

Book Reviews

Women and Islamisation: Contemporary Dimensions of Discourse on Gender Relations

Edited by Karin Ask and Marit Tjomsland, Berg, Oxford, 1998, 199pp.

The book is an edited collection of papers, the majority of which were presented at a conference organized in 1994 by the Chr Michelsen Institute in Bergen, Norway, under the title *Construction of Gender Relations in Processes of Modernisation: Women and Islamisation*. It is divided into seven chapters and an introduction. Generally, the book attempts to comprehend so-called "religious fundamentalism"; specifically, it examines Islamic fundamentalism. It endeavors to "analyze the ways in which Muslim women develop distinct voices and participate in Islamization processes," thus setting new agendas and redefining their role in society. Since the majority of the researchers are "outsiders" (outside Islam), the editors emphasize two points that are of crucial importance for the credibility of the work. First, unlike most Western studies on gender and Islam, this one claims to be conducted with sincere and good intentions, with an effort to distance itself from Western prejudices that so often portray Muslim "women's relation to Islam as being universally its victims." Second, this study considers cultural backgrounds, education, class, and age to consideration and assess Muslim women in their various national settings — once again in contrast to the usual Western studies that tend to lump Muslim women together into one category. Hence the ethnographic cases presented in the book represent a broad spectrum of Muslim women's religious activities, ranging from Senegal in the West to Iran in the East. The different case studies center on Muslim women's engagement in public religious activities, because it is this involvement which is expected to forge their new role away from the fixed traditional patriarchal one. However, their role in the discourse of Islamization does not necessarily address the overall issue of gender relations; rather, it offers a new alternative and questions the supremacy of Western feminism as the ultimate answer to gender equality.

In chapter one, titled "Feminist Reinterpretation of Islamic Sources: Muslim Feminist Theology in the Light of the Christian Tradition of Feminist Thought," Roald discusses the development of the so-called "Muslim feminist tradition," particularly the attempts by some Muslim women to re-interpret the Islamic sources from a female perspective. She focuses on the intellectual

debate among Muslim feminists and explores the “most common issues in the contemporary feminist reinterpretation of Islamic sources,” such as the re-evaluation of Islamic sources, criticism of the use of Islamic sources, criticism of interpretations of Islamic sources and gender relations in the Qur’an. Roald wonders whether this trend would have a positive impact on the general Muslim attitude toward gender relations as is the case with feminist thought in Western society, and draws a parallel between the two traditions in an attempt to show their differences and similarities.

Roald’s approach to the subject is, in my opinion, problematic and confusing. Indeed, when she speaks of the Muslim feminist tradition she does not define the term clearly, and, like an outsider, refers to them together as if they constitute but one category. She appears to be unaware of the existence of two strands within the Muslim tradition, one secular and the other religious – the former differing from the latter by its deconstructionist approach. Furthermore, her attempt to compare the two traditions based on a theory which is a product of Western culture is fraught with difficulty because it not only ignores the differences in the historical development of the two movements, but also the socioeconomic and theological factors surrounding them.

In “New Veils and New Voices: Islamist Women’s Groups in Egypt,” Soroya Duval criticizes the way Arab Muslim women are portrayed by both outside and inside analysts. Indeed, they are very often subjected to “speculation, generalisation and stereotyping,” thus making it difficult to present an adequate understanding of “gender constructs” in the region. Duval attributes this situation to gender studies that are based on “social development studies, modernization theories, as well as orientalist or neo-orientalist accounts.” Indeed, she believes that these studies do not adequately address the position of Muslim women, because they reflect a high degree of ethnocentrism by emphasizing that the only way forward is for these women to abandon their tradition, thus blocking other alternatives, and asserting the supremacy of the Western feminist model. Duval refuses to accept this line of thinking and questions the validity of such an assumption. Taking the Islamist Women’s groups in Egypt as a case study, she stresses that Western and Western-affiliated feminism must accept the fact that there are other valid ways to achieve positive changes for Muslim women. These are “the possible feminist positions taken by women adopting Islamic dress, positions supportive of female autonomy and equality, (and) are articulated in terms totally different from the language of Western and Western-affiliated feminism.” These voices should be encouraged to allow for possible understanding.

In chapter three, titled “Contested Identities: Women and Religion in Algeria and Jordan,” Jansen argues that contemporary Islamic resurgence in the Middle

East has “imposed” a new identity on Muslims, particularly regarding gender and gender relations. As such, women have experienced a shift “in perceptions of self as women and as Muslims.” Because their established identities are challenged by their new one, Muslim women are led to question whether it is in conformity with the “propagated Muslim identity” in the region. In a study based on information gathered in Algeria and Jordan, Jansen demonstrates how a growing number of women are trying “to reconcile new notions of femininity with a new identity as Muslims,” thus following and supporting the religious discourse.

“Public Baths as Private Places” is the title of the fourth chapter in which Marjo Buitelaar, a cultural anthropologist, investigates the importance of public baths or *hammam* to women because she feels that public baths are a significant social organization related to various aspects of their lives. As such, she chooses the public bath in Moroccan society as a case study and explores the “sexual division of space that is characteristic of North African cultures.” She also discusses the shifting notions of privacy in Morocco as a result of the modernization process. Although the subject is interesting, one cannot help but feel that it is out of line with the overall theme of the book, or, if there is any link, it is not clearly demonstrated. This is important if we take into consideration the fact that the book is targeting ordinary audiences as well as specialists.

In “Female Dervishes in Contemporary Istanbul: Between Tradition and Modernity,” Catharina Raudvere discusses the Sufi orders in Turkish society and focuses on the religious activities of a group of women who are members of the Halveti-Jerrahi order in Istanbul. She describes the history and internal structure of the order, then relates the activities and rituals of the Halveti-Jerrahi women and their *dhikr* ceremonies. She stresses that this form of piety is not highly regarded by both the Islamists and secularists in Turkey, who condemn it as a ground for superstitious behavior (by the former) and a means for political influence (by the latter). Unfortunately, Raudvere’s account is rather simplistic and unbalanced. Indeed, it takes the reader seven pages to reach the main focus of the subject; then, when she finally deals with it, she covers it hurriedly and superficially without any critical assessment of the role of Sufi orders in general, and of Sufi women in particular, in Turkish politics and society.

In “Women and Muridism in Senegal: The Case of the Mam Diarra Bousso Daira in Mbacke,” Rosander looks at the situation of women and Sufism in Senegal. She focuses on the Muridi (from Muridiyyah — a Sufi order) women, and their associations, and in particular the women members of the Mam Diarra Bousso association which bears the name of the mother of the founder

of the Muridiyyah order, Shaykh Ahmadou Barnba. Recalling her meetings and interviews with these women, Rosander highlights Senegalese female religious practice in today's Muridism. She concludes that although their religious practice is closely associated to the dominant religious discourse, it can nevertheless be seen "in terms of women's ability to manipulate the value system without challenging it or aiming at changing it." Like the previous chapter, this study is interesting but lacks critical assessment of the subject. The author restricts herself to no more than anthropological explanations and observations.

In the final chapter, Kamalkhani looks at women's religious activities in Iran and assesses its impact on their social and political mobility. She stresses that the regime in Iran has managed to mobilize rather than marginalize women in society, by encouraging them to take an active role not only in the private but also in the public arena, especially in educational institutions. Their contribution is regarded as "an urgent political need and a modern policy for Muslim nation-building," and the state has consequently offered them religious as well as economic opportunities and has managed to integrate them into the wider society.

Although the book contains some good ideas, it is, in general, weak and fragmented because it lacks a unified theoretical approach. Indeed, the work comes across as a series of articles with no link with one another. A concluding chapter may have put things in order.

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