

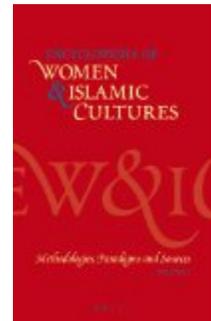
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Suad Joseph, ed. *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures. Volume One: Methodologies, Paradigms and Sources*. Leiden: Brill, 2003. 682 pp. \$229.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-11380-0.

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## Astutely Conceptualized: Interdisciplinary, Transhistorical, and

The Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures (EWIC) is a historic, timely, and ambitious project that exemplifies a moment in the academy when the study of “women and Islamic cultures” is being consolidated, establishing itself as an “interdisciplinary, transhistorical, and transnational” area, according to the general editor, Suad Joseph (p. xxxiii). The encyclopedia is an intervention into the relationship of women’s/gender studies to Middle East studies and a way to account for the delayed absorption of feminist critique by Middle East studies, compared to other fields, according to Joseph (p. xl). The first volume of EWIC, “Methodologies, Paradigms, and Sources,” makes an important and unique contribution because it is not a collection of summaries of research areas, but presents “critical tools” that scholars and students can use in their own research (p. xxii). In the introduction, Joseph explains the goals of the project and notes that scholars were asked to consider “primary sources and how their use has informed and shaped what is considered to be ‘known’ about women” and to “evaluate important changes in methodologies and sources” and the “specific political and social conditions under which knowledge is produced over time” (p. xxiii).

The introduction also addresses the tensions between “the ways in which encyclopedia projects tend to stabilize concepts and the editors’ efforts to complicate and destabilize them” (p. xxii). Joseph notes that four of the encyclopedia’s primary organizing concepts—Islam, region, nation-state, and periodization—as well as the notion of feminism, of course, are “troubled, shifting, politically burdened” concepts that must be challenged, even

as the encyclopedia documents research focused on these notions. This astute approach to encyclopedic knowledge provides a critical and important epistemological lens through which to read the entries in the first volume.

The volume is organized into two sections: first, thematic entries, focused on diverse regions covering periods from the sixth century in the Middle East, just before the rise of Islam in that area, and just prior to the introduction of Islam in other regions, to the present. The second section consists of disciplinary entries, spanning the major disciplines as well as interdisciplinary fields, such as women’s studies/gender studies, Islamic studies, and legal studies, and also conceptual/methodological fields such as “Orientalism” and “oral history.” This allows for a historically and culturally situated understanding of research paradigms and methods for studying women and Islamic cultures, as well as disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to the field; this organizational distinction is useful because it forces attention to the ways in which paradigms and sources are shaped by research approaches to specific periods, regions, and disciplinary areas of knowledge, even if these categories are not always explicitly reflected on in all entries. There is an interesting connection, and sometimes an overlap, between the first and second sections, for the various periodized/regional entries generally emerge from disciplinary fields, and the disciplinary entries conceptualize regions and periods in diverse ways, thus providing multiple perspectives on questions of methodology and paradigms.

One of the themes highlighted at the end of the introduction is one of the key themes running through the entire volume, namely, that “women are often the litmus test of what constitutes ‘modernity.’ Women are seen as the signifier par excellence of a culture, of a nation, of a civilization” (p. xlix). As Gail Minault points out, “Women remain symbolic both of everything that is wrong with society and of everything that men want their society to be” (p. 178). This is a significant issue for the discussion of sources across the thematic entries, for several of them point to the ways in which women were charged with representing the nation and were associated with social reforms and legal or cultural debates, shaping the nature of sources available on women in Islamic cultures and restricting archives. Many scholars observe that documents addressing women produced by male reformers in various societies do not focus enough on women’s daily lives and silence female voices. But Julia Clancy-Smith argues that one strategy to counter this bias in sources is to read these materials “against the grain” (p. 113). In some instances, court and legal records have helped counter stereotypes of Muslim women as inherently helpless and powerless (pp. 345, 430).

Several entries also demonstrate how Orientalism and colonialism have shaped archives of knowledge about women and Islamic cultures. European colonial regimes in regions from North Africa to Southeast Asia produced documents about colonized populations for social control, so the archive during colonial periods in many regions consists largely of missionary tracts; colonial ethnographies; administrative, legal, and military documents; and writings of European travelers and settlers (p. 100). This textual and visual archive has all the problems of colonialist and Orientalist representations of women in Islamic cultures and of the empires’ political and strategic interests, for example, a preoccupation with the mysterious harem in various regions (p. 64) and on tribals and nomads in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Afghanistan (p. 256). There is a tension between relying on sources that focus ideologically on women as symbolic of social and political issues and trying to go beyond political and judicial documents to look at the daily life of “ordinary” women (p. 179). Some scholars point out that elites tended to record their lives more than non-elites (p. 102) and that turning to women’s literature, including memoirs and fiction, women’s magazines, and other visual and poetic sources can shed light on the lived experiences of women across class backgrounds (pp. 64, 180,

344). Another strategy is to “seek out women’s oral accounts using technologies derived from cultural anthropology” (p. 180).

There is an acknowledgment in the book that the influence of imperial and political interests continues to shape research on women and Islamic cultures, for “Western geopolitical and strategic concerns” underlie the current interest in “Islam and Arabness” (p. 198). A few scholars, including the editor in her introduction, explicitly discuss the politics of terminology, the production of categories such as “Muslim,” “Middle Eastern,” or “Arab” in conjunction with various shifts in state policies, particularly those of the United States. (pp. xxii, 192, 197). Some of these policies are associated with political interventions that have devastatingly tangible effects. For example, Laura Bier notes the burning of the Iraqi national archives in April 2003 during the U.S. invasion of Iraq (p. 201). One of the entries also explicitly points to the politics of the researcher’s own position and identifications as they affect research on women and Islamic cultures (p. 363).

The disciplinary entries make note of shifts in various fields as they affect methods and paradigms for the study of women and Islamic cultures, for example, the “Islamic trend” in women’s history that has brought a “critical and contextualized reading of Islamic texts” (p. 347). In contrast, the entry for political science observes that the discipline’s reliance on rational choice theory and institutional sources neglects the activities and agency of women (p. 409). The institutionalization of women’s studies in the United States has also obviously provided a context for the study of women and Islamic cultures, but this has also been accompanied by the biases of Western feminist discourse that has overlapped in many instances with Orientalist and imperialist approaches. This perhaps explains why there are two entries in the book for women’s studies, one specifically focused on “Euro-American Women’s Studies and Islamic Cultures,” in addition to an entry for “Sexualities and Queer Studies.”

The entries in both sections of the volume represent an enormous amount of hard work by an impressive collection of scholars and a very significant collection of expertise and critique. The first volume of the encyclopedia is clearly an astutely conceptualized project that that will greatly advance and support research on women and Islamic cultures at a critical moment in the development of this field of study.

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