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Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences

Margot Badran

Oneworld, 2009

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What does it mean for a woman to speak? This is one of the central underlying questions in Margot Badran's *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*. She situates what women's speaking means in the context of modernity and Islam in the wake of colonialism, public education, nationalism, secularism, and later Islamist revival and Islamic feminists' *ijtihad*. Badran juxtaposes patriarchal traditions and the emergence of self-authorizing female voices in their negotiation of changing social realities. A theme that runs throughout the whole collection of essays is women speaking for themselves about their own lives, which constitutes "a form of shedding of the patriarchal surrogate voice" (Badran, 2009, p. 97).

Badran offers readers a rich historical encounter with pioneering Egyptian feminists such as Huda Sha'rawi, Nabawiyya Musa, and Malak Hifni Nasif, who exited "the institution of female seclusion" (Badran, 2009, p. 65) and entered the public realm and sociopolitical discourse by promoting education and humanitarian progress as part of the nationalist movement. She also explores how male leaders and religious authorities have used concerns over women's morality as a ubiquitous rationale for denying women public and self-authorizing roles. She focuses mainly on the context of late 19th- and 20th-century Egypt, but also explores other Muslim majority contexts in the second section of the book. The author brings her decades-long career and extensive expertise as a historian of the modern Middle East, women, and gender to this broad

and compelling topic, demonstrating that feminism was and continues to be an indigenous movement that also manifests at the intersection of secularism and religion.

The volume is a compilation of some of the author's previous essays, organized into two parts. The first and most in-depth part centers the voices and activism of Egyptian feminists. Because the text was not written as one volume, there is some overlap in content, which becomes repetitive. However, in the second part of the book, Badran broadens the scope to other Islamic-majority contexts such as Yemen, Tunisia, Turkey, Nigeria, and Malaysia, and also explores late 20th- and early 21st-century Islamic feminism, when female religious scholars continued *ijtihad* in a progressive Islamic voice. Badran also tackles issues of women's sexuality in Islam, with a chapter on female genital mutilation and another on reforms of *hudud* law or Qur'an-sanctioned penalties. She rounds out the text with three chapters that explore definitions of Islamic feminisms, as women have forged new conceptions of gender roles and their own subjectivity through religious interpretation and cultural commentary amid more recent conceptualizations of modernity.

Badran deals extensively with the contested term "feminism" in Egypt, which appeared overtly in the early 1920s but can trace its lineage back as early as the 1860s in women's published writings, where the ultimate aim was to lift women from oppression and subordination and "achieve better lives for women" (Badran, 2009, p. 18). Badran nuances the history of the term and argues for an independently forged feminism in Islamic contexts. She explores various examples of female agency and self-determination, while also highlighting the intersectionality of class, ethnicity, and religion. Ultimately, Badran maps the transition of women from object to subject in Islamic societies, where "women insist on their own growth, productivity, and creativity in diverse spheres" (Badran, 2009, p. 143), and she provides a map of the waves of feminism in the Islamic world, particularly Egypt. She also reveals ways in which male actors, whether nationalists or Islamists, have used women's position to further their agendas of either national liberation or cultural preservation.

Chapter four offers a particularly compelling case study of a self-authorizing female voice at the intersection of modernity, feminism, nationalism, and Islam: the autobiography of Nabawiyya Musa. Musa was a pioneering girls' educator who was committed to nation-building via education as a means to freedom from colonial oppression, even though girls' education was

considered a violation of religion. This particular chapter exemplifies Badran's argument that feminism was indigenous to Egypt and Muslim society outside of Western imposition. In addition, Badran argues for autobiography as feminist epistemology, whereby scholars can witness the presence of feminist consciousness and activism as political work. She describes how Musa engaged in a radical act by writing about herself at a time when women's literacy and even saying a woman's name aloud in the street were considered improper.

One shortcoming of the book is that Badran does not adequately define or problematize the term "modernity." However, she does explore the moments when women in the Islamic milieu emerged as recognized yet contested contributors to social and civilizational discourse. In most courses on modern Islam, Muhammad 'Abduh, Qasim Amin, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, and Rashid Rida are presented as key modernist and reformist figures in the shaping of Islamic discourse. Each of these individuals had opinions about women and their place in the changing modern world. To scholars of modern Islam Badran offers Huda Sha'rawi, Nabawiyya Musa, Bahithat al-Badiya, and Nawal al-Saadawi, among others, who should be rightly included for their significant role in this period through their groundbreaking work and activism.

Badran's book brings these names and other significant indigenous feminists and movements to the fore in the discussion of Islamic history, while exploring the definition of feminism and its various iterations over the course of more than a century and a half. Her work continues to be an important and accessible text for scholars of Islam that provides a complex picture of the history of Islamic feminism, while also exploring tensions and polemics about nationalist, secularist, and Islamist views. Even today, the field of Islamic studies needs texts like Badran's that center women in both national and Islamic histories and counter the misconception that Islam and feminism are incompatible. This text remains relevant in the ways it centers Muslim women's lived experiences, their shedding of the "patriarchal surrogate voice," and their contribution to knowledge production and activism.

References

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