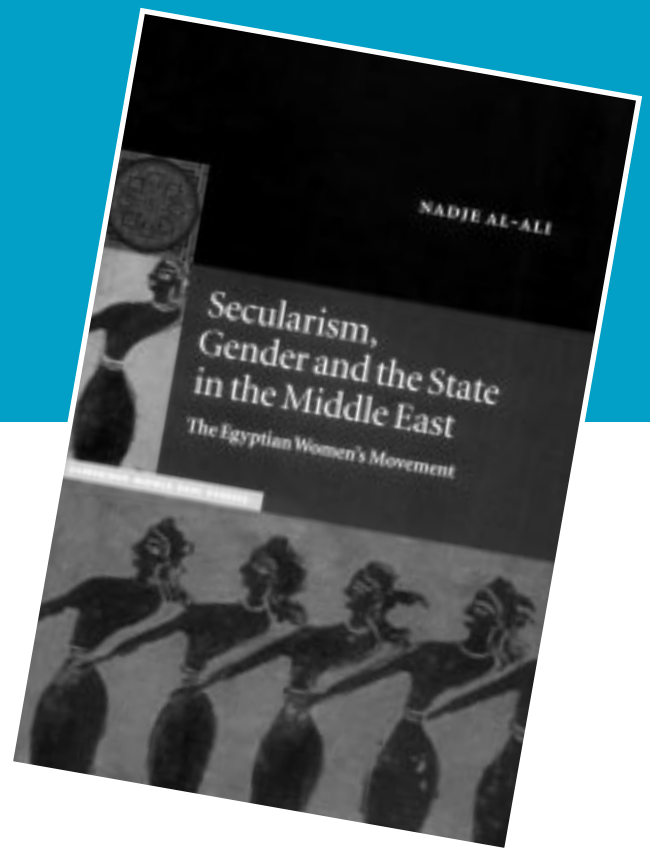


Contemporary Egyptian Feminist Activism

Nadje Al-Ali, [Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement](#) (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Reviewed by Hala Kamal



In her introduction to this outstanding study of secular feminism in Egypt, Nadje Al-Ali states that her main concern is the case of secular women's activism in post-colonial Egypt. Focusing on secular-oriented groups and individuals in this work, Al-Ali aims at balancing the increased interest in Islamist constituencies and movements as evident in much of the recent research and publications on the Middle East, for example Azza Karam's [Women, Islamisms and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt](#) (Macmillan Press, 1998).

Al-Ali's theoretical framework is informed by post-colonial and cultural theories as well as feminist anthropological methodology. She therefore adopts a post-orientalist perspective revealing her awareness of the "monolithic and hegemonic discourses" as well as constructions of the 'other' related to the politics of (mis)representation. Al-Ali takes upon herself the challenge of deconstructing identities (including her own identity), perhaps strengthened by her personal experience as an 'Iraqi-German' and hence 'Arab-Western', whose identity she defines as 'hyphenated' rather than divided (p.37). In problematizing her identity, Al-Ali critically examines her positionality, acknowledging its impact on her research (pp. 39-40). Having stated the ambivalence of her identity, she moves on to the issue of Egyptian national and feminist identities. Thus, in addition to

tracing contemporary Egyptian secular women's involvement in the women's movement, based on their own oral accounts, Al-Ali attempts to explore more theoretical questions, with particular interest in the notion of identity within the framework of political struggle and nation-building. She sets out to provide "a detailed ethnographic account of the context, content and political significance of contemporary Egyptian women's activism" (p. 2). The study is based on interviews held with members of women's groups as well as individual activists, combining personal accounts with an analysis of the socio-political context of women's activism in the post-independence period, as an expression of Al-Ali's belief that "[p]ersonal narratives and biographies, just as much as statistical information, can be tools to learn

about historical events, political processes and social phenomena" (p. 89).

One of the most significant features of Al-Ali's study is her tendency to offer definitions of her terminology. She attempts to define secularism by problematizing the term 'secular', looking at it within various contexts and seeing it from different perspectives, including the interviewees' definition of the term in question. Thus the author's definition of secularism within the contemporary Egyptian context acquires a specificity of its own, meaning "the acceptance of the separation between religion and politics, but does not necessarily denote anti-religious or anti-Islamic positions"; and secular-oriented people also "do not endorse *Shari'a* (Islamic law) as the main or sole source of legislation, but they also refer to civil law and human rights conventions ... as frames of reference for their struggles" (p. 4). Al-Ali is conscious of the specificity of Egyptian secularism due to its relation to a complex history of liberalism and modernity, in addition to colonial and post-colonial experiences. It is worth noting that according to Al-Ali's definition of Egyptian secularism (derived from her interviewees' self-definitions) a secular orientation is compatible with religious observance.

The author also chooses to use the term 'women's activism' rather than 'feminism'. Again she problematizes and contextualizes her terms, differentiating between the 'feminist movement' (*al-haraka al-nissawiyya*) which is concerned with patriarchy alone as opposed to the 'women's movement' (*al-haraka al-nissa'iya*) which includes an involvement in national independence, class struggle and other social and political issues. Here I beg to differ, since there are contemporary Egyptian secular activists who do not shy away from the term 'feminist' but actually define themselves as '*nassawiyyat*', or more linguistically accurately as '*nisswiyyat*'. Feminist activism in this sense does not figure merely as a political counter-patriarchal concept, but is used in the light of feminism (*al-nisswiyya*, or *al-tawajuh al-nisswi*) as a category of analysis that includes gender, class, nation, ethnicity, etc., as well as being a frame of mind that directs one's perspective and attitude to life - in thought and practice.

Al-Ali stresses the fact that several of the interviewed women activists reject the term 'feminist' as an identity marker "for pragmatic and ideological reasons" (p. 4). Yet she claims that the "antagonism and anxiety" developed by many women towards feminism as a western concept reflects their 'internalization' of the stereotypical connotations of the term. But adopting/rejecting 'feminism' as an identity marker may reflect a more complex process. I suggest that some Egyptian women activists do not refrain from endorsing the term 'feminist' out of unconscious internalization (hence rejection), but do so strategically, aware of the connotations that the term carries in various circles in Egypt, particularly as a western concept. They reject the term with the aim of breaking terminological and conceptual barriers between them and certain Egyptian constituencies.

Al-Ali divides the secular women's movement into three main categories. First, there is women's rights activism based on the liberal and reformist model of equality. Second, there is women's socialist activism which considers women's exploitation as part of the economic and socio-political inequalities rooted in class division, capitalism and imperialism. Third, radical feminist activism focuses on forms of cultural and sexual oppression and acknowledges difference without being separatist. While the author adopts this Western paradigm of women's activism, she points to the heterogeneity of Egyptian women's activism. Al-Ali further applies Molyneux's typology of women's activism, categorizing groups in terms of 'independent', 'associational' and 'directed' (p. 7), which seems to me a more pragmatic model, applicable to groups rather than individuals. Yet as Al-Ali rightly points out, "women's organizations fluctuate in their level of autonomy or dependence" (p. 8), and are influenced by the state, their access to political and economic resources, UN organizations and foreign funding agencies.

In her second chapter, Al-Ali presents an account of the Egyptian women's movement as constructed by contemporary Egyptian activists in the interviews held with them, thus "approaching history through interpretation" (p. 55). Al-Ali focuses on the historical and politi-

cal context marking the relationship of the women's movement to the state in the post-independence period. And although Al-Ali concludes that most of the changes in favor of women's status have been achieved during moments of economic and socio-political crises, yet these developments were not 'given' as much as having resulted from long processes of women's struggle within the society and against the state.

Later (chapter 3) Al-Ali presents the life stories of nine women activists, with particular emphasis on the conjunctures between personal experiences and historical developments. She explains her selection of the life-stories in terms of 'objective' factors such as generational difference, political orientation and organizational belonging, in addition to the 'subjective' factor of "personal curiosity and interest on both sides" (p. 87). Al-Ali also explains her choice of the 'life-story' rather than 'life history' or 'biography', since the former is a more accurate term in describing the process of selecting significant quotes and excerpts rather than presenting a chronology of a person's past (footnote, p. 87). These life stories offer accounts of individual women's experiences within the Egyptian women's movement from as early as the 1930s, which was a period marked by women's activism in a context of social and welfare work. The second group represents the generation of the 1950s-1960s whose activism was born within national mobilization under Nasser's regime. And finally, the new generation of women in their twenties and thirties seems to reflect the current situation marked by personal rebellion and professionalized activism.

Reading this chapter one senses Al-Ali's admiration and respect for the older generation's pioneering efforts and activist involvement. The interviews suggest that the most politically conscious generation of women activists, however, is the one whose feminist consciousness is related to their leftist political engagement since the students' movement of the 1970s. It is worth noting here that apart from 'women's' activism which goes back to the early years of the 20th century and before, it is the representatives of the student movement that have acquired and continue to reveal a 'feminist' con-

sciousness – not just ideologically, but politically and in terms of organization; combining feminist activism with the struggle for social justice.

In the last two chapters of her book, Al-Ali discusses the goals and priorities of contemporary women's activism in Egypt – some of which address general issues such as alleviating poverty and combating illiteracy among women, as well as offering them legal assistance. Additionally, women's organizations are involved in feminist struggles with the state aimed at bringing about legal changes regarding the Nationality Law, Personal Status Law, Labor Laws, and the Law of Association. Another area of women's activism is related to consciousness-raising and a more organized involvement in recent anti-war and anti-imperialist protest. However, the more issues, the more debate! To illustrate the current debates within the women's movement, Al-Ali selects the *Markaz Dirasat Al-Mar'a Al-Gadida* (New Woman's Research Center) as a case study that shows the most pressing organizational and ideological issues. One of these is the challenge of creating independent and democratic structures, another revolves around the professionalization of activism as opposed to voluntary work. Foreign funding is another hot issue, with donors divided into 'good' and 'bad' according to their general agendas. One of the women's NGOs, *Ma'n* (the Women's Study Centre, Together), which is engaged in gender-related research from a Marxist feminist perspective, rejects foreign funding altogether.

There is also much controversy from an ideological point of view concerning for instance the cultural frame of reference for Egyptian women's activism. Similarly, much discussion is going on about women's rights in terms of their universality on the one hand and cultural specificity on the other. One of the issues that arise in those discussions is that of essentialism. Yet, it is worth noting that as much as difference can be used and misused as a marker of inequality, contemporary Egyptian activists can use essentialism as a political means to promote feminism and social justice within our own cultural context in the current historical moment.