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Women in the Arab World

Old Boundaries, New Frontiers

Judith Tucker (ed.)

Reviewed by Wafa Stephan Tarnowski

Women in the Arab World: *Old Boundaries, New Frontiers* is an excellent collection of articles by Western and Arab scholars on the plight of women in the Arab World.

As the title suggests, the lives of women in the Arab World are circumscribed by boundaries such as: the weight of Islamic mores and beliefs, limited access to political power, thus restriction to indirect forms of power and emphasis on female domesticity and modesty. These boundaries are not immutable, although *old* because they are traditional and prevail all over the Middle East. In fact, Arab women are trying hard to change them and create new frontiers, which as defined by Tucker, "are the ways in which these ideas about gender and the realities of women's lives are changing" (introduction, pg. xvii). Tucker seems to imply that the emergence of a pan-Arab women's movement," which could

give real meaning to the dream of an authentic indigenous feminism," is possible. (pg. xvii)

What are the causes that could warrant such optimism? The traditional view portrayed Arab women as victims of society and religious beliefs. A lot of scholarship, says Tucker, has dwelt on this victimization of women and on dramatic aspects of it, such as circumcision, veiling, harem life, arranged marriages, etc., which she says has discouraged feminist scholars (pg. xv). A more careful study of Arab family structure both, in history and at present, says Tucker, would yield different evidence. She demonstrates in her article on "The Arab Family in History" (Ch. X) that

the traditional view has been that of a monolithic institution described as mirror opposite of its European, Western counterpart (pg. 195). The role of women in that family unit was described, generally, as that of victim and the family as an instrument of women's oppression (pg. 196). That, says Tucker, is not the whole truth because "it obscures the multiplicity of ways, in which, she (the woman) did participate in her society" (pg. 196). Tucker calls on scholars to explore the critical role of family and to reclaim the history of the family, "to study it in ways that intersect with the concerns of women's history" (pg. 196).

Tucker shows how the Arab family has been viewed, so far, as other because scholars have generally focused on four aspects of it that differ from its Western counterpart. First the relationship between husband and wife are depicted as being traditionally defined

AL-RAIDA

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and not requiring the consent of each member. Second, women in Arab families were always given to bear the burden of family honor, 'ird. Any behavior by the woman more than the man, which may seem, explicitly or implicitly, connected with sexual relations outside marriage reflected negatively on the woman's family bringing shame to it. Third, patrilineal clans are depicted as powerful social units that influence and structure economic and political relations in the Arab World. Endogamous marriage was one of the most important ways of maintaining economic integrity and achieving solidarity of that clan, and the most prevalent form of endogamy was cousin marriage. Fourthly, in the other family model says Tucker, the woman is placed in a basically powerless position within the practice, or even the threat of polygyny, could be used as an ever present threat to the position of a woman inside her own house and therefore as a means of enforcing submission (pg. 198).

By comparing gender relations between upper and lower-class groups in Palestine and Egypt during the 18th and 19th century, Tucker concludes that the Historic Arab family was far from monolithic. That family evolved in response to the variations that accompanied its required roles.

Family politics also operated differently in class terms. Marriage among wealthy classes was indeed a matter of alliances between families, and divorce was almost

inexistent, whereas marriage arrangements among the poorer sections were more flexible and there were changes in marriage partners. The implications of such differences for women, says Tucker, lie at the center of any study of women's history in the region (pg. 206). The implications for us readers and scholars are also important because they make us look at women's lives and gender relations in the Arab World in a whole different way with more sensitivity and discernment. This article sets the tone for the entire book, which tries to look at the issues of gender and Islamic thought (Barbara Stowasser), Post-Islamist and Post-Nationalist Feminist discourses (Mervat Hatem), the issues of women's economic activities (Suad Dajani), of social constraints and marginality of Arab women writers (Evelyne Accad), the issue of political power and the relationship between nationalism and feminism (Sondra Hale on Sudanese women and Rosemary Sayegh on Palestinian women) and the issue of domestic and social relations where the social and psychological aspects of gender relations are developed and lived most concretely (Julie Peteet and Suzan Schaefer Davis). This book is an excellent introduction to the major issues at play in the study of gender relations in the Arab World. Each and every article clarifies an aspect on the gender situation in the Arab World making the book into an informative mosaic of the subject.

Among the most

thought provoking articles I cite that of Margot Badran on the history of feminism in Egypt and those of Stowasser and Hatem on the relationship between Islam and Feminism. Accad's article on Arab women's special contribution to literature helps to personalize women's plight in the Arab World by explaining important novels of key women writers such as Leila Baalbaki, Kulit al-Khury, Emilie Nasrallah, Daisy el-Ameer, Ghada al-Samman, Nawal al-Saadawi and Hana el-Sheikh.

In an article on Post-Islamist and Post-Nationalist Feminist Discourses, Mervat Hatem says that the crisis of Arabic feminists discourses is a reflection of a real crisis facing Arab societies" (pg. 45).

I agree with Hatem wholly. It is indeed difficult for Arab women to develop an independent discourse like their Western counterparts did and are doing. The strongly held idea that feminism came from the West and is not suited to Arab Islamic culture is hard to fight. After reading this book, it seems to me that individually there are lots of very committed Arab feminists but as a movement we're very weak and dispersed and lack a cohesive discourse to unite us across political boundaries, religions and social classes.

— Ms. Tarnowski is a feminist writer and journalist.



OLD BOUNDARIES
NEW FRONTIERS

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Evelyne Accad
Margot Badran
Sondra Hale
Susan Schaefer Davis
Daisy el-Ameer
Suad Dajani
Mervat Hatem
Maggie L. Meserve
Julie Peteet
Rosemary Sayegh
Julie E. Tucker