Research approaches

AYSHA PARLA INTERVIEWS
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Feminism, Nationalism, Modernity

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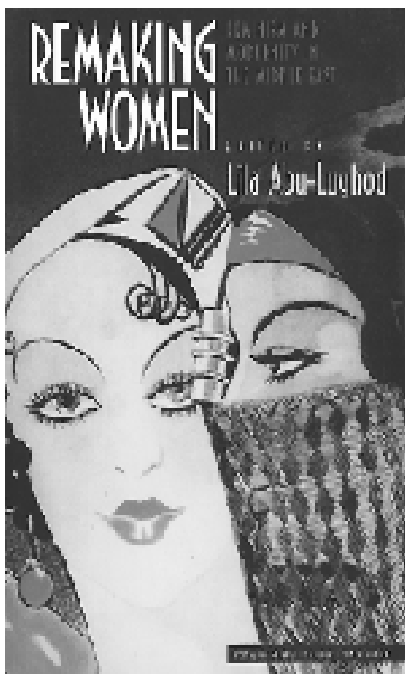

A.P. — *Beginning with the 1980s, we observe a proliferation of writing on women in various parts of the Middle East (and also South Asia), in particular on the ways women have been cast as the icons of nationalist identity within distinct modernization projects of postcolonial/ post-independence Middle Eastern nation-states. How would you locate your edited volume on* Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East, *recently published by Princeton University Press, with respect to this body of literature?*

L.A. — There is no doubt that books like Deniz Kandiyoti's edited collection, *Women, Islam and the State*, that insisted that women in the Middle East must be studied not in terms of an undifferentiated 'Islam' or Islamic culture but rather through the differing political projects of nation-states, with their distinct histories, relationships to colonialism and the West, class politics, ideological uses of an Islamic idiom, and struggles over the role of Islamic law in state legal apparatuses, paved the way for *Remaking Women*.

But this ground-breaking work, published in 1991, was only a beginning. Some of what Kandiyoti's volume could not do was accomplished by several books published in the past few years that paid special attention to the crucial moment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the terms of the debates about 'women's emancipation' were set and when, it might be said, 'the history of the present' regarding feminism and its possibilities in the Middle East was made. These books made extensive use of the writings of Middle Eastern women themselves to analyse the period in question. The rediscovery of women's writings and the analysis of the active women's press, especially in turn-of-the-century Egypt, but also in Iran and Ottoman Turkey, has enabled scholars to shift their attention from the prominent male reformers to the many women who were active participants in the shaping of the new discourses on women.

The work of these earlier scholars crystallized for me, and for the contributors to *Remaking Women*, a number of questions that needed to be pursued. First and foremost were questions about the politics of modernity. In particular, we asked ourselves, how might new ideas and practices considered 'modern' and progressive, implanted in Europe's colonies or simply taken up by emerging local elite, have ushered in not only forms of emancipation but new forms of social control? Second were questions about the politics of East/West relations. How are we to think about those discourses that borrowed from Europe, were supported by Europeans, or were shaped in response to colonial definitions of the 'backwardness' of the East? Third were questions about class that enter into both of these, such as who became involved in debates about 'the woman question' and what relationship did their involvement have to consolidating class projects and identities? Pursuing these questions has led us to what I believe are some very new interpretations of 'feminist' projects in the Middle East.

A.P. — *One of the critical terms that marks the collection is 'modernity.' In your introduction, you urge a rethinking of the ways in which discourses of the modern have been deployed by various political groups at critical historical moments. How do you understand/define modernity, and through what sort of critical lens do you view it, especially as it pertains to gender, or to use that favourite phrase of nationalist discourse, to the 'woman question'?*

L.A. — Some people have argued that it is impossible to define modernity. Instead, we should track the diverse ways the insistent claims to being modern are made. One thing we need to do to study 'the woman question' in the Middle East is to explore how notions of modernity have been produced and reproduced through being opposed to the non-modern in various dichotomies. Even more important, however, is to ask how modernity, as a condition, might not be what it purports, or tells itself – in the language of enlightenment and progress – it is.

This kind of critical rethinking of modernity helps us reassess the projects of modernizing Middle Eastern women that have characterized this century. How best to become modern and what role should be given to Islam and how much of the West to emulate were certainly contentious issues. But that something new was to happen was not doubted. The rhetoric of reformers and literate women themselves was full of references to 'the new' – with calls for 'women's awakening' and 'the new woman' reverberating through the magazines, books and speeches of the era. We wanted to explore how in various parts of the Middle East these projects were conceived and promoted, in all their complexity, contradictions, and unintended consequences, but with a critical eye for the ways in which they might not only be liberatory.

A.P. — *You seem to be asserting that there was something distinct to modernity, that something(s) did change in quite fundamental ways. In which sites, or which aspects of women's lives would you situate these transformations?*

L.A. — The calls for remaking women at the turn of the century and into the first half of the twentieth century included advocacy of both women's greater participation in the public world – through education, unveiling, and political participation – and women's enormous responsibility for the domestic sphere. Nationalism and visions of national development were central to both arguments. While some scholars have dismissed the cult of domesticity promoted by writers in women's journals as conservative and as a deplorable extension of women's traditional roles, we suggest that it depended on a radical re-figuring of gender roles. In other words, to be a wife and mother as these modernizers conceived of it was to be a very different kind of subject than the wife and mother of before. It was not insignificant that the 'new' wife and mother was now to be in charge of the scientific management of the orderly household of the modern nation, as well as the rearing and training of the children who now were seen as the future citizens of the modern nation.

This new vision of wifehood and motherhood underwrote developments in the education of women and intersected with nationalist aspirations. Novel visions of child rearing and household management – and the prescriptive literature through which they were reiterated – not only intersected with nationalist projects but articulated the national struggle in terms of a politics of modernity. Moreover, this new domesticity worked to enforce a single bourgeois norm, devaluing other forms of marriage and family. The sources of these new visions of women's roles can be traced to Europe, whose prescriptive literatures were being translated and whose definitions of the modern deeply affected the Middle Easterners' images of themselves and their society.

What I think we have done that is most original is to have critically analysed the ways that these forms of modernization – the induction of women into new domestic roles as 'ministers of the interior', the professionalization of housewifery, the making scientific of child rearing, the drafting into the nationalist project of producing good sons, the organization into nuclear households governed by ideals of bourgeois marriage, and even the involvement in new educational institutions – may have initiated new coercive norms and subjected women to new forms of control and discipline, many self-imposed, even as they undermined other forms of patriarchy.

A.P. — *Given these new modes of subjection – to the nation-state, to the nuclear family, to the conjugal couple – secured through everyday disciplinary regimes which train the body as well as the mind, you are suspicious, then, of the emancipatory claims of the projects of modernity. Do you see a danger, however, that this critical reassessment of modernity and its emancipatory claims, might veer dangerously close to a yearning for a romanticized traditional past?*

L.A. — You are right to point out the dangers. The tricky task in all this is how to be sceptical of modernity's progressive claims of emancipation and critical of its social and cultural operations and yet appreciate the forms of energy, possibility, even power that aspects of it might have enabled, especially for women. How can one question modernity without implying that one longs nostalgically for some pre-modern formation? Feminist scholars feel this dilemma acutely because they cannot ignore the fact that gendered power has taken and can take many forms.

We try in *Remaking Women* to assess the impact for women of the kinds of modernizing projects and discourses that marked the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Middle East, being aware of the ways these projects, as Afsaneh Najmabadi puts it, might have been simultaneously regulatory and emancipatory. For example, the 'discourse of domesticity' in Iran seems to have provided the very grounds from which the male domain of modern education could be opened up, and with it women's movement into public life and national recognition. Later, women could use notions of serving the State to claim higher education and professions. In Egypt, as Marilyn Booth points out, the prescriptive biographies of famous women that appeared in the Arab press in the first decades of this century seem to have been both constrictive and expansive for women's lives. In sharpening the distinction between the public and private realms, writers of the era could now problematize women's absence from the public (and thus encourage them to enter it) while enforcing new norms of the private, now elaborated as a unique and busy domain in which women should exert themselves.

A.P. — *The implicit term prowling around the already vexed relationship between modernity and feminism, is, as you stress, the West. In nationalist discourses of modernization, we witness over and over women's central role simultaneously as the representatives of civilization and progress, and as the bearers of the so-called unique, authentic, traditional values that distinguish the nation from those aspects of the West seen as corrupting, such as sexual license, excess individualism. Similarly, you emphasize how women's issues have all too easily become the grounds on which battles over cultural authenticity are waged. What does this mean for the place of feminism within postcolonial politics?*

L.A. — You've put your finger on the most troubling question for scholars and activists alike: the relationship between modernity and the West. In colonial or semi-colonial contexts, the distinction between modernity and tradition (with its correlate, backwardness) had a particularly active life because it was paired with that between the West and the non-West.

It is difficult for anyone thinking about 'the woman question' today, as at the turn of the century, to escape the language of accusations and counteraccusations about cultural authenticity. Are attempts to transform the condition of women indigenous or foreign? We try in this book to more calmly interrogate the genealogy of feminism in the Middle East, working against reified notions of separate cultures. To label indigenous the feminism of women who had strong ties to Europeans, not only in the languages in which they wrote, but their formative influences, their interlocutors, and their liberal ideas, risks passing over too quickly the conjunctures between the projects of Europeans and Middle Easterners and the actual role of European discourses in Middle Eastern ones, often mediated, as I said earlier, through the projects of modernity.

But to ignore the differences in local feminisms and projects to reform women is just as misleading. For example, being framed within an Islamic discourse and argued with some of its tools (of reference to the Qur'an, etc.) subtly transformed translated discourses, such as those on motherhood and housewifery. Translations always involved rewritings of the original European texts or framing by commentaries that drew from the texts different meanings. Western cultural forms and ideas were appropriated selectively, often piecemeal. In the Egyptian case, Omnia Shakry shows that European modern notions of child rearing were aligned with Islamic notions of bodily discipline. Even 'Islam' has no doubt been transformed by being made the object of derision by missionaries, the sign of barbarism by the Europeans, and, in response, both the banner of authenticity for those opposing domination and the framework in which debates about society and women have come to take place.

One of the most productive lines of thought made possible by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which re-framed world history as a global phenomenon, was that the division between East and West had to be understood not as a natural geographic or cultural fact but a product of the historical encounter of imperialism. Following this lead, we argue that condemning 'feminism' as an inauthentic Western import is just as inaccurate as celebrating it as a local or indigenous project. The first position assumes such a thing as cultural purity; the second underestimates the formative power of colonialism in the development of the Middle East. ✦

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