

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Ferial J. Ghazoul, ed. *Gender and Knowledge: Contribution of Gender Perspectives to Intellectual Formations*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2000. 500 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-977-424-521-3.

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Published on H-Gender-MidEast (May, 2005)



Gender and Knowledge

The impact of gender on knowledge of society and culture, its effects on history, religion, politics, and literature, and its effect on the formation of the self, are some of the issues discussed in the nineteenth issue of *Alif*, the refereed journal published by the American University in Cairo, with multidisciplinary articles in English and Arabic.

The religious discourse on gender and on the position of women is dealt with in several articles in the issue. Perhaps one of the most outstanding articles about the religious discourse on the woman question in the volume is by the prominent scholar Professor Nasr Hamid Abu-Zeid (Leiden University). The article is in Arabic and is titled “Qadiyat al-Mar’ah Bayna Sindan al-Hadatha wa Mitraqat al-Taqalid” (“The ‘Woman Question’ Between the Hammer of Modernity and the Anvil of Tradition”). Professor Abu-Zeid argues that “the woman question” in the contemporary Arab world is inseparable from the social and political setting. He argues that discourse on the question of women in Egypt nowadays is similar to the type of discourse that prevailed at the beginning of the Egyptian Renaissance in the nineteenth century, and he attributes this setback to the existential crisis of the Arab world that reached its climax with the defeat of 1967 (Arabic section, p. 29). The continuous defeats in the political arena, and the incapacity to face the real adversary, namely dictatorship and American and Zionist hegemony, led people to rally around an Islamist discourse, which in turn, not only kindled public anger against western imperialism, but also against

western civilization and culture as a whole. Thus, the call for the emancipation of women was condemned as an insidious call from the West that seeks to undermine the Arab and Islamic culture (p. 31). Abu-Zeid also argues that the current situation of women in the Islamic world as a whole, and in Egypt in particular, is to a great extent due to the general public’s incapacity to distinguish between Shari’a (Islamic law) on the one hand, and Fiqh (jurisprudence), which is the endeavor of religious scholars to interpret the Shari’a, on the other hand (p.33). Abu-Zeid contends that the interpretation of the Shari’a in many instances reflects the social traditions in many Islamic societies, such as the grave restrictions imposed upon a woman’s right to divorce, and on her right to include certain conditions in the marriage contract (p. 36). Abu-Zeid also points out that equality between men and women is a major concern of the Holy Quran (p. 42), and that the Quranic verses which seem to be dismissive or derisive of women are understood as such because they are discussed without reference to their context.

In his article “Qisat al-Khalq wal ’Isyan fil Qur’an” (“The Story of Creation and Disobedience in the Quran”), Mohamed Mahmoud, Professor of Comparative Religion at Tufts University, vindicates Eve from the charge of having been the cause for Adam’s fall from Grace, a charge that has always been used to condemn women on the basis of their being a source of temptation and sin. The article demonstrates, through a close reading of the story of creation in the different suras (chapters) of the Quran, that Eve is totally absent from the story of cre-

ation and disobedience, while Satan is central in the unfolding of the narrative and the prime mover of its events (Arabic section, pp. 66-88). The careful examination of the Quran points out that it is Satan who disobeys God and lures both Adam and Eve out of Heaven.

The issue also includes an interview with Hoda Elsadda, Professor of English Literature at Cairo University, founding member of the Women and Memory Forum, and co-editor of *Hagar*, a journal on women's issues. In the interview, Elsadda argues that the project she undertook as the co-editor of *Hagar* was to write from a gender-sensitive perspective. She points out that in her view, writing, at a symbolic level, signifies the shattering of the silence imposed upon women and their world (Arabic section, p. 229). She argues that writing entails participation in working towards a better world, and thus helping to change history and society. Elsadda draws an interesting analogy between representations of colonized nations and marginalized groups on the one hand, and representations of women on the other (p. 210). She argues that Edward Said's seminal book, *Orientalism*, was the starting point in her interest in women's issues. She notes that *Orientalism* made her realize the striking resemblance between the language used to represent women and the roles that society expects them to play, and the language used to represent colonized nations and marginalized groups (p. 211). Elsadda also points out that her approach to women's issues is focusing on Arab cultural history from a gender-conscious perspective, and that what motivated her to espouse this approach was her joining a group of women who were trying to introduce a modified version of the marriage contract (p. 212). The questionnaire that aimed at finding out people's reactions to the suggested modifications revealed to her the prevalent misconceptions that made people view these modifications as alien to their heritage. It was then that Elsadda resolved to deconstruct hegemonic discourses in the Arab culture (p. 212). It was this resolve to study Arab cultural history from a gender-conscious perspective that prompted Elsadda to be a founding member of the Women and Memory Forum, the aim of which is to support research in Arab cultural history and to encourage cultural publications. Elsadda expressed her conviction that research that responds to real needs and attempts to answer genuine questions will enhance the movement for social change.

The renowned Egyptian Islamist writer and thinker Aisha Abdel-Rahman blames the spread of western education, introduced in Egypt by western missionary schools, for what she considers the swerving of the

women's movement in Egypt from its original track, and calls for a national and Islamic education and approach to women's upbringing and education (English section, p. 197). Concentrating primarily on Egypt, Abdel-Rahman argues in "Islam and the New Woman"—which first appeared in Arabic and was translated into English by Anthony Calderbank—that although women took great strides in different areas of professional life since the end of their seclusion in the harem, the same calls for the improvement of the situation of women that were heard in the days of the harem are still being heard today (p. 197). Abdel-Rahman attributes what she calls the "distorted vision of women's rights" (p. 197) to the great disparity between the types of education offered in foreign and missionary schools in Egypt in the early twentieth century and the education offered in national schools and to "cultural colonialism and intellectual invasion implanted firmly in the consciousness and mentality of the East" (p. 200).

The polarization in the Arab and Islamic arena concerning the woman question between the Islamist discourse and the secular discourse (which can be inferred from Abdel Rahman's article), is discussed at length by Heba Raouf Ezzat, Assistant Lecturer of political science at Cairo University, in her article "al-Mar'ah wal Ijtihad: Nahwa Khatabin Islamiyin Gadid" (Women and Ijtihad: Towards a New Islamic Discourse). Though Ezzat points out the drawbacks and pitfalls of each of the two approaches (Arabic section, pp. 97-99), she comes to the conclusion that over the past few decades the Islamists' discourse on the woman question showed significant signs of development, revision and regeneration, unlike the secularist discourse (pp. 100-101). She cites the writings of Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali and Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi as examples of the development of the Islamist discourse on gender and on the rights of women (pp. 101-112). In the concluding section of her article, Ezzat calls for a new discourse that reconciles the secular and Islamist discourses and bridges the gap between Islamic Shari'a law and modern social science in order to enhance the status of women (pp. 113-115).

If Ezzat ultimately seeks to deconstruct the binary opposition between secular and Islamist discourses, Muhammad Birairi, Professor of classical and modern Arabic literature at the American University in Cairo, seeks to deconstruct the masculine/feminine and male/female binary oppositions. In his article "Ta'nith al-Mudhakkir wa Tadhkir al-Mu'annath" ("Feminizing the Masculine/Masculinizing the Feminine"), Birairi discusses works in classical Arabic literature that decon-

struct the masculine/feminine binary opposition. Birairi distinguishes between two modes of literary expression in classical Arabic poetry (Arabic section, p. 122). The first is when the poet adopts and embodies in his poetry the values of the social institution. The second is when the poet transcends the dictates of the social establishment. Birairi argues that the former mode can be seen in propagandist poetry (al-mawdua'at al-shi'riyah dhat al-tab'a al-Da'a'i), such as panegyrics and lampoons (fakhr and hijaa), while the latter can be seen in the poetry that has a symbolic dimension, such as love poetry and wine poetry (p. 122). Birairi cites examples from classical Arabic poetry that point out that hijaa, or lampoons and satirical poetry, is the poetic genre in which the poet is most dominated by the values of the social establishment, and that it is the type of poetry in which the masculine/feminine binary is most evident. In this binary opposition the positive values such as honor, valor, and loyalty are associated with the masculine, while negative attributes such as treachery and unfaithfulness are associated with the feminine (p. 123). However, in the classical Arabic poetry that is symbolic, woman acquires a highly metaphysical value. She becomes the source of light, warmth, and guidance (p. 125). There are also poetic motifs in which the feminine is endowed with the positive attributes usually associated with the masculine, most notably the description of the she-camel in classical Arabic poetry. The she-camel, as described by the classical Arabic poets, is usually characterized by stamina, speed, and the heroic capacity to surmount obstacles (pp. 126-127). On the other hand, some classical Arabic texts problematize the masculine/feminine opposition by feminizing what is supposed to be masculine and vice versa. A striking example of such instances is the poem by the al-Shanfara in which he praises the poet Ta'abbata Shar-ran through comparing him to a mother taking care of her children (pp. 128-130). It is Birairi's contention that the dismantling of the binary opposition between the masculine and the feminine and the binary opposition between the self and the other is closely related to the spirit of tolerance and acceptance that does not deny the fact that difference exists, but negates the binary vision that turns one side of the opposition into the embodiment of goodness, while condemning the other side as an incarnation of evil (p. 136).

Another binary opposition that Shereen Abou El Naga, lecturer in the Department of English Language

and Literature at Cairo University, seeks to deconstruct is that between the private and the public and the inside and the outside. In her article "Tarh Nasawi Li Mafhum al-Bayt fi Hikayat Zahrah wa Sahib al-Bayt" ("The Concept of Home in The Story of Zahra and The Owner of the House: A Feminist Reading") Abou El Naga seeks to dismantle the boundaries between the private and the public. Through the examination of *The Story of Zahra*, a novel by the Lebanese writer Hanan Al Sheikh and *The Owner of the House*, a novel by the Egyptian writer and scholar Latifa Al-Zayyat, Abou El Naga examines the concept of "home," the domain described by the patriarchal society as a woman's private space and enclosure. Abu Al Naga argues that in a patriarchal society, the concept of home has certain connotations all of which seek to define woman's identity and to firmly establish her exclusion from the public sphere (Arabic section, p. 171). Among these connotations are taking care of the children, chastity, being obedient to the husband and the total negation of woman's individual self (p. 171). According to this concept, the home becomes a woman's cocoon in which she lives totally separated from the public world of decision-making (p. 171). Abu Al Naga argues that Zahra and Samia, the protagonists of the two novels (written by women), underwent severe crises that forced them to reconsider the concept of home. They managed to dismantle the barriers that separate the private from the public.

Alif's issue on gender and knowledge also includes an article by Olfat Kamal Al-Rouby, Professor of Arabic criticism and rhetoric at Cairo University, titled "Mayy Ziyadah wal Naqd al-Nisa'i" (Mai Ziyada and Feminist Criticism) in which she discusses the critical writings of Mai Ziyada (1886-1941), who was renowned for hosting a literary salon that was attended by prominent Egyptian men of letters. The issue also contains a testimony by Jehan el-Bayoumi, a medical doctor, whose "Women and Health Here and There: A Medical Testimony" discusses issues concerning women and health; another testimony by the writer Sherif Hatata on his own experience with masculinity; an Arabic translation of Julia Kristeva's "Woman's Time"; and a translation of Virginia Woolf's essay "Women and Fiction."

The issue is a valuable contribution to gender studies that combines varied views and analytical approaches. Though comparative concerns are evident, the focus is on Arab-Islamic culture.

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Citation: Nesreen Allam. Review of Ghazoul, Ferial J., ed., *Gender and Knowledge: Contribution of Gender Perspectives to Intellectual Formations*. H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. May, 2005.

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