

## *Feminists, Islam and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*

by Margot Badran  
Princeton University Press, 1995

Reviewed by Hosn Abboud

Margot Badran presents "Feminists, Islam and Nation" as a historical study of the Egyptian feminist movement from the end of the nineteenth until the middle of the twentieth century. The history of the Egyptian feminist movement according to Badran is part of the modern history of Egypt. The most important points that Badran tackles are the following:

First, a feminist orientation to Egyptian woman's issues became apparent at the end of the nineteenth century within the framework of the family, mainly in the urban areas and prior to Qassem Amin's suggestions. This social awareness was enhanced by women who examined the drawbacks of existing gender patterns that emphasized the role and contributions of men while neglecting those of women, until women began to be perceived as burdensome not only to the man, but also to her society and nation as well. This stage is illustrated effectively in the writings of the poet Aisha El-Teimouriyya, the researcher Zeinab Fawwaz; and the writer Melk Hafni Nassif.

Second, the feminist movement never existed outside the Islamic or the Egyptian national frameworks. The Islamic Reformation movement of Muhammad Abdo the "national emancipation movement" headed by Saad Zaghloul, and the Egyptian Feminist Union headed by Huda Shaarani, were all interdependent.

Third, the Egyptian feminist movement, due to its evolution in an Arab environment and its concern for interpreting Islam and liberating Egypt, could not be considered "foreign". Although Egyptian women tried to

learn from European women when meeting with them at the Women's International Conferences, they were not influenced by them, especially because British women never took a stand against the British occupation of Egypt.

The book is divided into three parts: the first includes four chapters in which the author explains the development of the feminist awareness of two pioneers: Huda Shaarawi, the founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union, and Nabawiyya Moussa, the first Egyptian female governor. This historical stage witnessed active social participation, journalistic productions, and the organization of the feminist movement.

The second part comprises the main body of the book and is divided into seven chapters. Here, Badran narrates in detail the history of the Egyptian woman's conflict within the family, especially in connection with personal status laws and women's struggle to achieve their right to secondary education.

The third and last section contains only one chapter in which the author surveys the Arab feminist movement that was founded by the Egyptian Women's Union. The Arab Feminist Union was founded for the sake of national issues after Arab women were isolated from the international feminist movement, which did not support colonized women's calls for independence. Badran writes that "the institutionalization of Arab feminism emerged from a coalescence in solidarity around a nationalist cause, the Palestine cause. Arab feminism was also, in part, born out of the limitations of international feminism" (pp. 223). In the twenties and thirties, Egypt was the only Arab country that had obtained independence. This gave rise to an active feminist movement that became a catalyst for the wider Arab feminist movement. The conference of the Arab Women's Union was held in Egypt in 1936 to discuss the Palestinian problem, and again in 1944 to discuss women's issues and the Arab union. It is worth mentioning that the Constitution of the Arab Feminist Union was written one year before the Constitution of the Arab League and that Egypt still plays a pioneering role locally and regionally. This was illustrated by Egyptian women's contributions to both the Population Conference held in 1994 in Cairo, and the Fourth International Women's Conference held in Beijing in 1996.

This book is required for any Arabic studies library and constitutes a valuable reference for the researcher and specialist interested in the history of modern Egypt, since Badran has interviewed a number of pioneers who

have since passed away. She has also examined diaries, letters, speeches, journalistic articles, poems, novels, and the by-laws and constitutions of feminist organizations. She has conducted a focused study on the Egyptian Women's Union and its periodicals, which were published in French and Arabic, also studied the archives of the European women's movement.

It is apparent that the Egyptian Women's Union constitutes the primary subject of the book. The author does not present the opposing movements' points of view, which considered the politicization of women's issues to be part of an imperialist program. Had she included these opposing views, the book would have been complete. However, this fear of discussing all the implications of women's issues is understandable, since talking about woman's role threatens cultural values and the masculine characteristics in any society. The author did not address any women's movement other than the Egyptian Women's Union, perhaps due to the leading role this movement played in Egypt. However, an examination of the opinions of other Arab women's movements would have better illustrated the scope of the Egyptian Women's Union's popularity and its influence.

This book is of interest to women and men alike because the issues raised are still subjects of daily discussion in the journals, books and literary circles of the contemporary Arab World. Egyptian and Arab women want to redefine their Islamic, national and social identities in accordance with the current historical period. The book includes valuable information; it must have taken the author a very long time to present, in detail, the history of our mothers who proved their potential in various fields. The author's intention was to ensure that no one would forget the invaluable contributions of these women, or would take any of their accomplishments for granted because this might lead us to take lightly some of our society's gravest issues.

It is worth mentioning that the Board of the American University of Cairo presented a version of this book at the last book exhibition in Cairo, and that the author is now working on an Arabic translation so that this important study will be within the reach of more Arab readers.

*Translated from Arabic by  
Ghena Ismail*

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