

Nazira Zeineddine: A Pioneer of Islamic Feminism, by miriam cooke*. Ser. Makers of the Muslim World. Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2010. xix + 142 pages.

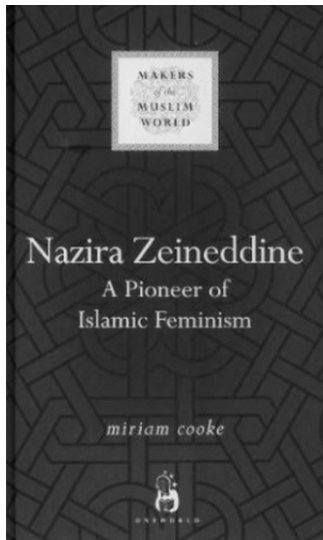
REVIEWED BY MARILYN BOOTH

In 1927, nineteen-year-old Nazira Zayn al-Din began to write in response to a campaign in mandate-era Syria to force its female subjects to wear face veils. What she envisioned as a short oration or essay saw its way into print as a substantial tome in 1928, under the title *al-Sufur wa'l-Hijab (Unveiling and Veiling)*. Written in a rhetorical style that careens between scholarly citation and polemic, oralistic second-person singular address and the oratory of collective address, the book is embedded in the local-regional discourses of its era: on gender right, on the quality and nature of European practices adopted by local elites, on the contemporaneity of Islam as lived practice.

Though *Unveiling and Veiling* had its strong supporters, its publication set off a firestorm of accusations and counter-arguments. It resulted in one of numerous discursive eruptions from the late 19th through the early 20th century amongst Arabic-speaking elites that put the politics of gender and home at the symbolic and lived centre of national survival. Happily for later researchers, Zayn al-Din (cooke has chosen to use the French-inflected version of Nazira's family name, Zeineddine) collected many of the reviews, charges, and accolades that arose from her first book in her second volume, *al-Fatat wa'l-Shuyukh (The Young Woman and the Shaykhs, 1929)*, an attempt at self-explanation and self-justification. As Zayn al-Din seizes the opportunity to put her own case together via the words of others, she continues her fierce and often derisive one-woman campaign against some individuals in the religious establishment. How selective was her presentation of reactions to her book? As miriam cooke notes in her biography of Zayn al-Din, *The Young Woman and the Shaykhs* brings together reactions from far outside the Arab world, though (as cooke doesn't note) this 'international attention' (xi) appears to have been largely limited to Arabic-language journals, which were published from Sao Paolo to the Indian subcontinent (The French-language organ of the Egyptian Feminist Union, *L'Egyptienne*, did announce and welcome *al-Sufur wa'l-hijab*).¹ But Zayn al-Din's call did not seem to have had a lasting echo. After a few more years of public work and writing, she disappeared, more or less, from the public eye.

Born in 1908 to a Druze lawyer who had studied at leading Ottoman institutions and the formally educated daughter of a high-ranking Ottoman army officer, Nazira was raised by parents who cared about education for girls as well as boys. She dedicated *Unveiling and Veiling* to her father, and cooke emphasizes Sa'id Bek Zayn al-Din's strong role in his daughter's intellectual and political formation. Cooke stages several conversations between them that draw on Zayn al-Din's written argumentation. Ensnared in Ottoman and Syrian intellectual circles, Sa'id Bek encouraged Nazira's entry into the fray and fury of public discourse. Neither daughter nor father, it appears, expected the uproar that "the young woman" (she referred to herself as *al-fatat*, which is usually understood as an unmarried but maturing girl).

Zayn al-Din went on to marry (at an unusually late age for her time and place) and live the life of an elite Lebanese Druze woman until her death in 1976. One of cooke's purposes here is to trace the apparently quiet period after Nazira's public career, and she has elicited much biographical information from interviews with relatives, visits to homes Nazira lived in, and a reading of her books that is sensitive to autobiographical clues. While there is clearly a sympathetic link between biographer and subject, cooke is also carefully critical: she notes that Zayn al-Din's strident tone, which was often explicitly directed against particular leading religious authorities, and her attempt



Portrait of young Nazira



Nazira at a later stage in her life

to present herself as a “transcendental authority” (p. 96), likely worked against any possibility of real dialogue. Perhaps, ironically, this rhetorical boldness contributed to Zayn al-Din’s eclipse as a public intellectual. It’s a fascinating case. Cooke doesn’t speculate on its illustrative capacity beyond the immediate context, but this story has all the ingredients of a “perfect storm” that might be a lively starting point for cross-regional comparison. It’s a tale that juxtaposes a supportive, enthusiastic, and influential father with the relative isolation from social discourse that Zayn al-Din and other intellectual women before and after her have railed against – not to mention the disapproval or more active opposition across cultures and eras that women who challenge established interpretations of sacred texts have encountered. Was it the case simply that ‘the clerics had won’ (p. xi)? Or do the responses to Zayn al-Din’s book and her subsequent invisibility exemplify how gender activisms (in different eras and areas) can be both fostered and restrained by structural constraints and social forces? Was Zayn al-Din’s public act doomed from the start by the very conditions that gave rise to it? If Cooke does not address these questions, this concise review implicitly raises them.

Cooke set out to produce a biography, and she has offered us a lively, creative, and thoughtful interpretation of an intriguing subject’s life. The book is a pleasure to read, and Cooke’s elaboration of her methodology clarifies for readers the innovative way she has chosen to approach her topic. She reads visual and material ‘texts’ such as Zayn al-Din’s surroundings (domestic furnishings, rooms, facades), as well as her writings and counter-writings in response to her writings, and traces of commentary by those who knew Zayn al-Din. She weaves the insights garnered from these sources into a set of lively scenes and conversations in addition to giving a more conventional narrative of Zayn al-Din’s life and oeuvre. The translated excerpts that Cooke offers give a sense of Zayn al-Din’s rhetoric and focus, and Cooke has cleverly used the author’s second-person direct address strategy, employed effectively in *Unveiling and Veiling*, within a conversational context in the biography. Yet, I have some quarrels with this treatment. I am uneasy with Cooke’s decision to collapse together quotations from different sections of Zayn al-Din’s first book, often without indicating where one passage ends and another begins. I wonder, too, whether creating

conversations out of these written texts risks puzzling and misleading the reader. I do not think that cooke misrepresents Zayn al-Din's overall argument or intention. But both of these strategies may make Zayn al-Din's subsequent withdrawal from the public scene appear more inexplicable than they actually are. When one relies on Zayn al-Din's own writing in all of its fullness (and sometimes its over-expansiveness), her approach appears somewhat more cautious, more carefully set within the mainstream discourse on feminine education and domesticity, for example, than is quite evident from cooke's treatment. Staging a scene of parlor confrontation between Zayn al-Din and her major interlocutor may also give a skewed image of Zayn al-Din's own persona as well as the social environment in which she lived. As a young woman, would she really have confronted the scholar Mustafa al-Ghalayini, many years her senior, in a fierce debate in front of the men in her father's sitting room? (Perhaps, just perhaps, she did do so; but this book does not offer any evidence or indication of it, and it seems highly unlikely.) Indeed, could the young Nazira have marshaled in conversation the quote-laced and often quite lengthy arguments she propounds in her book? Would she have used the same sarcastic and bold mode of address if she had faced al-Ghalayini in person? It hardly seems so. To put these passages into a context of conversational exchange suggests Zayn al-Din had a fearless personality and intrepid social presence, which makes her silent withdrawal from the public scene not long afterward appear truly puzzling.

At the same time, while the juxtaposed segments of text that cooke features give the flavor of Zayn al-Din's polemic, they do not allow for the analysis of the structure, progression and contextualization of her arguments. These excerpts cannot fully communicate the force of these arguments, often conveyed in Zayn al-Din's book through (for example) verses or *ayat* from the Qur'an interspersed within Zayn al-Din's explanations. And as I suggested above, juxtaposing sentences or paragraphs from different sections of *al-Sufur wa'l-Hijab* may give the impression of a sharper and more radical focus than Zayn al-Din's long discourses generally exhibit; her discussions are often carefully set within a fairly conventional framework of critique (see, e.g., the first pages of *al-Fatat wa'l-Shuyukh*). I am also uncomfortable with the fact that at least some passages quoted in translation are more akin to paraphrases, not really conveying the intricacies of the Arabic texts.

The same is true of quotations from Zayn al-Din's second volume (*The Young Woman and the Shaykhs*). For example, the quotation with which cooke opens the book, which celebrates Zayn al-Din's new celebrity status, is actually not as strenuously focused on Zayn al-Din in the longer Arabic version as it is in cooke's abbreviated version (xi), where Zayn al-Din is celebrated as one of several scintillating young women (though, to be fair, the longer original does single her out for notice at the end of the passage). Moreover, this passage appears not on p. 23 of *al-Fatat wa'l-Shuyukh*, as cited by cooke, but on p. 239. A simple typo? Perhaps, but unfortunately this is not the only page reference that is inaccurate or partially accurate. For instance, in cooke's book there appears on page 95 a quotation said to be from pp. 40 and 60-62 of *al-Fatat wa'l-Shuyukh*. The first quoted sentence begins on page 39, followed by one sentence from page 61, then a paraphrase of a paragraph from page 62. Finally there is an interpretation of a sentence on the same page calling 'Easterners' to follow the 'rightly guided path of the West', but without the following paragraph from the original that emphasizes the finality of God's will, an omission which risks giving an inaccurate impression of Zayn al-Din's point.

Nor is there much attempt here to link Zayn al-Din's work and impact (or lack of it) to later gender activism in the region. Cooke uses the rubric "Islamic feminism" (in her title as well as in the book) and invokes in a general way the late-twentieth-century debates over gender politics across the Middle East and amongst Muslim-majority communities, but she lets her characterization of Zayn al-Din's writing, and the excerpts from it, speak for themselves and does not analyze their significance to,

or embeddedness in, earlier and later discourses. She emphasizes the specifically 'Islamic' focus of Zayn al-Din's argument, while offering a brief background treatment of earlier Arab gender activisms without foregrounding the multi-confessional context of those earliest debates and institutional achievements. Mentioning emergent Arabophone women-centred periodicals, she does not address the fact that many were founded by women and men belonging to Arab Christian communities. Perhaps cooke wanted to avoid over-emphasizing religiously defined identity categories. But Zayn al-Din's own work engages constantly with the layered complexity of Arab identities and the impact of cultural flows, and thus some attention to the many roots and branches of emergent Arab feminism would seem appropriate. Moreover, Zayn al-Din was herself a member of a minority community. Curiously, in a book published in a series with the entirely laudable aim of reaching an audience beyond specialized academic circles, cooke does not offer information on the Druze community historically or doctrinally; such background would have helped the reader better evaluate the biography's brief narrative of how this community's political fortunes began to change under the French Mandate over Lebanon in the early 20s and Zayn al-Din's insistence on her Muslim-ness. Nor do we have an analysis of Zayn al-Din's work in comparative focus with other works on women's rights that had already started emerging in print for Arabophone audiences. Cooke is not the first to scrutinize Zayn al-Din's legacy; she cites and briefly mentions, but does not engage critically with, other analyses of Zayn al-Din's intervention by Nabil Bu Matar, Aida al-Jawhari, Elizabeth Thompson, and Nazik Saba Yarid. Margot Badran has also highlighted Zayn al-Din in earlier work, not cited in cooke's study.

But the above are perhaps routes to pursue rather than lacunae: after all, cooke did not set out to offer a comprehensive study of Zayn al-Din's published presence on the 1920s intellectual scene. Her biographical spadework and her book's sparkle offer a fascinating glimpse at this moment in the history of Arab women's public discursive interventions, as cooke also offers signposts for other scholars to follow as they trace this strand of the rich history of gender activisms in Arab societies, which still holds so many surprises.

Marilyn Booth, University of Edinburgh
Email: M.Booth@ed.ac.uk

ENDNOTES

* This is the spelling that cooke adopts when writing her name.

1. Communication from Margot Badran, Jan. 2011; see also Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2009), [essay originally published 2005].