

R E V I E W S

FEMINIST IN THE DIASPORA: FRIEND OR FOE?

Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt (eds.): Women and War in the Middle East. Transnational Perspectives. Zed Books, 2009, 272 pages. Price: £65.

The Middle Eastern region is, to a large extent, object of associations about instability, violence, and war. As the editors Al-Ali and Pratt point out in their introduction, these instabilities may give reason to concern in other regions, e.g. in Europe, but it is predominantly the populations of the Middle East that feel and live with the consequences. As one reads through the chapters of the book, it increasingly becomes clear that this is so equally for the female and the male parts of these populations. More precisely, the different contributions in the book give the reader a nuanced insight into the kind of political maneuvering, compensative actions and survival strategies which particularly women engage in, once their country (whether they still live in it or not) is torn by war and conflict. This is further highlighted in situations where so-called peacebuilding is inaugurated – very often in parallel with continued violence or other actions of war. Thus, during war and/or conflict, institutions break down and stable incomes disappear. V. Spike Peterson's contribution sheds light on the informal forms of economy, in which both women and men engage as a consequence of these conditions.

Further, gender is a necessary element of the analysis of how war is legitimated: the US government decided to invade Iraq in 2003 with direct reference to the suffering of women under Saddam Hussein's rule, ignoring the extensive participation in public life and the high level of education for women in Saddam's Iraq.

In brief, the idea of the book is to combine insights from theory on securitization with transnational migration studies in a gender perspective. An important share of these issues concerns mobilization and interference in conflict and post-conflict in primarily Iraq and Palestine, executed by Diaspora populations in Europe and the US.

Consequently, the editors emphasize how women in receiving societies, through mobilization and associative activities, attempt to influence decisions about starting war, about conflict resolution and peace processes. In their study of women in the Iraqi diaspora in the US, Al-Ali and Pratt demonstrate that women not only contribute to creating peace, but certainly also war – if anyone should still doubt this. In other words, Iraqi women are not united in a common action or goal, but are just about as divided in different political fractions as the population as a whole. Women enter dubious alliances with the official enemy or aggressor in their country, when Iraqi women's organizations in their American exile collaborate with the American government to rebuild Iraq, destructed by the Ameri-

cans and their allies. Women also constitute an important element of building national ideologies. They set boundaries for feminist objectives in such processes, often with support from foreign donors. Thereby, they demonstrate their after all limited interests for 'the women's cause' in the country.

Confirmed by other literature (see Tripp 2009, the context being African states), there is an interesting and hardly coincidental collapse between state failure/state building and a boom of women's activism. The Iraqi and Palestinian cases both demonstrate that in the contexts of a weak state, a state close to collapsing, as well as a build-up phase, are critical for establishing new and improved rights for women. It is obvious that women – and men – in these situations have to seize the chance to mobilize and influence the fundamental structures of their future society. The elaborations of new laws and constitutions simply constitute an opportunity for improving the gender balance. In the Kurdish (Shahrazad Mojab's contribution), the Palestinian (Riina Isotalo's contribution) and the Iraqi cases (Martina Kamp's contribution) a concurrent pattern in this state building process becomes obvious. 'The woman issue' is cut off from the feminist agenda and consequently becomes, depoliticized, whether this happens through 'NGO'ization' or via government initiatives.

What about transnational feminist networks? Currently,

an increasing interest and hopefulness is attached to transnational feminism, caused by new communication technologies and other developments that facilitate closer cooperation in spite of geographical distances. Must not transnational cooperation, e.g. between feminist movements of countries in war and countries in peace, be assumed to be a constructive feature in these processes? In their concluding chapter, Al-Ali and Pratt approach a response to this question by dividing relevant organizations into one category which combines transnational politics with transnational methods, and another which uses transnational methods, but without a transnational political perspective. The latter does not avoid colonial-imperialist structures and military strategies, inherent in the initiatives that involved governments launch. More interesting are the organizations that work to illustrate the ways in which racism, gender discrimination and global North-South relations are closely intertwined – and therefore connect their transnational methods with a transnational politics. In both cases, feminists in the diaspora come to the fore of events, since they usually have privileged access to influence the definition of the needs of women (and men) in conflict-ridden sending societies. From the point of view of the population in the latter societies, it becomes decisive, whether or not those feminists in the diaspora are regarded as political allies rather than ene-

mies. In the book this is illustrated by the existence of different fractions in the Iraqi diaspora that cooperated with the Bush administration to 'liberate women in Iraq from Saddam's sadistic rule' before and after the invasion. This cooperation provides privileged access to fora that decide how resources from the receiving country are distributed to the country in conflict or war. This is, a privilege which cannot be defended with any arguments drawing on democratic values. To reiterate an obvious point, there are severe political contradictions among women in the diaspora. There is also a discrepancy between the feminist objectives in the work of international NGOs and local feminist objectives. Sophie Richter-Devroe demonstrates in her contribution that Palestinian women, in contrast to international NGOs in the occupied territories, are far from prepared to sell out of their nationalist goals of ending the occupation.

This edited book is, to a higher degree than usual, the work of the editors. This is due to the fact that the editors have written not only an introduction, but also a contribution and a concluding chapter. The tight editing is also the strength of the book; the contributions are better connected and to a larger extent discussed as one coherent field of investigation than is often seen in an edited book. The issues of this book is beyond doubt topical, and, by adding the perspective of transnational migration studies, the contributions in

total give a much needed insight into how women act during conditions of war, conflict and peace-building. It is debatable if it is justified to refer to the Middle East in the title of the book, since all the contributions discuss conflict and war in either Iraq or Palestine – and only one chapter (by Isis Nusair) has the wider Middle East as its object of investigation. Probably, this is due to the fact that North America and Western Europe have received large numbers of refugees from these two countries, and consequently, host the larger part of their diasporas. A certain irony may be detected here; other countries in conflict and war in the Middle East (Yemen, Sudan, Algeria) may seem less relevant for the researchers of this book, all associated with universities in, unsurprisingly, North America and Western Europe.

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LITERATURE

· Tripp, Aili M., I. Casimiro, J. Kwesiga and A. Mungwa (2009): *African Women's Movements. Changing political landscapes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

A WELCOME INTRODUCTION TO FEMINISM IN ISLAM

Margot Badran: Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences.

*Oneworld, Oxford, 2009,
349 pages. Price: £19.99.*

Feminism in Islam presents some of Badran's key work over more than two decades. The first part of the book focuses on 'secular feminism' in Egypt and consists of articles published during the 1990s and early years of this decade. The second part includes more recent work and predominantly focuses on 'Islamic feminism'. This part combines a continued focus on Egypt with a more global perspective. The second part of the book is likely to attract the greatest interest, given that 'Islamic feminism' remains a controversial and largely unknown phenomenon beyond small scholarly circles, where it has been intensely discussed since the early 1990s.

Yet, the key novelty of the book is that it brings together analysis of secular and Islamic/religious feminisms in one volume. Having both together, allows for an understanding of the differences, the respective changes and (not least) their interconnections over time. According to Badran, secular and Islamic feminisms have never been hermetic/isolated entities – and we are currently witnessing an increasing convergence between them. Hence, rather than seeing secular and Islamic feminisms as oppositional forces (as they are

indeed often presented) it might be better to see them as engaging in 'constructive conversation' (Badran 2009: 6).

Badran defines 'Islamic feminism' as "a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm. Islamic feminism...derives its understanding and mandate from the 'Qur'an, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence" (Badran 2009: 242).

Her book provides us with easily accessible insights into what Islamic feminists do (claim egalitarian interpretations of Islam, which challenge traditional patriarchal interpretations and practices); how Islamic feminists act (via Islamic reinterpretation or *ijtihad* of the *Qur'an* and the *hadith*); where they do this (across the globe, as Islamic feminism is to be perceived as a global phenomenon spreading rapidly over the last two decades via new communication technology) and its potentials (which Badran sees as very important, as Islamic feminism in her view promises to transform Islam from within).

Accordingly, the book provides useful and timely insights into a phenomenon often viewed in Western public discourse as an oxymoron or contradiction in terms (given essentialist interpretations of Islam and women's rights as fundamentally irreconcilable). At the same time, it affords the parallel contestation of the term (rather than the phenomenon) by many of its supposed practitioners, who shy away from a concept, which links

their activism to ‘feminism’, viewed in equally essentialist terms as inherently Western and alien to their culture and practices. Badran explicitly writes against both these views and fundamentally challenges their underlying assumptions.

For one thing, in her analysis, feminism is *not* a Western concept *nor* is it alien to Islam. Rather, at its most basic, or generic, “feminism is a critique of women’s subordination and a challenge to male domination (in various contexts in time and space) and includes efforts to rectify women’s situation” (Badran 2009: 327).

Secondly, talking about feminism in an Egyptian context, Badran highlights that all feminists draw on religion: “Religion from the very start has been integral to the feminisms that Muslim women have constructed, both explicitly and implicitly, whether they have been called “secular feminism” or “Islamic feminism”” (Badran 2009: 2).

Thirdly, while not a very theoretical work, the book still arrives at describing the porousness and developments of a tricky concept such as secularism within an Egyptian context. Badran convincingly illustrates how secularism there originally did not connote an absence of religion, but rather a separation of state and religion. However, with the rise of political Islam/Islamism in the 1970s, a different understanding emerged, according to which secularism denotes un-Islamic, anti-Islamic and even non-Muslim (Badran 2009: 328).

Interestingly, and deeply provocative to those who see Islam as fundamentally misogynous and opposed to women’s rights, Badran also sees Islamic feminism as far more radical than secular feminism (in its Egyptian version). Whereas the latter accepted differences between the public/private spheres, the former (due to its insistence on fundamental human equality) goes much further, eliminating distinctions between public/private (Badran 2009: 3).

In the end, Badran arrives at something very important – to go beyond stereotyping, providing informative and easily accessible insights into controversial, complex and highly timely phenomena in a period where global public discourse is concerned with the challenge of dealing with related issues, such as women insisting on wearing burkas in the European public sphere.

The volume fills an important gap in the already substantial literature on ‘women and Islam’ between groundbreaking and theoretically sophisticated analyses of authors such as Saba Mahmood and the important interpretive contributions of Islam by ‘believing’ authors such as Amina Wadud.

Leaning on the contributions of these and many others, and combining this with her yearlong interest and insight into women’s activism in Egypt and in the wider Islamic Umma, Badran provides an easily accessible synthesis. This makes her book particularly useful for newcomers to the

tricky and controversial field of Islamic feminism, of which she herself has been one of the pioneering analysts.

On the weak side, it must be noted, that the book unfortunately suffers from repetition. This is unavoidable in a volume collecting previously published work and it is explicitly acknowledged by Badran herself, but it still remains annoying to the reader. In an ideal world, it would have been preferable with a new, shorter and integrated manuscript instead of the collection of small and somewhat repetitive pieces.

Another point of criticism concerns Badran’s style. In contrast to influential Islamic scholars such as Wadud, Badran does not write as ‘a believer’. Yet, notably in the last part of the book, at times it is difficult to distinguish between what Badran analyses – and what she herself believes in, as she at times appears herself very close to the Islamic ‘scholar-activists’ whom she describes. As a reader this is confusing – yet, at the same time, Badran’s clear personal commitment and interest in passing on nuance and understanding in the indeed tricky and recent phenomenon of Islamic feminism is also what, in the end, contributes to making the book an inviting and compelling contribution to the field.

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LITERATURE

· Mahmood, Saba (2005): *Politics of Piety. The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton University Press, Princeton & Oxford.

· Wadud, Amina (2006): *Inside the Gender Jihad. Women's Reform in Islam*. Oneworld, Oxford.

ARE ORTHODOX RELIGIOUS PRACTICES ALWAYS A REPRESSIVE TOOL?

Lene Sjørup and Hilda Rømer Christensen (eds.): Pieties and Gender. Brill, 2009, 236 pages. Price: 93€

A three-day conference with the theme *Gender and Religion in Global Perspectives* was held in October 2006 in Copenhagen. It was a well-organised conference with keynote speakers and commentators, and more than 50 research papers were given. I was myself one of the commentators and found this two-fold structure very fruitful not only for the outcome of the conference but also for this anthology.

The anthology *Pieties and Gender* can be seen as the result of a further discussion of one of the major themes, i.e. piety and gender, but also agency. The anthology is more or less shaped after the same model as the conference with the keynote article written by Saba Mahmood followed by ten articles, some of which use their comments on the keynote article or Mahmood's

book *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* from 2005, as their point of departure. Others mention or discuss some of the author's conclusions.

All the articles deal with the common theme 'piety and gender' in the light of feminist or gender theories. Most of them take Judith Butler's work into account but also symbol theory, place and space theory, human-material theory and of course, social science theories in a wider perspective are well represented in the articles. Especially the discussion of agency is welcomed.

The anthology is divided into four parts: (1) Pieties and Politics, (2) Pieties and Methodologies, (3) Virtuous Masculinities, and (4) Symbolic Gender Representations. This provides the reader with a good understanding of the different angles, from which the theme is approached. Furthermore, the reader is aided by a well-written introduction by Lene Sjørup, who chooses to introduce not only the book and the different contributions as such, but also the underlying feminist theory which Mahmood's article raises new questions to.

Part one: *Pieties and Politics* consists of four articles. The first one by Saba Mahmood has the title *Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject*. This is followed by the article *The Politics of Piety and the Norms of Analysis* by Robin May Schott, who was also one of the commentators at the conference. The third article *Gender, Religion and Human*

Rights in Europe is written by Kari Elisabeth Børresen.

Mahmood's article is both a short outline and a critique of feminist theory and its lack of exploring or taking religious differences into account. In that light she wishes to spread the understanding of agency, especially in relation to women whose senses of self have been shaped by a non-liberal tradition. She thus suggests that agency should not be seen as a synonym of resistance or as a tool for inactivity and submission, but rather as a capacity for action. Her ethnographical fieldwork in Cairo on a women grassroots piety movement called *the Mosque Movement* serves as an empirical example.

Robin May Schott begins her article by pointing out where Mahmood's article touches upon important issues in contemporary debates, i.e. the tensions between (a) secular liberal discourses and religious discourses and (b) feminist and religious discourses. Schott elaborates a bit upon this, but – what may be more interesting to the theme of the book – she also questions Mahmood's attempt to detach the theoretical analysis from the prescriptive dimensions of feminism in the sense of having normative values.

Børresen elaborates on the impact of religion in the shaping of socio-political gender roles, using the formation of the human rights in Europe as an example. It is an interesting article as long as it stays in Europe and uses Christianity and Islam as examples. But I do not understand where the idea

search on current gender and development strategies; contribute to a critical revisiting of the key concepts and their application in development work; provide inputs and inspiration for researchers and practitioners; and/or reflect on the role of research and researchers within this area.

Kvinder, Køn & Forskning is an interdisciplinary journal on gender research in the fields of culture, society, nature, health,

and technology. The journal is mainly aimed at researchers in the field of gender scholarship but may also be relevant for other researchers and students as well as for various interest groups et al. The aim of the journal is to reflect the depth and scope of gender research in Denmark. The articles deal with theoretical, methodological, and empirical issues. *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning* constitutes a forum for scholarly debate on theories, methodolo-

gies, and interpretations.

Theme editors: Lene Bull Christiansen, Diana Højlund Madsen and Lise Rolandsen Agustín

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