

Gender, Modernity, and Liberty – Middle Eastern and Western Women’s Writings: A Critical Sourcebook

*Reina Lewis and Nancy Micklewright, eds.
New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006. 259 pages.*

This book presents a dialogue between western and Middle Eastern women that is often presumed never to have happened. It supplies us with a collection of extracts from Ottoman, Egyptian, British, and American writers, each accompanied with a biography and literary introduction of its writer. The book covers 100 years, beginning with 1837, and focuses on writings by women from Istanbul and Cairo, key locations for the flowering of Middle Eastern feminism. As mentioned in the “Introduction,” the articulation of women’s views was particularly advanced in these two cities.

The historical background of this period, as well as its effects upon women in both the Ottoman Empire (toward the establishment of the Turkish Republic) and Egypt (marked by Arab nationalism and the country’s move toward independence) is well explained in the editors’ introduction and photo essay, which displays the collection’s main theme. In a nutshell, this period witnessed the emergence of organized feminism in both the West and the East and, at the same time, marked the start of a significant growth in the number of European visitors to both cities due to the increased availability of regular steamship travel.

Based upon the information provided, it seems that Middle Eastern women followed the conditions and campaigns of western women with great interest, even though they proffered a cogent critique of western liberation’s limitations and adopted only select western feminist ideas. The writers’ very “staunch” feminism was strongly based on opinionated materials that are subversive even in our times. For example, Lady Anne Brassey (1839-87) is quoted as writing: “Turkey would never take its proper place till ... the softening and purifying influence of women was allowed to be felt” (p. 128). Prior to that, she asserts: “It is a great mistake of the Turks to think that they

can educate their wives and daughters, and still keep them in confinement and subjection” (p. 125). Some of the writers, such as Elizabeth Cooper (1877-1945), provide us with an exact sociological analysis of the different strata by presenting the menus, clothes, and jewelry that characterize the society’s classes and shed light on the material culture of that period and place.

I found the analysis of how western women grasped their sisters in the East highly interesting. It seems that patronizing overtones existed even within the society of women. In fact, some western women actually despised their Middle Eastern sisters. For example, Demetra Vaka Brown (1877-1946) disparages *çarfafs*, the traditional clothing of Ottoman ladies. If she sees anything positive in such attire, she attributes it to the clothes being exotic and picturesque. Brassey wrote: “The princess had a pleasant little French companion ... and she herself, *for a Turkish lady*, talked very well” (p. 127, emphasis added). We might think that the patronizing western women suffered from their own masculine society and sometimes passed it along to their eastern sisters. This may stem from the fact that the women writers mentioned were all members of the elite, as average women were rarely literate and did not leave any written firsthand accounts of their lives. This attitude could have been discussed in the book – a pity that it was not. But maybe this topic exceeds the book’s scope.

Despite the editor’s note on language, I still argue that using modern Turkish words is preferable, at least regarding some terms and especially when they were written in the modern Turkish style. One example of this is *hanım* (lady, Mrs., or Miss., which is used after the woman’s first name), rather than *hanoum*. Furthermore, some apparent typing mistakes could have been avoided.

As for the book’s contribution, every source dealing with gender and feminism is of great importance, since these topics are always in need of new theses and assumptions and nothing ever published can be considered “too much.” Thus, such a book as *Gender and Modernity* is a blessing and an addition to the meagerness of such literature. Moreover, the “Introduction” is very informative and based on many important and relevant cited works dealing with gender and feminism. The second chapter, the photo essay, is in line with the recent innovative attitude of researching history – history as told by or along with photos – that has gradually become popular. I dare to say that at least this chapter is one of the reasons why this book is worth reading.

Since the book gives a good description of all social, anthropological, literary, and historical aspects of women’s daily lives, readers coming from these disciplines will find it of significant value to their own research. In addition, the book’s sampling of women writers of the period contributes to

all gender research, not only that of the Middle East. However, far more research into such writings should be conducted in order to bring about a fuller and completer version of them.

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