
Women in the Middle East: Past and Present, by Nikki R. Keddie, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007. Preface + 356 pages + index. \$24.95.

REVIEWED BY NADIA EL CHEIKH

Anyone engaged in the study of Islamic and Middle Eastern women's history will be familiar with the vast output of Nikki Keddie in this field. Her contributions have been seminal in propelling the investigation of women and gender relations in a variety of historical contexts. This book includes both new and old material, brought together by the author's formidable goal of providing a general synthesis of the state of the field at this moment. Relying on the rapidly evolving expansion of research and scholarly output, it covers the period from pre-Islam until the present. The volume is in three parts. The first and lengthiest is a history of Middle Eastern women from pre-Islam until modern times. The second part includes published articles that cover broad ideas and issues. The third part is a short autobiographical section where Keddie reflects on her own development and evolving attitudes towards the field of women's studies. The volume also contains reproductions of photographs that the author took in the Middle East in the 1970s and 1980s.

In Book One, comprising a book-length history of Middle-Eastern women, the chapter divisions are chronological. The first part deals with the period from pre-Islamic until late Mamluk times. The first chapter focuses on pre-Islamic gender societies in the Mediterranean and Arabian regions, and the rise of Islam and its effect on the gender system with a particular discussion of the relevant Qur'anic verses. The second chapter covers, in 20 pages, the periods of the Rashidun, Umayyad, and Abbasid caliphates and synthesizes information on Islamic family law, e.g. on marriage, divorce, adultery, and child custody as well as on class and slavery. Keddie also provides information about women's lives from the Cairo Geniza documents.

This huge effort at synthesis and condensation results in the lumping of information from various periods into a seemingly undistinguishable set of historical circumstances. One example is the very

title of the section on “women’s lives and codes of honor over the centuries” (pp. 38-40). Relying on recent anthropological studies, this section discusses the notions of shame, modesty, and family honor, without any tangible historical grounding. The specific location of this section implies that its general comments are supposed to be valid for the much earlier periods. While the author rightly points out that the scarce and controversial nature of the documentation concerning women in this very long period means that a lot of what is written about it is speculative (p. 9), this does not mean that “medieval Islam,” stretching over a thousand years, should be treated in an almost monolithic fashion, especially since the author herself refers to the problem of reading later beliefs and practices into earlier events (p. 11).

Of course, part of the problem is the near absence of incisive new methodological and epistemological approaches to women and gender history for the early Islamic period. This is to be contrasted with the substantial advances made in the fields of Ottoman and modern Middle Eastern history. The respective states of the fields are reflected in Keddie’s synthesis which gives the most emphasis and space to the modern period. The available documentation, notably the legal documents for the Ottoman empire, “the wealth and reliability of this documentation, the amount of monographic scholarship available and the proliferation of Arab countries with distinct policies and histories regarding women led me to give more space to recent events than to earlier ones” (p. 10).

The fifth chapter covers the period 1914-45 and includes coverage of women in most of the Middle Eastern countries that have come into existence since 1945. The author highlights this contribution to be a special feature of the volume (p. 2) since most of these countries have not been the subject of individual narrative historical books or articles. However, the treatments are unequal. Taking the example of Lebanon for instance, the comments on legal and societal changes affecting women since 1945 are very limited (pp. 139-140). There is no mention of important advances in the law pioneered by the late Laure Moghaizel, and no reference to the more recent changes in the sexual landscape reflected in the publication of *Barra*, the first lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexed, and queer magazine in the Arab world. It might have been better if this chapter had been written as a bibliographical essay, highlighting further possibilities of research in certain specific areas.

Book Two includes several published essays that elucidate the current state of writing on Middle Eastern women, analyzing what has been accomplished and suggesting what is needed to further study in this field. The oldest of these articles, “Problems in the Study of Middle Eastern Women,” was a pivotal contribution at the time of its publication in 1979, and in many ways, remains an important article for the insights it brings to the study of Middle Eastern women, especially for the earlier periods. Another reprinted article, “Scholarship, Relativism, and Universalism,” discusses the problem of attitudes towards the position of Muslim women, be they hostile or apologetic. It suggests that there may be a dialectical way of contextualizing historically evolved features now considered positive or negative. Another useful article included in this section is one that surveys recent books on modern Middle Eastern women’s history, and in which the author highlights the geographical concentration of this scholarship on Egypt and Iran.

Book Three features autobiographical recollections that tell of the author’s changing attitudes with respect to women’s studies. As such it constitutes a valuable reflection on the development of the field in the last decades.

Undoubtedly, the task of synthesizing the enormous volume of information and material available is daunting. The author has tried to incorporate well-documented conclusions on a whole range of subjects, including analyses of views regarding women in the early Islamic period, assessment of the role of Turks and Mongols, analyses of Ottoman court records, studies on women’s rights movements, and other areas of inquiries. As the author states, this is a general work aimed largely at non-specialists. It could most usefully be used as a quick reference guide that can direct readers

to the larger bibliographical resources that the author so adequately includes and that are becoming increasingly available to students of Middle East women's history.

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