Gender, Politics and Islam

Therese Saliba, Carolyn Allen, Judith A. Howard, eds.
Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002. 354 pages.

Though women's studies and Islamic studies have not often met in scholarly discourse, *Gender, Politics and Islam* is evidence that they should. This book is a testament to the breadth and quality of scholarship in Muslim women's studies. All of its articles originally appeared in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, of which Therese Saliba, Carolyn Allen, and Judith A. Howard, previously served as editors and associate editors.

Saliba's competent introduction summarizes the articles and promptly debunks simplistic understandings of Muslim women and their lives, and

highlights their diverse and complex engagements with religion, politics, society, and culture. Not only does this introduction speak for and to nuanced understandings of Islam and Muslims, it also links feminist struggles transnationally and explicitly positions itself against the exceptionalism of Muslim women.

Although all nine chapters were previously published, this volume merits separate publication for several reasons. First, it promotes good scholarship on Muslim women. Second, it undoubtedly will reach a larger audience as a collection than as individual articles. This audience includes not only those outside academia, but also academics who might not normally read specialized women's studies journals – many in the field of Islamic studies, traditionally defined, for example. Moreover, the book could be used effectively in teaching Islamic studies and women's studies; indeed, some of its articles are already being used this way. Though the articles were not written for a general audience, many could easily appeal to the interested nonspecialist.

Finally, these serious, scholarly essays complement each other and represent a breadth of disciplinary approaches (e.g., literary studies, sociology, history, anthropology, and political science), geographical regions (e.g., Iran, Pakistan, Palestine, Lebanon, Yemen, Bangladesh, and Canada), and issues (e.g., legal rights, religious rituals, political empowerment, reception politics, and Islamic feminism, among many others). Despite this breadth, each essay speaks extremely well to at least several others and highlights Muslim women's strategies and practices of crafting spaces for action and engagement in politics and society.

Valentine Moghadem's "Islamic Feminism and its Discontents: Towards a Resolution of the Debate" provides an overview of Iranian women's many contrasting positions in relation to their rights in the Islamic Republic. She also draws useful comparisons between U.S. liberal feminists and Iranian Islamic feminists, thereby providing an analysis of current trends, issues, and debates. "The Politics of Feminism in Islam," by Anouar Majid, continues this inquiry into women crafting a feminist theory and practice that engages Islam. Like Moghadem, he sees a positive side to Iran's Islamic feminist movement, as it resists "the effects of global capitalism and contributes to a rich egalitarian polycentric world" (p. 87).

In "The Power Paradox in Muslim Women's Majales: North-West Pakistani Mourning Rituals as Sites of Contestation over Religious Politics, Ethnicity and Gender," Marie Elaine Hegland explores what

she calls women's "paradoxical power" derived from doing ritual religious work. Hegland uses a definition of "fundamentalist" women that is at odds with many of the other articles, which makes an interesting point of comparison. Julie Peteet treats activist mothering practices among Palestinian women in refugee camps in the West Bank and Lebanon in "Icons and Militants: Mothering in the Danger Zone." Comparing and contrasting locations of activist mothering, she shows women's strategies for political involvement through their mothering practices.

Gabriele von Bruck's "Elusive Bodies: The Politics of Aesthetics among Yemeni Elite Women" contextualizes the performance of gender through women's bodies among the elite of Sana`a. Based on her research showing how bodily adornment practices constitute women's personhood and social identity, she argues that women's gender roles should be distinguished between married and unmarried women.

These three anthropological articles are followed by Elora Shehabbudin's strong contribution, "Contesting the Illicit: Gender and the Politics of Fatwas in Bangladesh." Shehabuddin marshals empirical evidence gathered during field research and convincingly weaves it into a theoretical discussion showing how women engage with law, society, politics, and culture. She argues that the debate over *fatawa* in Bangladesh is not a matter of Islamism versus secularism, but rather of how social control is exercised over the lives and bodies of poor, rural women.

S. M. Shamsul Alam's study, "Women in the Era of Modernity and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Case of Taslima Nasrin of Bangladesh," outlines the Bangladeshi context in which Nasrin worked and which is likely unfamiliar to most readers of *Signs* and of this volume alike. Though this piece is weaker than others in the volume, as a reception study it is a good companion to the preceding and following articles.

Amal Amireh's "Framing Nawaal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World" should be required reading in classrooms dealing with Muslim women, literature in translation, and cross-cultural issues more generally. Much of the "knowledge" about Arabs and Muslims, women specifically, in Europe and North America is transmitted through the extremely mediated translations of writers like Saadawi. To confront the politics of translation, publication, and reception of Arab and Muslim writers and their works is one of the most important tasks incumbent upon all of us in the field today. Amireh's article represents a major shift in how

Arab and Muslim writers, and women in particular, are read in different contexts.

"Muslim Women: Negotiations in the Third Space" by Shahnaz Khan complements Amireh's engaged reading practice. Framing her study with postcolonial theory and the notion of a "third space" that can be opened up within Canadian multiculturalism for Muslim women, Khan uses material from interviews with two Muslim women in order to illuminate her points convincingly.

One drawback to the collection is that the extensive footnotes demarcating the authors' uses of terminology and concepts can become overbearing at times. Though they are interesting and helpful in gauging an author's stance and for teaching purposes, editing these within the collection would have made the book more accessible. Additionally, why does the word *gender*, but not *women*, appear in the title? Not all of the pieces engage with gender as a concept, though they all treat questions related to women and many deal explicitly with feminism. In addition, it might have been useful to highlight more prominently when each essay was originally published (though the dates do appear in small print). Despite these minor criticisms, this book makes an important contribution to the fields of women's studies and Islamic studies and heralds stimulating new developments in Muslim women's studies as well.

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