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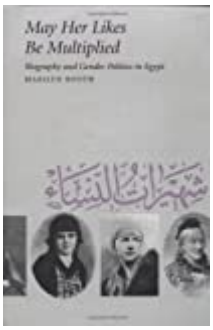

Marilyn Booth. *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. xxxviii + 460 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-22419-3; $35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-22420-9.

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Neither Seditious nor Subversive, Neither Critical nor Counterhegemonic

May Her Likes be Multiplied is a welcome addition to the burgeoning field of scholarship on women in modern Egypt and more generally the Middle East. It represents a nuanced and sustained analysis of female biographies published in Egypt from the late-nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth. This is a valuable study of sources on women, for women and (largely) by women that locates the discourse of a gendered literary genre within the social and political matrix of emerging modernity. Booth locates the lineage of women's biography in Egypt within the Arabic tradition of biography (*tabaqat*), but also sees it as deriving from the Western model of exemplary writing. This kind of biography first emerged in Egypt with the work of Maryam Nahhas in 1879, though Booth's study is based on the slightly later work of Zaynab Fawwaz (*Scattered Pearls on the Generations of the Mistresses of Seclusion*, 1894) and, more substantially, the women's magazine literature that appeared in Egypt in the early 1890s with the publication of Hind Nawfal's *al-Fatah* and similar publications in the succeeding decades. Each magazine had its own particular character and constituency, but all aimed at a female readership and many featured biographies that celebrated the lives and achievements of famous women.

These portraits often ended with a formulation, from which the title of the book derives, that praised its subject and, in some sense, enjoined the reader to follow her example. Throughout the period discussed, journalism and, to a lesser extent, fiction were perhaps the only avenues open to women to represent a female voice in writing and historical imagination. Egyptian women were neither represented in the academy–it was not until the 1970s that they began to make their first inroads into university history departments-?nor were they given much consideration in the mainstream (male) histories unless it was as passive objects within the narrative. Though less concerned with the truth of these biographies, Booth mines this extensive literature not only for its moralist dimension but also to present these biographies as a kind of alternative history.

Booth's approach emphasises both the production and reception of the text as key aspects to understanding the intention, meaning and possible effect of the biographies. She acknowledges some important variations between magazines run by Syrian, Muslim and Coptic

women, and those adopting a religious or more secular tone. These were reflected in the choice of subjects, particularly in the prominence given to Western women; the attitude towards the pre-Islamic period and the importance given to religious and ethnic identity and the putative audience. Despite these differences, Booth is more struck by what these biographies have in common, namely, a "unified didactic mission" that offered a "discourse of exemplarity," exhorting women to emulate those who exemplified attributes of virtue and served as "paragons of purity." This emphasis on unity over diversity does mean that certain questions–such as the position of non-Arabophone women resident in Egypt–are not addressed, but Booth presents a convincing case for a collective autobiographical project that implied a sense of constructed female community. Influenced by a broadly modernist perspective, these life histories were anchored in their own cultural context (a marriage which at times projected equivocal and even inconsistent positions on certain issues but ultimately addressed the same basic question of the place of women in a changing world).

This ambiguous stance was exemplified in a number of issues such as the attitude taken towards women's employment. Biographies generally favored the women's right to work, but the dominant perspective, particularly from the 1920s, was solidly located in the world of the bourgeoisie where women should defer to men. The possibility of a public career for women or a redefinition of the traditional divisions of labor was not explicitly addressed. Even in cases where women held political power in their own right, such as Catherine the Great, the biographies stressed the primacy of the domestic arena, praising the virtues of domestic management, thrift, companionship in marriage, motherhood and upbringing. A similar position was taken towards the issue of education for girls which was extolled as a benefit, but which was usually confined to the context of a mother's role towards her daughter or as heavily circumscribed by the notion of national duty. Booth argues, however, that this cult of domesticity was not simply a "discourse of containment" since women writers, while they stressed the importance of the home, did so for practical or strategic reasons and generally did not see it as an exclusive activity. Nevertheless, she sees the increasing emphasis of the domestic in the 1920s as part of a backlash against the more radical political activities of women. The "woman behind the man," exemplified in the figure of Safiyya Zaghlul, wife of the Wafdist leader, becomes a preferred model, rather than the militant feminist. There is a celebration of the women's movement, but it is, in some sense, muffled, while emphasis is given to the primacy of the home in a way that downplays any threat to social order. For strategic reasons, biography was largely silent on issues such as the veil and polygyny. In this way, magazine editors showed themselves to be more cautious than women activists.

The continuing and ambiguous tension between the role of women and the public national arena provides a fruitful theme. According to Booth, female biographies had a clear national orientation (as opposed to an international perspective) and yet western models were used throughout the period to invoke moral values and behavior. Indeed, the unlikely figure of Joan of Arc was the most common subject before 1940. Here Booth's detailed study offers an illuminating case of how a single historical figure could project a whole range of social values. Joan of Arc could serve as an exemplar of religious belief, peasant authenticity, nationalist feeling, indeed, even as an anti-imperialist resisting the "British" Army. Thus Western models of biography could be used to supersede or overlook national and ethnic boundaries, but this did involve a startling silence on the issue of imperialism. Yet this fusion of diverse, competing and sometimes contradictory currents was part of a complicated negotiation between emergent nationalism, modernity and gender roles. Booth sees female biography as collectively seeking to draw on local tradition leavened by Western liberal values to articulate and project an indigenous female modernity. In the shortest and least-developed chapter, Booth discusses some biographies that offer more doubtful or negative models, such as women criminals and temptresses–almost all of them from the West. She links this trend to increasing commercialisation and attention to the mass market. It might also have been illuminating to consider the commercial aspect of the production of women's magazines throughout the whole period, not only from a point of view of comparative circulation, but to consider in what way commercial considerations may have played a part in the literary product. Having dedicated most of her study to a detailed analysis of female biography in the period up until 1940, Booth's last chapter concludes with some highly pertinent reflections on developments of the genre since the 1950s. Most notable is the emergence of an Islamist trend of biography that has sponsored a move away from a "secular" approach to a more religious idiom where Muslim women and, particularly, early Islamic figures feature more than Western women, where there is a greater communal and less individualist tone, and where the *umma* rather than the *watan* is invoked.

Booth's study shows female biography in Egypt as a significant arena for the construction and contest of the position and role of women in society. The genre was not an overtly radical medium, and Booth is well aware of its elite origins and values, nor was it monolithic in character. Neither seditious enough to be subversive, nor critical enough to be counterhegemonic, it nevertheless sought to shift, negotiate and accommodate the boundaries of gender in both the public and private realms. The result is a complex, ambiguous narrative and debate about the nature of modernity. Booth's study will form an important contribution to scholarship dealing with the way women's voices were articulated and represented in Egypt, and will profit those interested not just in Egyptian literature, society and politics, but more broadly in feminism of the non-Western world and the politics of biography.

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