



New Directions in Middle East Women's and Gender History

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1.

Look in on a scene from the contemporary history of women and gender in the Arab Middle East: in 1999, a major conference on gender history in Arab societies over the past one hundred years took place in Cairo. Playing on the title of a famously controversial 1899 treatise on the woman question—lawyer Qasim Amin's *The Liberation of Woman*—the convenors chose to call the event “One Hundred Years of the Emancipation of the Arab Woman.” Organized by the Government of Egypt's Supreme Council for Culture under the sponsorship of Suzanne Mubarak, spouse of the Egyptian President and keynote speaker, the conference was a major public as well as academic event, widely covered in the local press. Much of the coverage focused on a few heated but generally productive confrontations that occurred within panel discussions. Yet it was not the content of debates so much as the personalities and dress of participants that drew a voyeuristic media gaze (as did our end-of-conference dinner on a boat that cruised the Nile). Outrage was expressed at the inclusion of a roundtable discussion on sexuality; certain newspapers speculated that there must have been undue western feminist influence at work. Specifically, there was anger that state funding had gone into this event, and the issue was used by Islamist spokespeople to criticize the Egyptian government's Western leanings. In the local media, especially the organs of the official opposition political parties, the study of gender history itself was turned into a sexualized body, attacked for its pernicious influence, and dismissed. To hold such a conference was criticized as an affront to Egypt's national honor, and at least one newspaper writer seemed scandalized by the fact that four or five non-Arabs, including myself, were among the 300 or so participants, and therefore witness to this breach of national honor.

2. I offer this anecdote as a window on major challenges—as well as signal

accomplishments—shaping the writing and teaching of gender history on and in Muslim-majority societies of the Middle East (in which I include the Muslim-majority societies of west Asia and North Africa that define themselves as Arab, as well as Turkey and Iran). First, to make a point that is perhaps obvious yet still requires repeating, the fortunes of gender history as an academic enterprise cannot be disentangled from contemporary politics, global and local, an entanglement that seems especially clear in Middle East gender history right now. Second, while much of the energy over the past decade and a half of scholarship has been centered in North America and England, the gender-sensitive study of history for the region started *in* the region, with the first historical analyses of women's status published just before the turn of the twentieth century in Lebanon, Egypt, and Turkey, as interventions in shaping a nationalist narrative. It is crucial not only to engage with and to honor early and ongoing work in the region, but to recognize the historiographical significance of how academics are differentially placed in the global—too often an easy substitute for “Western”—production of knowledges.

3. Now, the center of gravity is shifting to the region once again, through publications and the energies of academic programs and research centers.¹ But, third, in an increasingly conservative social and political atmosphere characterized by growing popular discontent about the perceived failure of the postcolonial state to perform its duty toward citizens, as well as widening income gaps, mounting unemployment, and consistent state repression of any real organized opposition, women are (yet again) bearing a double symbolic and social-political burden. Claimed by various political actors simultaneously as embodying all that is wrong with society *and* as the all-important repository of everything the society cherishes most, women may find their every articulation resonating far beyond the academy. Such circumstances have repercussions on academic work, implications for how research is framed and received, how a scholarly community polices itself—and how it is policed from outside its own relatively comfortable boundaries. And in such an atmosphere, the 1999 conference in Cairo could not *but* have drawn notice, whether praise or censure, from the larger political community. For sensitivities and loud silences around gender remain at the center of the politics of the nation; and therefore, so does gender history, as it analyses and questions earlier narratives of the nation.

Although I will discuss English-language scholarship on Middle East women's and gender history, an area of work that has proliferated hugely over the past decade, I want to emphasize ongoing debates formulated among scholars in the Middle East and to highlight the importance of factors outside the academic discipline of history that continue to be crucial in shaping Middle East gender studies as a whole and perhaps the study of history in particular. These debates are leading the field in exciting and activist directions, though sometimes with the troubling sorts of sideshows afforded by the media interventions that I described above. Of course boundaries between "here" and "there", or between English-language scholarship and that presented in Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and French, are not static: and in fact, issues of "where" and "how" one is situated are very much to the fore. With the growth of gender studies in/on the Middle East in every social science and humanities discipline, there has been a fierce, and at times acrimonious, debate over situated knowledges and positionality, no less with regard to history than in any other discipline, a constant if variably constructive reminder of the importance of activism in shaping scholarly agendas, the perceived urgency of the issues at hand, and of course the interested nature of all scholarship.² That scholarship on gender in the Middle East is directly pertinent to activism around gender and human rights (with repercussions in law reform, legislation, medical care, social safety nets, and a host of other areas with immediate impact on the lives of women, men, and children) is a remarkable and exciting responsibility for scholars, one that is of course not limited to those working on/in the Middle East.

5. If those of us who try to conceptualize, research, and teach Middle East gender history in North America feel that we are working within an ever more highly charged political atmosphere, how much more sharply evident it is for scholars in the Middle East, who face restraints both material and political, not to mention the generally difficult conditions that obtain in the region's overcrowded and under resourced public universities. Yet in recent years, centers and collectives for the study of gender have appeared throughout the region, which is especially impressive given the growing conservatism in most places. The University of Sanna' in Yemen, the American University in Cairo and that in Sharja, the Lebanese American University in Beirut and Bir Zeit University in Palestine (to the extent it can remain open in siege conditions) all have started centers and embarked on teaching women's history. And it is

important to note that centers have existed since the 1970s, when the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World at Beirut College for Girls (later Lebanese American University) and the Women's Studies Center at Ahfad College for Girls (later Ahfad University for Women, Omdurman, Sudan) were founded. This ongoing energy in teaching and curriculum development is crucial, of course, to create a constituency of young women and young men, giving them historical narratives through or against which to think about their own lives. Yet there are strong deterrents to research work on gender in the region; and there remains a gulf between what is published here, and sometimes translated into Middle Eastern languages, and what is published there, and almost never translated into English.³

6. In the region particularly, the “archaeological” work of republishing, annotating, and analyzing earlier writings on gender continues. This is not only a scholarly imperative—and a slow process, for archives remain difficult to access and incomplete. It is also a political necessity for feminist scholars in the region, in the present political climate, where the biographies and writings of individuals of an earlier time are constructed in the interests of conservative gender agendas.⁴ Energy has gone into publishing new biographies of early feminist figures, such as Nabawiyya Musa and Huda Sha'rawi. Women's collectives—Multaqā al-Mar'a wa-al-Dhakira (Women and Memory Forum) in Cairo, al-Bahithat (Researchers' Collective) in Beirut, the editorial group that puts out the journal *al-Ra'ida* at Beirut University College and the *Nour* editorial collective in Cairo—are republishing early works by Arab women, and early volumes of women's magazines, as a way to counter accusations that feminism is alien to nonwestern societies. Moreover, the republication of earlier material can be a strategy for speaking in a context where any contemporary analysis with a whiff of either feminism or sexuality is vulnerable to official censorship and even more so to what is called “censorship of the street”—pressure from religious activists. In fact, historians of gender who are republishing earlier documents are often vying with Islamist publishing houses that are also republishing medieval Islamic tracts that focus on gender, since ironically, Islamist discourse actually gives center stage to the body and to sexuality by focusing regulatory discourses there. Islamist writers are also publishing translations with commentaries of selected western documents central to histories of gender discourse, and

are thereby working, quite consciously I think, to capture the terrain of western feminism and define it for a popular audience before others can do so, much as conservative think tanks in the United States have adopted the rhetoric of multiculturalism and feminism to their own political agendas.⁵ The empirical work of unearthing documents certainly carries political valence as well as academic value, while offering an ostensibly “neutral” or “objective” ground on which to advance agendas through the choice of texts, annotations, and prefatory remarks.

7. Feminist recognition of the importance of historical narrative is also evident in Muslim-majority societies of the Middle East today through alternative modes of writing history. In recent work, I have argued that the historical novels of late nineteenth-century gender activists in Egypt and Lebanon were a political intervention into discourses on gender, a tentatively feminist rewriting of history; at other key moments, such as the 1960s and the 1990s, the historical novel has surfaced as a genre that contests dominant narratives of gendered social organization.⁶ We can learn much about certain women’s concepts of gender and contributions to discourse on the politics of gender through time by historicizing women’s writings of historical novels, as alternative archives that challenge some of the gaps and silences in what historians have regarded as the “archive proper.” Thus far, though, creative use of the novel—and of poetry—as social institutions that shape human understandings of relationships and of difference has not drawn historians of the Middle East, as it has for instance in work on domesticity and class relations in nineteenth-century North and South American and European societies. There remains a distinct division in Middle East area studies between the study of history and the study of literature—partly because historians of Arabic literature are still caught in a rather sterile debate over the extent to which the early Arabic novel may be considered either “Arabic” or “novel.”
8. At the aforementioned 1999 conference, one energizing aspect was that scholars in many disciplines, fiction writers, and filmmakers not only contributed notoriously to making contemporary history, but also brought their own work to bear on interpreting earlier historical moments. If cross-disciplinary work is endemic to feminist activist scholarship, this feature is striking in Middle East women’s and gender history. Some of the most important theoretical breakthroughs

and rereadings leading to new historical work have been contributed by anthropologists and sociologists: Deniz Kandiyoti on theories of patriarchy and nationalism; Fatima Mernissi on traditions of Islamic historical scholarship and how the sacrality of the sources has constricted readings of early Islamic history; Suad Joseph on kinship and family organization; Annelies Moors on changing structures of law as shaped by practice. Scholars outside of the discipline of history have contributed to the study of the early nationalist period and feminist discourses especially in Egypt: anthropologists (Cynthia Nelson, Lila Abu-Lughod), political scientists (Mervat Hatem), scholars of literature (Huda al-Sadda) and of Islamic studies (Omaima Abu-Bakr). Gender history has also been influenced by the preoccupations of Women in Development work, although that is less true now than it was fifteen years ago.⁷

9. But, after a couple of decades in which other disciplines seemed to take the lead, historians are now at the forefront in theorizing gender as a key analytic space and in reassessing dominant narratives of Middle East historiography. Historians for whom gender centrally shapes their analysis are reassessing the formation of the modern state as centrally shaped by gender: witness the work of three scholars of Iran, Parvin Paidar, Afsaneh Najmabadi, and Janet Afary. Ellen Fleischmann's book in press on the early Palestinian nationalist movement not only incorporates women's activism into that history but also sees the nationalism movement as significantly shaped by concepts of "the new woman." Elizabeth Thompson argues that a "crisis of paternity" was central to Syrian elites' struggle to oppose French imperial control in the interwar period and to the shape the postcolonial state would take. Mounira Charrad's *States and Women's Rights* explores not only how postcolonial North African states engineered family status law in divergent ways partly because of the different status of extended kinship groups in each case, but also how family status law became central to each state's definition of itself (how laws governing marriage, divorce, inheritance, child custody and the law have been formative of the creation of these states following independence). Julia Clancy-Smith, working on North Africa, is emphasizing gender analysis in her many recent essays on colonial encounters. For an earlier period, Leslie Peirce's work on the centrality of women of the Ottoman imperial family to the institutions of rule has opened up new lines of investigation.⁸

Such work builds on and also runs parallel to historical scholarship focusing on women's activism and status, whether elite women's institution-building within anticolonial nationalist contexts, such as Margot Badran's work on the Egyptian Feminist Union or Ijlal Khalifa's and Amal al-Subki's books on the Egyptian feminist movement's growth or Beth Baron's book on the Egyptian women's press as an institution in formation; and on ground-breaking historical scholarship on nonelite women's work and status vis-à-vis legal systems, notably Judith Tucker's books on Egypt and more recently Ottoman Syria and Palestine.⁹ Yet for the most part, gender-aware historical scholarship remains parallel to, rather than incorporated within or central to the discipline of history in and on the Middle East/North Africa region. There remains a resistance of silence, among historians of the Middle East whether based in Europe, North America, or the Middle East, to the idea of gender as a socially constructed marker of difference within a field of power relations; too often, "women's history" is still regarded as denoting an "add women and stir" approach. In a review essay, Beth Baron spoke approvingly of what she sees as a turn away from theory and toward story-telling, as a needed recuperative move in Middle East women's and gender studies that minimizes theory and emphasizes variability among women's experiences.¹⁰ But I worry that this risks ceding the terrain of gender analysis, already subordinate with regards to the mainstream of history writing on and in the region. That recent years have seen numerous review articles and assessments of "the field" (however defined) suggests a productive tension that has marked women's and gender history in general, between, roughly, poststructuralist emphasis on the inaccessibility of experience except as a product of discourse and feminist desires to focus on the material stuff of women's lives; perhaps because Middle East gender history is a small field wherein the lure of multiple archives and untended pastures looms large, these debates have hovered but not been as central as they might be to work in this area.

11. Historians, in company with other scholars of the Middle East, have grappled with the issue of "complementarity" as a marker of—and agent in—maintaining gender binaries, although it seems to me that "complementarity" has been scrutinized more in terms of a combination of legal strictures and material experience than as a hegemonic discourse with material political implications. Long a mainstay of conservative

visions of Muslim-majority societies, the notion that men's and women's ascribed social-political duties were "equal but different" and "complemented" each other masked the hierarchical arrangements whereby these "complementary" roles were maintained as "natural," as they could mask violence.¹¹ Deconstructing this construct by foregrounding the bipolar yet hierarchical distinctions that constituted its ideological work was linked to understanding the particular forms of patriarchal family and supra-family political organization that operated in various social and historical contexts in the region, and then in investigating linkages and dissonances between notions of domesticity and gender difference.

12. Historians of women and gender in the Middle East took up, to discard, western feminist formulations of public and private, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of gender and spatial distinctions in discrete historical situations. Sophisticated work on the *harim* and a burgeoning genre of Arab women's memoirs that constructed gender segregation in specific ways fed into a relatively new attention by historians of Middle Eastern societies to domesticity and its multiple meanings. Some historians, especially in their earlier work, tended to look at it as a narrowing discourse aimed at keeping women in the home; Margot Badran pointed out its strategic deployment by the early organized feminist movement in Egypt as a way to enter the public sphere, while Beth Baron emphasized the pervasive presence of domesticity as a learned art that women championed in the early women's press of Egypt. Possibly more ambiguous meanings of discourses on domesticity within the context of Middle East histories emerged in work by Afsaneh Najmabadi on the gendered axes of early modern discourse in Iran and my work concerning deployments of modernity in "Famous Women" biography in the Arabic press. Questioning reified notions of patriarchy has also led to more emphasis on masculinities, specifically the positioning of younger men in hierarchies of power, an investigation in which Kandiyoti and anthropologist Suad Joseph have been key.
13. Scholarship on the political work of gendered representations and on the political force of concepts such as honor and shame, particularly with reference to the elaboration of anticolonialist nationalisms and emerging postcolonial states, examines intersections among dominant discourses of gender binaries, aesthetic culture, and political activism. Frances Hasso has

argued that Palestinian flight during and just after the 1948 war enacted anxieties over familial honor transferred to the larger community, while Ellen Fleischmann has analyzed Palestinian women's double use of the discourse of honor to resist imperialist encroachment and to challenge their own community's gender regime. Concepts of honor have undergirded my own formulations of elite men's discourses on women's rights as veiled discourses on masculinity in British-controlled Egypt, and Beth Baron's investigation of elite Egyptian women's nationalist stances.¹² Honor was a language in which resistance to the occupier was articulated as community preservation. But as I suggested at the start, the discourse of honor remains politically operative today and can be used to discredit the project of making gender constitutive to the study of history—a move that has to be deliberately contested. What I think is one of the most important books on Middle East women and gender to come out recently is not a work of history but an anthology on the politics of sexuality, *Sexuality in Muslim Societies* published by Women for Women's Human Rights/New Ways, a collective of Turkish feminist activists and scholars whose bold denunciation of silences around sexuality includes breaking what is probably the final taboo by speaking about Muslim lesbian communities. (Yet, I was told regretfully, these essays cannot be included in the Arabic-language version of the volume.¹³) At the same time, increasing interest in the study of masculinities has led to a more open scholarly discussion of gay male identities and communities. But recent political events, notably the Egyptian government's imprisonment and trial of 52 men accused of embracing gay identity shows that the political climate for this work is not getting more receptive: and it is a frightening enactment of how representations of sexual identity are appropriated for political purposes.

14. For the greatest silence in Middle East gender research in all disciplines doubtless remains that silence around sexualities. With regards to work in the region, social taboos are significant; scholars who are already attacked as being "Western" for attending to gender are understandably reluctant to incur the even greater wrath that awaits those who openly discuss sexuality. This self-censorship is a dilemma that those writing in the volume on *Sexuality in Muslim Societies* confront squarely.
15. Yet this is not an unbroken silence in historical

scholarship. Historians have studied medieval discourses on the differentiation of bodies through “liminal” categories, for these attracted considerable legal scholarship in premodern times. Shaun Marmon’s work on eunuchs, Paula Sanders’ on hermaphrodites, and Everett Rowson’s on homoerotic narratives and on categorizations of gender and sexuality in medieval belles-lettres have all shown how discourses on human sexuality governed social categories of the sexual when the fluidity of ethnic and religious boundaries appeared to threaten social stability.¹⁴ Afsaneh Najmabadi’s forthcoming work on early modern Iranian history examines how the state was elaborated not only through gendered symbolism but also through sexualized social categories that twentieth-century nationalist discourses worked to contain at least in public articulation. If these works focus on how received categories of sexual identity defined according to degrees of normativity have worked as metaphorized social boundary markers more than on sexualities as constituting a central realm of human experience and self-understanding, this is admittedly a difficult realm for the historian to access—but one of great import.

16. Most of the work on gender to date focuses on elite population groups, with significant exceptions such as Judith Tucker’s work on nineteenth century nonelite women in Egypt and Palestine, and their manipulations of legal systems. Recent studies of nonelite social movements and understandings—James Gelvin’s on popular nationalism in mandate Syria, Eve Troutt Powell’s on nineteenth-century Egyptian visions of Sudan—draw on gender analysis agilely but not centrally.¹⁵ Similarly, there is little work on women in labor organizations. In general, intersections of gender and class have been understudied, and while scholars make the de rigueur rhetorical dismissal of any unified category called “women”, there is little attention to relations within broad categories of gender difference, no studies, for example, of mistress-servant relations, though I discuss briefly the rhetorical deployment and suppression of this relationship in my work on biography as a discourse on modernity and women in nineteenth–twentieth century Egypt.¹⁶
17. Despite the fine work on sexuality and social boundaries mentioned above, and that partakes in and parallels work on the discourses of advice literature, pre-modern history suffers by comparison to the modern period with regards to gender analysis, except as a

backdrop to later—and ongoing—debates on “Islam and gender.” As Janet Afary noted in her contribution to the roundtables that generated these essays, in 1991 we had the first synthetic gendered history, Leila Ahmed’s *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, which remains widely cited and adopted in classrooms. But it was not yet time for a synthesis; many of Ahmed’s suppositions call for further work.¹⁷ Fine microanalyses trace particular discourses through time, such as Denise Spellberg’s work on the changing image of ‘A’isha bint Abi Bakr, spouse of the Prophet Muhammad, as reflecting and shaping shifting notions of political community, and Fatima Mernissi’s work on *hadith* concerning women as political actors. Leslie Peirce’s magnificent study of women in the imperial Ottoman court of the seventeenth century shows their central roles in defining as well as maintaining Ottoman power, as does her forthcoming study on law and gender in an Ottoman court.¹⁸ Scholars of more recent periods pay lip service to the notion that the state is not monolithic, but Peirce’s work truly demonstrates this for one key Middle Eastern premodern imperial center. In practice, the ambiguous and often self-contradictory roles of the state in defining and maintaining gender orders is an area that scholars whether of medieval Islamic polities or of the modern nation-state have barely begun to really unpack. As Judith Tucker and Margaret Meriwether noted recently, our relative lack of knowledge about the period before 1800 means that historians of the modern period tend to generalize about earlier times, and to draw overly sharp dichotomies between the earlier and later periods. This tendency sometimes echoes modernization theory’s sharp distinction between “tradition” and “modernity.” And where we have learned a great deal about premodern women’s material lives—such as their ownership of property and their ability to manipulate the legal system to advantage, the question remains (as Tucker and Meriwether also remarked) of whether women’s access to property meant access to authority and/or to autonomy.¹⁹

18. A sense of political crisis has been important in shaping academic work on and in the region, as I argued earlier. In a recent assessment of Middle East gender studies, Deniz Kandiyoti emphasized the “highly politicized and emotionally charged reflection on key political events” that frames both activist feminisms in the region and contemporary scholarship.²⁰ This reflection has informed the trajectory of gender

scholarship and activism from the earliest moments of formulating women's history in the region, in a context of anti-colonialist nationalist activism in which Arab, Turkish, and Iranian scholars were active.

19. A focus defined by moments of crisis and stages of political struggle—the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire, nationalist resistance to imperial power and grappling with colonially imposed boundaries throughout the region, the Iranian revolution, and so forth—may have tended to skew attention toward gender and nationalism, toward ideologies of representation, and towards work on specific engagements with imperial actors and structures. As crucial as these are, historians' work on nationalism and representation needs to be matched by work in areas such as history of the family, women as economic actors in changing economies and as labor activists, gender-aware histories of labor migration and diaspora, gendered accounts of material life, and the like, where we need historically specific analyses of how ideologies of gender and material histories permeate and shape each other. These are by no means absent, as Tucker's and Meriwether's volume on gendering the social history of the Middle East demonstrates, and as their own and others' research shows; yet within the discipline of history, these difficult-to-access areas remain less explored especially with attention to internal and chronological difference.²¹ Equally, we need histories of concepts that have been shaped through material experience, through social process: "honor," "family," "kinship," "government," and so forth. We need more explorations of tensions between lived lives and texts.²²
20. If we ponder the historiography of Middle East gender history, we find a trajectory that has been shaped both by the changing foci of transnational feminisms and by the region's recent history. It was crucial first not only to engage in archaeology—digging women out of the dust—but also to challenge some dominant and enduring stereotypes. The specific historical lines of engagement between Middle Eastern and European societies produced images for western consumption of the Arab or Turkish or Muslim woman as erotic exhibitionist yet also as passive and concealed, as simultaneously powerful threat and helpless victim, and of course as metaphoric sign for the contained and needy East. The heavy burden of orientalism has weighed on much scholarship concerning the Middle East, nowhere more than in gender studies: it has been necessary to

dismantle stereotypes before and as we do anything else, which of course carries a danger that one will reify stereotypes in the very process of shattering them. Early ventures into women's history concentrated on countering these reductive images by emphasizing the agency of different groups of women in Middle East economies, in culture production, and in the formation of legal culture. The accompanying stereotype of Islam as a uniformly oppressive and unchanging cultural system also channeled scholarly energies into an emphasis on secular spheres, and on secular ideological and material sources for women's generally unequal or downgraded access to public life, material resources, cultural leadership, and authority in the family. These emphases easily went hand in hand with the archaeological imperative, with compensatory history, with simply trying to find sources for women's lives in the past.

21. As we have seen in our own media coverage over the past few months, stereotypes of Arab or Muslim women die hard in our own society. Yet, recognizing that "agency" and "the secular" were inadequate as explanatory frameworks for understanding either female experience or the deployment of gender categories in particular historical contexts, academic gender historians moved on. But an emphasis on the secular remains strong in most institutional histories of early Arab feminism, where "Islam" is represented predominantly as a set of practices and as a presence—an ineluctable marker of cultural identity—with which feminists had to contend. This is only partly explained by the elite subject focus of this work: the fact that female elites who shaped early Arab, Turkish, and Iranian feminisms were often trained to look westward; these elites, however, were not necessarily alienated from their religion of birth as either faith or culture.
22. Very recently, Middle East women's and gender history has swung from this focus on the secular—emphasizing that Islam had relatively little to do with structural aspects of women's status as legal subjects, economic actors, and family members—to privileging religion not only as a legal system and social world view but also as an explanatory framework for women's activism, both historically and at present. Some feminist scholars see this as a possibly dangerous move; sociologist Haideh Moghissi has accused scholars who study women's religiously based activism of collusion with Islamist-oriented authorities, specifically the Iranian regime.²³ Some worry that privileging religion returns scholarship to paradigms we thought had

been fully discredited—to a point somewhere along that almost an uncanny convergence between orientalist views of Islam as a timeless, uniform, and all-encompassing system that rigidly shapes the gendered organization of society, on the one hand, and—on the other—Islamic fundamentalist views of the ideal society as organized along what are proposed as timeless and seamless Islamic lines. Both orientalist and Islamist perspectives have tended to see gender identities as fixed by the religion, either in a uniformly degrading and oppressive manner (if you are an Orientalist), or in a privileged space of essentialized female self-realization (if you are an Islamist). By Islamism I mean a political program that works toward a state whose structures and legal system are wholly governed by (a discrete interpretation of) “Islam,” that sees the formation of one or more Islamic states as the only possible future for the region, and that regards Islamic doctrine as defined by the orthodox tradition of exegesis and jurisprudence over time, and as unchangeable. There are of course variations among Islamist groups in terms of tactics and so forth, but in defining “Islamism” I want to emphasize that I am not conflating “Islamism” as a political program and “Islam” as a faith and moral perspective.

23. Others see this new scholarly enthusiasm for the religious as a welcome acknowledgement of the diverse paths women have taken as they have exercised agency in their own communities. It does reinvigorate a debate that has been part of Middle East women’s and gender historiography, and activist debate, for a very long time indeed. As Deniz Kandiyoti notes for feminist scholarship in the Middle East, “the debate on the compatibility of Islam with women’s emancipation, harking back to Qasim Amin, is still on the agenda in the 1980s and 1990s” (and a decade later!).²⁴ Again, this is not just an academic debate. Any assessment of the academic scene in (and on) the region has to take into account the impact of Islamism as the ground on which most political and social debate takes place. In other words, religion-as-politics sets the perimeters of public discourse in the region now, albeit with significant resistance from intellectuals: yet even those who are opposed to an Islamist outlook have to begin their arguments on terrain marked out by that outlook.
24. And this above all is where the entire field of Middle East gender studies, in whatever discipline and wherever geographically situated, is shaped by immediate politics—and that is perhaps truer of gender history than of any other discipline. It is also where lay history

becomes very significant in helping to shape what professional historians do, with both positive and constraining implications. Thus, gender activists are not only doing exegesis of the foundational texts of Islam, but are also looking for antecedents in history, a fine demonstration of how contemporary conditions impel historical construction.

25. Fatima Mernissi was probably the first scholar-activist whose investigations into the sources of Islamic law and practice—Qur'an and Hadith (the Prophet's reported sayings and acts)—became widely disseminated. Mernissi's imaginative forays into early Islamic history for a contextual reading of sources and their re/production led her to question narratives of gender that over time had been deemed "Islamic." Like other Muslim scholars, notably in Iran, Mernissi claimed *ijtihad*, the believer's right to evaluate sacred sources and shape community consensus around faith and practice. This perspective emphasizes Islam's democratic component as it suggests the potential malleability of gender practices associated with Islamic doctrine. It proposes a history of Islamic discourse, not as a rigidly prescriptive discourse on gendered rights but as a dynamic discourse on social norms subject to negotiation and defined by power relations at various moments. It highlights early Muslim women's contributions to that discourse, which were then muted in practice as Islam became linked to ruling structures.²⁵
26. Historians are positing intersections of gender and religiously defined frameworks in a nuanced way that emphasizes women's assertions of agency while recognizing that religious institutions and practices justified in the name of religion are sites of power that often work against the interests of particular groups of women. One of the tasks for gender history now is to trace discontinuities and continuities in the shaping force of religious systems with regards to histories of social practices. It seems to me that studies of contemporary faith-based gender activisms in the Middle East may overplay the novelty of women's declarations of agency within Islamic frameworks; there is a need for more historical work on Muslim women's articulations of faith-based positions as grounding for formulating their own access to social rights and resources.
27. At the same time, the search for Islamic roots risks overlooking the complexities of discourse positions that historical subjects managed to hold. For instance, whereas two decades ago, scholars portrayed early

feminists in the Arab world as precursors to a secularist feminism that was dominant into the 1990s, now scholars search high and low for the Islamic roots of contemporary discourse, and often they find what they seek in the same writings of those same historical personages. This is not an inaccurate reading, and if it leads to a historically grounded respect for these complex discourse positions, this is all to the good; but too often one pole—whether the Islamic or the secular—seems to be emphasized at the expense of the other. Thus, as a particular group of scholars in Cairo, the Women and Memory Forum, reprints the works of early feminists such as Nabawiyya Musa and Malak Hifni Nasif and holds conferences on them, they are attacked by certain secular feminists for allegedly overplaying the Islamic component of early gender activism in the region.²⁶ More dangerously, this emphasis can lead to an analytic distinction between “Islamic” or “Islamist” and “secular” that was not necessarily part of the thinking or the rhetoric of these historical subjects.

28. The search for Islamic roots comes out of a search for feminist epistemologies that are locally situated, not dependent on Western constructions of subject and object in research methodologies. Positing a faith-based feminism in an Islamic framework represents an epistemology that cannot be classed as “Western.” Yet, ironically, it is criticized as “Western” by some in the region. A provocative debate over the validity of the term “Islamic feminism” is a case in point. Among other contested areas, this term (variously defined) is championed by some while being regarded by others as the latest Western import, as something embraced by western scholars, in fact as a sort of neo-orientalism that has once again been adopted by some elements of a local elite.²⁷
29. A word more about this debate, for it is significant in shaping emerging work in Middle East gender studies, whether in the discipline of history or in other disciplines. The embrace of “Islamic feminism” risks a tautological bind, whether as a contemporary movement or as produced in discrete historical moments. For some scholars, any activism concerning women that is interpretable as “Islamic” becomes “feminist”; and any Muslim woman’s intellectual and/or activist work becomes “Islamic.” Though it is crucial to distinguish between “Muslim” as an ascribed identity and “Islamic” as a deliberately chosen approach, such a distinction is

“Thematic Conversations” culminating in sessions at annual meetings of the Middle East Studies Association (2000–2002); this series, initiated and led by Sherifa Zuhur, has been called “Insiders/Outsiders to the Study of Women and Gender in the Middle East.”

³ The Supreme Council for Culture published a number of translations of English-language gender scholarship in conjunction with the 1999 Conference, and has continued to do so since. Yet, just as Arabic literature fares poorly in opportunities for translation and circulation in North America, so does Arabic-language scholarship. Only scholars able to write and speak in English are likely to have their voices heard in North America, and to a lesser extent, in Europe.

⁴ See, e.g., Marilyn Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2001), Chap. 8, on contemporary Islamist political rhetoric as formulated through constructions of biographies of early Islamic women.

⁵ Marilyn Booth, “An Islamist Reading of John Stuart Mill,” unpublished ms.

⁶ Key examples of historical novels: *al-Bab al-maftuh*, by Latifa al-Zayyat (Cairo, 1960), available in English as *The Open Door*, trans. Marilyn Booth (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2000); *L’amour la fantasie*, by Assia Djebar (Paris, 1984), available in English as *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, trans. Dorothy Blair (London: Quartet, 1985) and by the same author, *Loin de Medina* (Paris, 1991), available in English as *Far from Medina*, trans. Dorothy Blair (London: Quartet, 1994); *Ghurnata*, by Radwa Ashur (Cairo, 1988). On the nineteenth-century novel as gender discourse, see Marilyn Booth, “The Exemplary Woman, the Female Hero, and the Feminists of 1900: Fictional History and Histories of Activism in Egypt” (unpublished ms.).

⁷ As Iris Berger mentions for Africa in her contribution.

⁸ Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Moustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, forthcoming); idem., “Crafting an Educated Housewife

in Iran,” in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998) and *The Story of the Daughters of Quchan: Gender and National Memory in Iranian History* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1998); Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906–11: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and the Origins of Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Ellen Fleischmann, *The Nation and Its ‘New’ Women: the Palestinian Women’s Movement, 1920–1948* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003); Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia UP, 1999); Mounira M. Charrad, *States and Women’s Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2001); Julia Clancy-Smith, “Islam, Gender, and Identities in the Making of French Algeria, 1830–1962,” in *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism*, ed. Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1998), and other essays too numerous to mention here; Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Scholarship in French and Arabic could also be mentioned here, but for reasons of space and audience I have not given examples.

⁹ Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Ijlal Khalifa, *al-Haraka al-nisa’iyya al-haditha: qissat al-mar’a al-^carabiyya^c ala ard Misr* (Cairo: al-Matba^ca al-^carabiyya al-haditha, 1973); Amal al-Subki, *al-Haraka al-nisa’iyya fi Misr mâ bayna al-thawratayni 1919 wa–1952* (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-Misriyya al-^camma lil-kitab, 1986); Beth Ann Baron, *The Women’s Awakening in Egypt: Culture, Society, and the Press* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Judith Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and *In the House of the Law: Gender and Islamic Law in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998).

¹⁰ Beth Baron, “A Field Matures: Recent Literature on Women in the Middle East,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 32:

3 (1996).

¹¹ In the context of French feminist work, this masking effect of the notion of “complementarity” was discussed by French historians in an important essay in *Annales* in 1986, “Culture et pouvoir des femmes”; an English-language version appeared in 1989: Cecile Dauphin, Arlette Farge et al., “Women’s Culture and Women’s Power: Issues in French Women’s History,” *Journal of Women’s History* 1: 1 (Spring 1989): 63–88.

¹² Frances Hasso, “Gender and Modernity in Arab Accounts of the 1948 and 1967 Defeats,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 32 (November 2000), 491–510; Ellen Fleischmann, “Nation, Tradition, and Rights: the Indigenous Feminism of the Palestinian Women’s Movement, 1929–1948,” in *Women’s Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, Nation, and Race*, edited by Ian Christopher Fletcher, Laura E. Nym Mayhall, and Philippa Levine (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 138–54; Marilyn Booth, “Woman in Islam: Men and the ‘Women’s Press’ in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33: 2 (2001): 171–201; Beth Baron, “The Construction of National Honour in Egypt,” *Gender and History* 5 (1993): 244–55.

¹³ Author’s interview with members of the collective, Istanbul, May 2001. The full citation for the volume is: *Women and Sexuality in Muslim Societies*, ed. Pinar Ilkkaracan. Istanbul: Women for Women’s Human Rights (WWHR), New Ways (Kadinin Insan Haklari Projesi, KIHP), 2000.

¹⁴ Shaun E. Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Paula Sanders, “Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islamic Law,” in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, edited by Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 74–95; Everett K. Rowson, “Two Homoerotic Narratives from Mamluk Literature: al-Safadi’s *Law’at al-shaki* and Ibn Daniyal’s *al-Mutayyam*,” in *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, edited by J. W. Wright Jr. and Everett K. Rowson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 158–91; and his “The Categorization of Gender and Sexual Irregularity in Medieval Arabic Vice Lists,” in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, edited by Julia Epstein and Christina Straub (New York and London:

Routledge, 1991), pp. 50–79.

15 James L. Gelvin, *Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998); Eve Troutt Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Mastery of the Sudan* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, forthcoming 2003).

16 Marilyn Booth *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2001).

17 On this, see, e.g., my review of Ahmed's book in *Gender and History* 5: 1 (Spring 1993): 148–52.

18 *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, forthcoming 2003). For the earlier book, see note 6 above.

19 Judith Tucker and Margaret L. Meriwether, "Introduction," *A Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), p. 10. This chapter and the other contributions provide a more detailed overview of work accomplished to date in gender analysis within historical study of the Middle East and North Africa than I can offer here.

20 Deniz Kandiyoti, "Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and Middle East Studies," in *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p. 8.

21 Kandiyoti's thoughtful essay, cited above, discusses this in terms of stages of feminist scholarship and the impact of the study of Orientalism, which emphasized representation and tended to plot "difference" along an East-West axis even as it sought to dismantle that construction of otherness.

22 For instance, Judith Tucker, Annelies Moors, and Amira Sonbol have investigated women's appropriations of legal prescriptions to gain purchase on family property and to protest sexual abuse. I have attempted to trace tensions between lives and texts through the lens of "Famous Women" biographies in the Egyptian women's press.

[23](#) Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* (London. New York: Zed Books, 1999)

[24](#) Kandiyoti, "Contemporary Feminist Scholarship," p. 9.

[25](#) Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1991). Mernissi has carried on this investigation with respect to historical documentation and the dominant narratives of Islamic history in other works: *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1993) and *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1992).

[26](#) The Women and Memory Forum published selected proceedings of these conferences as *Min ra'idat al-qarn al-'ishrin: Shakhsiyyat wa-qadaya* (From Pioneers of the Twentieth Century: Personalities and Issues), edited by Huda al-Sadda (Cairo: Multaqa al-mar'a wa-al-dhakira, 2001).

[27](#) Recent issues of *The Middle East Women's Studies Review* have featured interventions in this debate.

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