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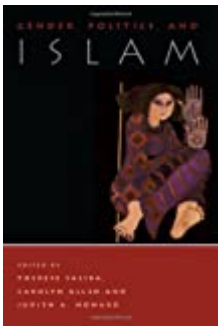

Therese Saliba, Carolyn Allen, Judith A. Howard, eds. *Gender, Politics, and Islam.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. 354 pp. $39.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-73428-6; $21.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-73429-3.

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Postcolonial, Feminist, and Islamic Studies

This book is a timely response to Bernard Lewis and Samuel P. Huntington's thesis of the civilizational clash between Islamic fundamentalism and Western modernity as well as the rescue narrative of the "Muslim woman" generated by the 9/11 events and the U.S. war in Afghanistan. In contrast to the decontextualized images of the "Muslim woman" circulating in the American mass media, which depict the veil as an icon of Islamic fundamentalism and Islam as the enemy of the "Muslim woman" and Western democracy, the nine articles in this book construct Islamic identity as a heterogeneous and historically situated concept. Refuting the Orientalist stereotype of the "Muslim woman" as a passive victim, the contributors to this book emphasize the agency of Muslim women and their constant struggle as they juggle the conflicting demands of their individual and collective identities. This study shows that Muslim women's lives are conditioned not only by their gender, religion, and culture, but also by their class, race, nationality, Western imperialism, and the power structures of the global market.

In chapter 1, "Islamic Feminism and Discontents: Towards a Resolution of the Debate," Valentine M. Moghadam relies on a Marxist-feminist methodology to analyze the reformist and feminist debates within the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Iranian expatriate feminist and leftist circles in Europe and North America. Rejecting what Muslim feminists call today "the 'correct' reading of Islamic texts" and the possibility for gender equality and minority rights within an Islamic reformist framework, she argues for the separation of mosque and state (p. 38). While understanding the discursive theological strategy of Muslim feminists, she fears that their exclusive focus on the Qur'an will hamper their access to socioeconomic and political power. Because of Islamic feminism's affinities to Western feminism, she calls for a broader definition of global feminism, one that not only includes Muslim women but also seeks to "transform socio-economic structures, political power, and international relations" which affect women's lives worldwide (p. 45).

Chapter 2, "The Politics of Feminism in Islam" by

Anouar Majid stands out as a defense of Islamic feminism. Critiquing clerical orthodox Islam and Western global capitalism, the author reconceptualizes Islamic feminism within a more expansive concept of Islam, one which is "democratic, anti-patriarchal and anti-imperialist" (p. 56). Advocating women's rights from an Islamic paradigm, he calls for the "reassessment of Islamic traditions" (p. 54), the reintroduction of the consensus practice, and the abandonment of the Shari'a law. Majid also exposes how the discourses of Orientalism, Islamic orthodoxy, and the hegemonic structures of imperialism condition almost all attempts to talk about Muslim women. While praising Muslim feminist scholars like Leila Ahmed, Mernia Lazreg, Nawal al Saadawi, and Leila Abouzid, he attacks Tahar Ben Jelloun for catering to a Western audience and Fatima Mernissi for championing the capitalist model of Western secularism.

This article can be read, in the author's own words, as one of those "changing images" of "defensive Islam" (p. 71). As Majid puts it, "the rejection of certain Western secular models in the age of late capitalism is consequently a survival imperative for Muslim people, not just a fanatical reaction to 'progress' " (p. 75). The originality of this study lies in the introduction of the reformist thought of the executed Sudanese scholar Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, who has been discarded from public memory in the Arabic world. However, because of its apologetic framework, the article presents some contradictions. The first concerns Majid's views on what is sacred in the Islamic faith. While dismissing secularism as a Western import and arguing that the Muslim world rejects and condemns, as the Rushdie case demonstrates, "the secularization of the Revelation and of the Prophet's life,", he offers as a reformist model *The Second Message of Islam* (1987), the book over which Taha was executed for apostasy (p. 72). If, as Majid argues, Muslims throughout the world have rejected Rushdie's postmodern desacralization of the Qur'an and the Prophet's life, why will they accept the abrogation of the Shari'a law and the Medinese Revelation that Taha and his disciple Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im advocate? Who has the power to negotiate Revelation? What are the foundational principles of Islam? And who determines them? Where do Muslim women stand in Taha's "revolutionary" reading and interpretation of the Qur'an? The article remains silent over these questions. A further contradiction exists between the author's call for a "redefined Islam" and his injunction to preserve this redefined Islam "as a viable alternative" to Westernization (p. 85). While conceding that Islamic cultures get constantly transformed and reinvented, the author believes that cultures (if reformed) can be strategically frozen and "preserve[d]" (p. 85). Finally, Mernissi privileges, not al Jahiliya as Majid argues, but early Islam. As a matter of fact, she locates her reformist agenda not in Western secularism but in spiritual Islam. For Mernissi, "the democratic glorification of the human individual, regardless of sex, race, or status, is the kernel of the Muslim message" (p. 19). Although he critiques her, Majid shares with Mernissi both her idealization of the early Islamic period and her anthropological understanding of culture as a set of beliefs and practices confined within some geographic boundaries.

In chapter 3, "The Power Paradox in Muslim Women's Majales: North-West Pakistani Mourning Rituals as Sites of Contestation over Religious Politics, Ethnicity, and Gender," Mary Elaine Hegland focuses on the agency and social histories of three Shi'a ethnic groups (Mohajirs, Pukhtun, and Qizilbash) in Peshawar, Pakistan. She examines how the dominant Mohajir ritual serves to reinforce the fundamentalist Shi'a worldview of the Mohajirs at the expense of other ethnic groups' languages and ritual styles. While inclusive of all classes, only elite women can host and manage these majales. Even though she concedes that Shi'a women are not defined by their religion alone, and that other factors like ethnicity, nationality, and class come into play, in jumping from the Battle of Karbala (680 A.D.) to Pakistan's partition from India (1947), Hegland creates a historical gap of 1322 years, thus dehistoricizing the lives of the women she is studying. Shi'a Islam and South Asia emerge in this article as "themed"[1] or pre-narrated spaces, where fundamentalism and "the control of females" are held as the "central" aspects of the Shi'a "faith" and South Asian culture (p. 124). In Hegland's article, there is no space for the Shi'a gendered subaltern to speak, whether fundamentalist, moderate, or liberal.

Chapter 4: Julie Peteet's "Icons and Militants: Mothering in the Danger Zone" provides a counterview to the decontextualized image of the demonic Palestinian mother who celebrates the death of her children in the U.S. mass media. Through her ethnographic study of Palestinian women living in the refugee camps in Lebanon and the West Bank, Peteet examines how the nationalist discourse of "maternal sacrifice," although patriarchal, provides Palestinian mothers with a limited agency to critique the leadership of the Palestinian movement. Focusing on class, she argues that most of these women who lost children in the Palestinian struggle are poor women who are often dismissed as politically immature by the upper class educated Palestinian activists. Be-

sides allowing the subjects of her study like Um Muhammad, Um Khalid, Um Saleh, and Um Ali to speak, Peteet explains to her Western audience that the mother of the martyr ululates, not because she does not understand the value of human life, but "in defiance at the forces that caused the death" of her child (p. 146). The mother of the martyr cannot display her grief in public; she "lamented and bewailed privately." Peteet's contribution lies also in her original study of the interrelations between gender, exile, and citizenship in the Palestine National Charter.

In chaper 5, "Elusive Bodies: The Politics and Aesthetics among Yemeni Elite Women," Gabriele vom Bruck studies the taboos that must be adhered to by all Yemeni women and explains how both the practice and avoidance of taboos associated with the female body (such as dress, odors, voices, dress style, and cosmetics) serve to mark individual and social identity. Because the use of cosmetics serves to delineate the social difference between married and unmarried women, a married woman's abstention from adorning herself constitutes a subversive act to the Yemeni gender ideology. While the *tafritah* is an all-women's social gathering, it is not free from patriarchal surveillance as women often control and police the lives of other women on behalf of men.

Chapter 6: Elora Shehabuddin's "Contesting the Illicit: Gender and the Politics of Fatwas in Bangladesh" investigates the fatwas against poor women in the rural areas of Bengladesh, and argues that these are mostly issued by a local male elite eager to maintain their power amidst the profound economic and political transformations affecting Bengladesh. These fatwas are deployed not only against women who commit adultery, but also against those who have an "increasing access to credit, employment, and educational opportunities outside the home" (p. 209). Shehabuddin's contribution lies in moving the deadlock in feminist scholarship on Muslim women, from the issue of Islam's compatibility with women's rights, to the challenge of postcoloniality and the failure of the Islamic nation states like Bengladesh to protect the rights of all its male and female citizens. Shehabuddin superbly demonstrates how poor women juggle secularist and Islamic feminist agendas in ways that best serve their economic, social, and political interests.

In chapters 7 and 8, S. M. Shamsul Alam's "Women in the Era of Modernity and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Case of Taslima Nasrin of Bangladesh" and Amel Amireh's "Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World" deal with the hegemonic discursive and political structures which condition the production and reception of the works of Muslim women activists in their home countries and the West. Shamsul Alam argues it is a mistake to read the fatwa against Nasrin as a clash between Islamic fundamentalism and modernity because such binarism forecloses the possibility of "gendered subaltern self-representation" (p. 236). Instead Nasrin's work should be read as a subversive critique of both the Islamist and the male-centered nationalist/modernist discourses in Bengladesh. Showing the imbalance of power in the cultural exchange between East and West, Amireh investigates the differences in El Saadawi's writings in Arabic and translation as well as the reception of her novels in the Arab and Western academic and non-academic circles. Amireh argues that despite El Saadawi's struggle against misappropriation, she presents herself in an image which often reinforces Western stereotypes about Muslim women. To redress this, Amireh calls for a new method of reading Muslim women, one which will investigate how the meanings of their texts are framed and distorted by the context of reception.

In chapter 9, "Muslim Women: Negotiations in the Third Space," Shahnaz Khan borrows Homi Bhabha's concept of "hybridized subjectivity in the third space" to explore the ways in which Muslim women living in North American diasporic communities create a hybrid form of agency as they negotiate the intersecting discourses of Islamism, Orientalism, and multiculturalism which regulate their lives (p. 306). For Karima, an Arab Muslim who immigrated from Iran, the role of a Muslim woman in Canada is reduced to the control of her daughters' bodies with no "spiritual or ritual requirements" (p. 321). The story of the East Indian Karima, the Lesbian Muslim woman who immigrated from Uganda, shows that Islamic identity is not monolithic and that Muslim women are often caught in the double bind to defend Islam against racist non-Muslims and Muslim women against radical Islam. Khan invites activists and scholars to view Muslim women "as active agents in the third space" (p. 332) and Muslim culture "as a multiple, shifting, and contradictory site" (p. 334).

This book is a brilliant contribution to the fields of postcolonial, feminist, and Islamic studies. As a part of a graduate student seminar, this collection will provide a wonderful forum for discussion and critical analysis. I believe the most original contribution of this work lies in its relocation of the modernist binarism between Islamic tradition and Western democracy to the issue of legalistic Islam and the failure of the modern Islamic state to protect and include its citizens (including the gendered

subaltern) in the political and economic power structures of the postcolonial nation state. The book is an excellent extension in postcolonial studies of scholarly works like Mahmood Mamdani's *Subject and Citizen: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (1996).

Note

[1]. Patricia Yaeger, *Introduction: Narrating Space: The Geography of Identity* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 18.

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