Foucault 1978, 101; see also Towns 2022). Following the announcement of the lecture, an online counter-campaign was launched by Kuwaiti feminists, who collectively tweeted using the hashtag *al-niswiya alkuwaitiya tumathlani* (“Kuwaiti feminism represents me”). By repeating and highlighting the Arabic word *al-niswiya* (feminism), the hashtag made feminist identity more visible in Kuwait, reasserting feminists’ position and attaching new meanings to it (Lilja 2022b, 9). The participants included self-identified feminists with real identities and those with anonymous identities or pseudonyms. Their collective effort in promoting the hashtag through retweeting their embodied messages, tweeting new messages with the hashtag in question (Sharma 2013, 62), and quote tweeting messages containing the hashtag contributed to practicing and performing feminism online. In all three cases, the effect of the message can be increased through the circulation process. Though reversed discourses can still redeploy older meanings, they have a “subversive effect” (Lilja 2008, 118) that requires repetition to maintain the alternative “truths” that they seek to establish (Lilja 2008, 2022b). Hashtags serve that purpose well.

As mentioned in the introduction, I drew on frame analysis (Benford and Snow 2000) to understand how women framed their resistance in response to the lecture. Overall, the frames used were intended to invoke a national discourse rooted in women’s struggle within the specific cultural context, countering the claim that their resistance was imported from the West. In other words, women labeling their feminism as “Kuwaiti” in the hashtag and in tweets helped to distinguish Kuwaiti feminism from Western feminism. By reclaiming feminism in this way, Kuwaiti women activists indirectly rejected the Western lens, creating a sense of pride in and belonging to their community. Some tweets with the hashtag highlighted the diversity of Kuwaiti feminism. For example, one activist tweeted: “Kuwaiti feminism in all its different forms, perspectives and the diverse approaches of those who belong to it represent me because feminism is a need, not a social façade.”

Despite tweets such as the one above, however, the hashtag did not appeal to all feminists, particularly Bidoon feminists. I communicated with three Bidoon activists who participated in my study but did not interact with the hashtag, asking them why they did not do so. Two declared that the hashtag did not represent them or their struggle. One described the epithet “Kuwaiti feminism” as “exclusionary, capturing a ‘classist’ and ‘state feminism rhetoric’” that excluded “the Bidoon, Bedouin, as well as foreign and domestic workers in Kuwait.” A better alternative could have been “feminism in Kuwait,” she added. Similarly, the second Bidoon activist said that “although the hashtag attempted to include all women in Kuwait,”

it was “general” and “loose.” The hashtag was controversial for her because some of the women who used it “marginalize me and are not interested in my cause. So how can it represent me?” (personal communication, July 22, 2022). Such responses question the potential of reverse discourse to create a “we” inclusive of everyone in one community (see Lilja 2022b). However, because the hashtag was a reaction to the anti-feminist space, it could be that it was not intended to marginalize others. The third Bidoon activist I spoke to agreed that the hashtag was problematic. However, she told me that it was still “an attempt to defend all women against a group of clerics trying to deprive women – not only Kuwaiti women – of the right to live” (personal communication, July 22, 2022). Some feminists who supported the hashtag reflected on the label a few months later. Another interviewee, a Kuwaiti feminist, lawyer, and journalist, told me that the hashtag was not intended to exclude other women from marginalized groups. However, “feminism in Kuwait” or “women’s rights in Kuwait” could have provided a more accurate and inclusive description. She explained that one of these should replace “Kuwaiti feminism” from now on (personal communication, February 5, 2023).

Though the hashtag might not have resonated with all feminists, it sought to challenge the demonization of feminism and the claim that it was imported from the West. For this reason, activists using the hashtag took pride in the fact that feminism had entered the public discourse, viewing this as evidence of its reach and impact. For example, one activist posted: “I am extremely proud of the influence of Kuwaiti feminism evidenced by counter-seminars and speeches. I am very proud of every feminist whose presence has threatened all men who now feel the fragility of their authority.” Similarly, quoting another tweet with a link to a Friday prayer speech that also smeared feminism (Department of Da’waa and Guidance 2021), an activist tweeted: “Kuwaiti women are willfully coming. Influential accounts have spoken about them. So have media outlets, university professors, clerics in mosques, and people on Twitter, in schools and universities. Honestly, this is something to be proud of.”

To counter claims that violence against women in Kuwait is rare, women activists framed their tweets with references to local cases, including Farah Akbar’s murder. According to one tweet, “Kuwaiti women are strong and able to change many things. We remember their position in Farah Akbar’s case and how they spoke up in the public sphere.” This local frame functioned to reiterate Kuwaiti women’s struggle, countering claims about feminists’ endeavor to destroy the family or call for sexual liberation. Additionally, feminists criticized Islamists’ reductive portrayal of violence against women as an exceptional phenomenon. Even before the lecture, it was anticipated that the prevalence of violence targeting women would be downplayed. Therefore, one activist tweeted:

In the symposium, I hope – for your credibility – that you would mention the names of the women martyrs killed by members of their families. I hope that you would explain to us how they were slain, what sentences [the perpetrators] received, and how were the responses tolerating their crimes.

Another woman dared Islamists participating in the lecture: “If you really care about your religion and homeland, put an end to the killing and oppression of women.” The martyrdom narrative conjured up by the label “women martyrs” had a religious and political symbolism that could further validate women’s struggle, framing it within a broader socio-political resistance for social change (Lewis 2019).

When the local frame of gender-based violence was communicated through sarcasm, it was potentially problematic, risking reinforcing hegemonic discourses rather than subverting them (see Towns 2022). For instance, one woman activist re-appropriated the Arabic term *rijula* (manhood) sarcastically to highlight Islamists’ refusal to recognize the prevalence of violence against women or to protect them. In her words, “You should be punishing women’s murderers, harassers, and oppressors. Where has your manhood gone?” Despite the sarcastic tone, her question risked reaffirming rather than denouncing the stereotypical moral and physical images invoked by *rijula*.¹¹

The last frame was the “Sahwa” frame, in reference to the “Awakening of Islam” phase in Saudi Arabia between the 1980s and the 1990s, “when radical Islamic ideology ... spread among the society” (Alhuzami and Bailey 2021, 5). The Sahwa frame was intended to counter-shame Islamists in Kuwait, blaming them for the rise of a fundamentalist exclusionary ideology echoing that of the Sahwa phase in Saudi Arabia. It was another example of a reverse discourse strategy re-articulating the word “Sahwa,” assigning negative meanings to it to contest and ridicule its literal and original sense. The reference was used not only by Kuwaiti women but also by their Saudi counterparts, who were attempting to show solidarity with the former. For example, one Saudi woman tweeted: “I feel sorry for you Kuwaiti women. We have got rid of the Sahwa. But it has traveled to you. All the solidarity and prayers are with you. You can fight this rotten ideology.” The interaction between Saudi and Kuwaiti women activists is not unique to this instance. All of my interviewees spoke about drawing inspiration from Saudi online feminist activism and the importance of regional online solidarity in maintaining the momentum of feminist activism and reinforcing the presence of feminism in Kuwait.

“Sahwa” was also sometimes juxtaposed with “cavemen” to mock Kuwaiti Islamists, implying that their ideas are regressive and fail to recognize societal and cultural changes. Addressing Islamists as a homogeneous bloc with a single discourse on women and discrediting them as outsiders enhanced by ridicule through the word “cavemen” risked reinforcing the antagonistic

narrative of “us” versus “them,” which feminists attempted to resist. Is antagonism an inevitable outcome in such an instance? What are the alternatives – if any? In January 2022, Mubarak wrote a detailed and thoughtful response to the lecture, departing from the “us” versus “them” narrative. She found that the fact that her request to comment in the lecture was ignored gave her an opportunity to respond in a more considered and less kneejerk manner through writing: “I must admit that ignoring me had upset me at first ... but [I was later] reminded that writing can be more powerful than the instantaneous and verbal response, which can convey errors, hastiness, causing a more damaging effect” (Mubarak 2022). Though an analysis of her piece is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note her attempt to challenge the anti-feminist discourse of the lecturer and the host by engaging with different counter-examples from Islamic texts and history, correcting the disinformation around the roots of feminism in the West, substantiating the scale of violence against women in the country, and emphasizing that feminism is diverse. While it is hard to gauge the effect of such a response in countering and shifting Islamists’ position, I contend that in the long term the significance lies in maintaining a productive debate around feminism that can appeal to broader sectors of society, particularly women.

Conclusion

Cyberfeminism is diverse and multi-layered. Understood in this article as practicing and performing feminism through creative digital means, including hashtags or joint accounts, whether by self-identified feminists or those who identify with feminist causes, cyberfeminism can be seen as a particular form of constructive resistance that produces new narratives, figures, or groups. Kuwaiti cyberfeminism obscures the binary between the privileged and the voiceless by allowing young women from different social backgrounds, including the Bedouin and the Bidoon unaffiliated with formal organizations, to voice their struggle online. The participation of such women has been vital in shifting the classist discourse associated with the WCSS or elite groups toward a more intersectional discourse that centers their experiences, stories, and double oppression – a point that deserves further investigation in future research. Anonymity is a common practice for protection, though it can be emotionally challenging and affect credibility. Despite this, anonymous cyberfeminists play a crucial role in activism, establishing a collective feminist presence. However, online feminist visibility faced counter-mobilization through an online lecture organized by the AIA, promoting gender inequality through ideological discourses and demonizing feminists while overlooking or downplaying the extent of violence against women. In response, Kuwaiti activists framed their struggle locally through a hashtag. Cyberfeminism can have limitations, including fragmentation and the reinforcement of the binary

opposition of “us” versus “them” – an inevitable outcome of a hostile narrative by their opponents. Mubarak (2022) attempted to avoid this binary by writing a lengthy article grounded in evidence from multiple sources. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of both responses in deterring and countering anti-feminist claims remains an open question.

Online feminist mobilizations and anti-feminist counter-mobilizations have offline consequences beyond street protests. The contestation between Kuwaiti feminists and conservative Islamists has resurfaced in subsequent events, including political attacks on the Women’s and Gender Studies Research Unit at Kuwait University, prompting women academics to respond in a statement (El-Tohamy 2022); the government’s cancelation of a women’s yoga retreat after backlash by conservative Islamists and clerics (*National News* 2022); and the circulation of a “values document” signed by conservative candidates prior to the 2022 National Assembly elections, calling for the implementation of strict Islamic laws, including gender segregation in public spaces (Omar 2022). At the time of writing, Kuwaiti civil society groups and activists were expressing outrage over Article 16 of a new draft law on the formation of the National Electoral Commission, which would require women to abide by Sharia rules and provisions to be able to exercise their rights to stand as candidates and to vote (*Alarab* 2023).¹²

The offline impact of cyberfeminism can be both short and long term. The former pertains to tangible and concrete policies and regulations, such as the family protection law.¹³ The latter includes less formal consequences, such as maintaining a lively feminist discourse or moving this discourse from the realm of cyberspace to that of mainstream media or television drama (see *Radionisaa* 2022). I concur with other scholars (Doajji 2017; Khamis 2016, 2019) that more abstract outcomes can be far more crucial than short-term concrete ones. It is a long journey and process. Herein lies the essence of constructive resistance.

Notes

1. Twitter is now called X (see Capoot 2023). However, throughout the article, I refer to the platform as Twitter because the events analyzed here took place before Elon Musk bought the app and rebranded it as X.
2. *Takfiri* is an adjective describing the ideology of excommunicating Muslims from their religion.
3. The tribal Bedouin (*bedu*) “constitute around 60 percent of the Kuwaiti national population, though the Kuwaiti census does not give specific information based on such social designations” (Al-Nakib 2014, 14). For a historical discussion of the dichotomy of the *hadar*/sedentary (urban) versus *bedū*/nomadic (tribal) in the Kuwaiti local discourse, see Al-Nakib (2014). The Arabic word *bidoon* means “without,” and *bidoon jinsiyah* means “without citizenship.” “The term *bidoon* in Kuwait refers to the stateless group of people who were not given Kuwaiti nationality and citizenship for different reasons” (Abu Sulaib 2020, 134). For a discussion

of these reasons, see Abu Sulaib (2020). No accurate statistics are available regarding the Bidoon people in Kuwait. As of 2016, government figures estimated that there were 92,000 Bidoons. However, this number has been contested by Kuwaiti human rights activists and academics (Abu Sulaib 2020). This sample is part of a larger sample of participants from Iraq, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia who participated in my research project on cyberfeminism in the four countries.

4. Political Islamists in Kuwait are not homogeneous. They can be categorized into Salafists, members of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Islamic-oriented tribal Islamists (Maktabi 2017), as well as Shia Islamists (González 2013). There are further divisions within each group. Though they share a similar patriarchal worldview, they differ in their interpretations and how they approach women's rights and issues according to the surrounding context and their self-interests (Maktabi 2017).
5. Preceded by smaller protests in 2006 and 2011 against "corruption scandals," Karamt Watan reflected people's outrage at the dissolution of the National Assembly and unexpected changes in the electoral law (Buscemi 2016, 198).
6. Based on my interviews with the three activists who launched this account (@bedoon_women), I understand that this collaboration could not be sustained for several reasons, including censorship.
7. Farah Akbar's murderer was sentenced to death in December 2022 (see *Middle East Monitor* 2022).
8. The two MPs in question belong to the Muslim Brotherhood.
9. The lecturer is of a Salafi background. See عدنان الهذال on Twitter: "دعاء عظيم ويسير، على من يشتره الله تعالى له، يذكره الشيخ د. محمد ضاوي العصيمي، من أهل الدعوة السلفية الصحيحة النقية، والذي لم يُغيره الأيام ولم يُغيره الإعلام، نسأل الله لنا وله الحق والثبات".
10. To this end, the host spoke about French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir and her book *The Second Sex*, describing it as a masculine book aimed at "getting rid of femininity," seen as natural and inherently in alignment with Islamic *fiqh* (the study and understanding of Islamic jurisprudence). Moreover, he mentioned her "suspension from her teaching position in 1943 after encouraging girls to practice *shudud*." This selective and superficial reading of de Beauvoir's text and life was intended to widen the gap between Kuwaiti society and feminists.
11. For a discussion of the discourses of manhood in the Middle East, see Gilmore (1990).
12. The National Assembly approved the draft law in August 2023 (*Jusoor Post* 2023). It should be noted that in May 2024, the Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah dissolved "the opposition-dominated parliament and suspended some articles of the country's constitution for a period not exceeding four years" (Farhat 2024).
13. In November 2020, following a series of femicides and media attention toward domestic violence, the Kuwaiti parliament passed the family protection law (Al-Sharekh and Al-Mukhled 2023). However, many of its articles have remained merely ink on paper (Al-Mukhled 2021b).

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