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Anne Sofie Roald. *Women in Islam: The Western Experience.* New York: Routledge, 2001. xvii + 339 pp. $41.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-24896-9; $120.00 (library), ISBN 978-0-415-24895-2.

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Disaggregating Islam from Arab

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Women in Islam: The Western Experience explores attitudes about gender among first- and second-generation Arabic-speaking Sunni Islamists living in Europe. Roald uses the term "Islamists" to refer to "Muslims who regard Islam as a body of ideas, values, beliefs and practices encompassing all spheres of life" (p. xii). This book is highly resourceful in its detailed account of Islamic trends, Islamic legislation, and Islamic texts relevant to this study.

It is also useful in its thorough outline of interpretations of gender issues among Islamists in Europe. Roald's methodologies are well developed and highly transparent to her reader. They include questionnaires, discussions, interviews, group discussions, participant observation and participant description among primarily educated Islamists. Roald provides her readers with a detailed account of her criteria for selecting informants and interviewees and describes her interview questions thoroughly.

As a non-Arab convert to Islam, she positions herself in-between the insider/outsider or research participant/researcher divide. She also recognizes the significance of her gender to her fieldwork when she explains that her husband legitimated her research. She writes, "I was accompanied by my husband who not only functioned as a bridge between the interviewees and myself, but who was also active in posing questions" (p. 76).

The theoretical framework that shapes Roald's analyses assumes that change in gender patterns among Arab Muslims is an outcome of interaction with "the West" and the extent to which Arab Muslims have lived in a given host society in Europe. Roald suggests that, in Europe, Islamic sources and literature are interpreted through two cultural base patterns, an "Arab cultural base pattern" that is patriarchal and a "Western cultural base pattern" that supports gender equality.

While she affirms that "the Islamic world view is dynamic" as it is a "world view in change" (p. 90), she portrays Arab and Western cultures as homogeneous and unchanging. Moreover, she relies on an unbalanced comparison between patriarchal scholarly discourses from the Arab world and feminist scholarly discourses from the West to make her case (p. 90). Roald, for example, conflates the writings of Egyptian scholar Muhammad Mutawalla ash-Sha'rawi (d. 1998), "a traditional scholar whose views on women and gender are built on a patriarchal system" with the "Arab cultural base pattern" and the feminist theologian Amina Wadud-Muhsin, an American convert to Islam, whose "debate is built on notions of equality between the sexes" with the Western cultural pattern. This approach excludes theological research from the Arab world that promotes gender equality and it overlooks the patriarchal underpinnings that shape Western societies. "Arab culture" thus emerges as oppressive to women while "Western culture" emerges as progressive and advanced vis-=-vis women's rights.

Despite her dichotomizing approach to "Arab culture" and "the West," Roald depicts Muslim identities and affiliations as nuanced, porous, and diverse. For example, she argues that fundamentalism has a different meaning in different contexts. Moreover, she distinguishes between ethnic Muslims and religious Muslims, while contextualizing Muslims' search for identity in Europe in terms of history and politics.

Illustrating differences and similarities, Roald provides a survey of modern Islamic trends in Europe. She gives an eminently useful, comprehensive account of nine trends and distinguishes between those based in Muslim countries and independent organizations originating in Europe or as a Muslim response to European influence. Four of these trends were most relevant to her fieldwork: the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Liberation Party, the salafi trend, and the post-ikhwan trend.

The Muslim Brotherhood, she argues, "views Islam as a comprehensive system which includes all aspects of human life," such as politics and family and gender relations (p. 39). The Islamic Liberation Party, she explains, supports the Muslim Brotherhood's notion of Islam as a complete system (p. 45), but views the establishment of the caliphate as essential. She adds that the Islamic Liberation Party is more traditional in relation to gender issues than the Muslim Brotherhood (p. 46). The salafi trend, according to Roald, is rooted in the wahhabi movement and is united in its commitment to the direct interpretation of the Koran and the Sunna of the Prophet. Additionally, Roald states, "The salafi view of women and their role in society is strict. Women are encouraged to stay in their homes.... Many women wear face veils" and "generally speaking, the salafi trend tends to take the strictest legal position" (p. 53).

Roald situates the post-ikhwan trend in the context of the contemporary Islamic resurgence movement of the 1970s and 1980s. She adds that in the 1990s the ikhwan ideology has diversified into various trends from "rigid formalism to Euro-Islam." Roald explains that many Muslims within this trend uphold "the ikhwan and the salafi notion of returning to the Koran and the Sunna, the ikhwan idea of Islam as a rational religion and the understanding of Islam as a complete way of life" (p. 56). She adds that those linked to this trend tend to disagree with the political behavior of the Muslim Brotherhood in Muslim countries and tend to be highly educated and most susceptible to change (p. 56).

Changes in attitudes to women and gender in the cultural encounter between "Islam" and the "West" is the key issue that shapes Roald's study. One of Roald's primary assumptions is that "the flexibility of interpretation of social issues in the Islamic sources affords the possibility of developing new interpretations in the new cultural context" (p. 79). She successfully illustrates her position by demonstrating that difference in affiliation with an Islamic movement, country of origin, religious training and cultural context produce difference in attitudes towards gender.

In her study of veiling, she found that Islamic arguments become controversial in Western contexts where "rape is explained not as a result of lightly dressed women but as a result of men's need to exercise power due to their own experiences of abuse" (p. 294). In addition to veiling, Roald addresses women's political participation, polygyny, divorce and child custody, and female circumcision. She relies upon Islamic sources (the Koran and the hadiths relevant to her questions), classical Islamic literature, contemporary written Islamic sources, and results from her fieldwork among Arab Islamists to develop her analysis.

This approach sets her work apart from most social science research on Women and Islam in that she extensively engages Islamic texts and links this engagement with ethnographic research. While Roald's book opens up spaces for addressing the multiplicity of Islamic views and interpretations, it is Eurocentric in that the issues she explores are those that have aroused attention by dominant Western state and media institutions.

Her study of Islamic texts reveals that cultural patterns are variables in scholarly Islamic interpretations; that man as the origin of creation is not necessarily an established notion in the Arab Islamist sphere; and that the attitude that man and woman are complementary to each other is more prevalent among Arabic-speaking Islamists than the attitude that women are a means for men. She found, for example, that among Arab Islamists in Europe, many agreed that a wife's obedience to her husband is about conflict resolution and that the gendered division of labor is based on divine decree. Regarding political participation, she explains that 75 percent of those interviewed agreed that a Muslim woman can have high positions in society, and that 80 percent said that a Muslim woman cannot become a state leader.

While analyzing her findings, Roald participates in a growing trend that seeks to disaggregate "Islam" from "Arab culture." I have observed a similar pattern in my research among Arab Muslim youth in North America. I have argued that this trend emerges in the context of migration from contexts where the notions of culture and religion are overlapping to contexts such as North America or Europe where the dominant discourse assumes a secular society where religion is relegated to the private sphere. Among young Muslim Arabs in the San Francisco Bay Area who participated in my own research, attempts to separate "Islam" from "Arab culture" have been driven by the following questions: What aspects of Islam are "truly Muslim" and what aspects of Islam are shaped by "Arab culture or tradition"?

While this approach is useful for furthering theological understandings, it can be Eurocentric when it privileges Europe as the key site of Islamic progress, gender equality, and women's rights. *Women in Islam* equate those who emphasize "men being superior to women" with an "Arab cultural base pattern" and suggest that second-generation Muslims who are educated in Europe will be more open to change than those educated at home. Roald expresses concern that the development of

gender equality in Islam will cause a rift between European and Arab approaches to Islam.

In addition to erasing the heterogeneity of approaches to women and Islam within Arab contexts, she adopts a linear approach to history that assumes that gender equality in the Arab world takes longer than it does in Europe and the United States. In this book, the Arab world is thus read according to the framework of cultural essentialism while Europe is articulated as transnational, multi-layered, and constantly changing. In my view, an alternative approach might expose that the boundaries between "Arabs" and "the West" are not fixed but fluid, that Arab women and men who are making change in their societies exist, and that patriarchy is alive and well in every part of the world in varying forms.

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