

# RELIGION & GENDER

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**Review of Jean Said Makdisi, Noha Bayoumi and Rafif Rida Sidawi (eds.), *Arab Feminisms: Gender and Equality in the Middle East* (Contemporary Arab Scholarship in the Social Sciences Series, Vol. 7), London: I.B. Tauris 2014, in association with The Centre for Arab Unity Studies, xxxvi + 440 pp., ISBN 978-1-78076-672-0**

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The position of women and feminism in the Arab world and in Islam is being extensively discussed in public and political debates, literature and academic publications. Much work on this subject in Europe and the United States focusses on the question how Muslim women can be liberated from their culture and belief; yet critique on this position is present as well. *Arab Feminisms* is an edited volume that discusses this theme from the experiences of Arab women, Arab women's movements and gender studies in the region. The book aims to explore the following questions: Is there an Arab feminist movement? And if yes, how does this movement look like? How does it differ or converge with feminisms from other places in the world? The chapters were originally presented at a conference entitled 'Arab Feminisms: A Critical Perspective' at the American University of Beirut, 4–7 October 2009. Remarkable is the fact that the book exists in two volumes: one in Arabic and one in English. The authors either wrote their chapter in English or in Arabic and subsequently all the chapters have been translated. As the editors Said Makdisi, Moha Bayoumi and Rafif Rida Sidawi acknowledge in the introduction (p. xiv), this process entailed some problems, notably the translation of the English word 'gender' into Arabic.

In the editorial introduction the editors state that with this book they wish to critically place Arab feminism in a wider, global, context; in Asia and in women's minority communities in the Western world, but also in relation to global feminism. The book is divided into four parts, one theoretical and conceptual, the other three parts focus on specific themes: war, civil conflict and military intervention; Islamic feminism; and feminism in a global context. In a total of 39 chapters, different geographical contexts are discussed, amongst others

Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq. As it is impossible to discuss all the chapters, I will highlight some of them in each of the four parts.

In Part one, *Variety in Understanding Feminist Concepts and Discourse*, feminist concepts and the specific use of them in Arab feminisms are central. Mervat Hatem critically deconstructs founding myths of the Arab women's movement: the idea that modernization is equated with expanding women's rights and that nationalist ideologies and the state are central factors in promoting gender equality. She is especially critical of the myth that men were the first advocates of women's rights in the region. In chapter two, Hoda Elsadda reflects on the use and translation of the word 'gender' in the Arab language and context. She shows how concepts travel through time within and across cultures and that therefore it is not necessary to have one single Arabic translation, rather the controversies around the concept offer new perspectives that resist dominant frameworks and biases. She does argue, however, for the production of feminist scholarship in Arabic to promote situated knowledges in specific geographical and political realities. Chapter five, seven and fourteen all discuss the feminist versus the women's movement question. In general, the authors of these chapters agree that women's movements try to gain women's rights within the status quo of the political and social system, but that a feminist critique is needed, which tries to radically overthrow these political and social systems in favour of a society where not only gender, but also political, economic, legal, racist and classed problems are challenged.

In Part Two, *The Crisis of Feminism in the Context of War, Civil Conflict and Military Intervention*, the Mashreq region is central. It focusses on the relations between colonialism, war, military conflict, political repression and feminism in the eastern part of the Arab region, including Palestine, Egypt and Iraq. I particularly favor chapters 16 and 17 on Palestine, because the authors explicitly link feminist concerns with political struggles. In these two chapters, Eileen Kuttab and Amal Amireh discuss international and Western feminism that 'tended to separate women's issues from national ones' (p. xxv) and the consequences for the Palestinian women's movement and the Palestinian political struggle. They argue that the women's movement has been taken over by an elitist leadership held accountable for international funding agencies rather than local communities and that the Palestinian political struggle has been weakened. The chapters on Iraq and Afghanistan both discuss the cooperation between feminist organizations and foreign occupation in their contexts. In both countries a rhetoric of women's rights made possible the foreign invasion, in order to mask the occupation as source of local social problems. Haifa Zangana conceptualizes this as colonial feminism and traces its role in the Iraq occupation and women's movement.

Part Three, *Islamic Feminism: Approaches and Visions*, stays rather descriptive on the development of Islamic feminism in specific contexts, like Egypt, Kuwait and Malaysia. Central here is the troubled relation between secular and Islamic feminism. Amal Grami traces the development of Islamic feminism in chapter 29, its different intellectual backgrounds and the problems in the movement, notably the term Islamic feminism itself, as it was first coined in the West and only later introduced in the Arab world. Marnia Lazreg argues in chapter 31 that post-structuralist perspectives on women in the Middle East have 'become an apologetic discourse for reasons external to the subject under investigation' (p. 349). In other words: post-structuralist scholarship is uncritically used in the study of women and gender in the Middle East, and tends to focus too much

on institutions and governments separated from the relation with the subject. The multiple ways in which power is enacted and responded to by people, precisely the aim of Foucauldian post-structuralism, becomes then subordinate to institutionalist approaches. Lazreg illustrates this argument with the re-veiling movement in Muslim societies. Part Four, *Feminism in a Global Context*, is the shortest part of the book with contributions from authors from different parts of the world. Also here colonial feminism and imperial power are central, in chapter 34 on “democracy” trainings for women in Iraq and in chapter 35 on US counterinsurgency.

I think this edited volume offers feminist scholars urgent and necessary insight in the debates, issues and problems concerning feminism and women’s status in the Arab region. Especially because Arabic contributions are translated into English knowledge on Arab feminisms is now available for a wider non-Arabic speaking audience, which is a great achievement of this volume. I particularly like the connection most authors make between feminism and international political developments in their contexts, as it shows the intersection of feminism with (global) politics and global power structures, something that is often overlooked in some Western feminisms. Many thus define feminism more as a radical political movement than as an academic subject position. The book contributes to intersectional and interdisciplinary scholarship combining gender and feminism with other axes of power and difference, like colonialism, imperialism, politics, class, race and religion. The diverse social and political locations discussed in the volume make it an empirically rich and theoretically diverse book, which shows how different forms of feminism work out on the ground.

As the authors clearly state that there is not a single form of Arab feminism, or any feminism for that matter, this becomes also clear in the individual chapters. Unfortunately, there is not an overarching argument or thread guiding the book. A concluding chapter is missing and also the editorial introduction merely provides an introduction to the separate chapters rather than a discussion of the central themes, concepts and differences therein. Furthermore, it is not always clear how authors use and define the concepts of gender and sex. Interestingly, while the deconstruction of binaries like religion/secular, public/private and modernity/tradition are central in many chapters, the gender binary of man/woman seems uncontested. Sexuality, queer theory and men and masculinity studies are topics only rarely touched upon.

Whereas the part on Islamic feminism explicitly focusses on debates of religion and gender, in the other chapters of the book this is less evident but not absent, for example in Mervat Hatem’s critique of modernity discourses and Judith Butler’s discussion of difference and the religious/secular binary. Although the texts on Islamic feminism are not extensively theorized and a discussion of religious and ethnic minorities in the region is rather absent, *Arab Feminisms* is notwithstanding a volume of interest for academic debates in the interdisciplinary study of religion and gender. While the Arab world and Islam are familiar topics in discussions on gender, feminism and women’s emancipation, this volume is unique because it brings in perspectives from academics and activists from the Arab region who often have been less visible, and their (Arabic) texts less accessible for feminist scholars working in the dominant English language. This book therefore is an innovative contribution to the study of feminism and gender and I highly recommend it to scholars and activists working in the broad field of feminism, religion, gender and politics in the Arab world and beyond.