

Book Review
By
Ghazwa Al-doori

**Women, Education, and Science within the Arab-
Islamic Socio-Cultural history**

By – Zakia Belhachmi

Engagement with the Arab world for me is both a personal and intellectual journey for the Arab world has been my home for extended periods in various stages of my life.

When reading this book I discovered that the backdrop of misrepresentations alluded to women within the Arab Islamic socio-cultural history are based on myths.

Myths are usually based on grains of truth or isolated facts taken out of context and generalized to represent essential characteristics of the whole.

Myths about the women in the Arab world are based on facts taken out of their political and social context and generalized into hard core stereotypes that distort definitions of the situation of women in the Arab world.

In the Muslim world, Islam has constituted a pervasive cultural influence in the pattern of everyday life since its emergence in the 7th century A.D. in Arabia. It is my belief that the *tafseer* of The Qura'n and the *Hadeeth* are our only textual resources for increasing feminist knowledge within the Arab-Islamic Neo- Patriarchal Social order, Education and Scientific practice.

When I was introduced to this book, Women, Education, and Science within the Arab- Islamic Socio-Cultural History by Dr. Pitts in my education class at the University of Pennsylvania, the title led me to expect that the book will address the roll of women leading in education, and sciences through out the fourteen hundred years. I thought the title was misleading because it used the words “the Science” which leads to thinking of enacting scientific concepts; instead, when I started reading the introduction I learned the word science to mean Socio-Political construction. The term science in the glossary of this book is considered to be the link between knowledge and the political cultural development of the society. The introduction to the book presented two fundamental and interloping issues I was interested in; the historical process of women’s involvement in science; and feminism within the

Book Review
By
Ghazwa Al-doori

specific cultural context of the region. The book emphasized *Al-Sadawi's and Mernissi's* women standpoints as a site of struggle and as epistemic position about social reality (scientific discourse of lived femininity), more described in chapter four. Although I thought the title was misleading, I admit Zaki Belhacheni in chapter one of this book did an excellent job in centralizing the exploration of education.

After all, education in the Arab-Islamic culture, like in other cultures, is a social institution concerned not only within passing on tradition, but also with emerging cultural patterns likely to accommodate change that occurred, or changed under way

It is amazing how in this chapter the author provided a symmetric overview of education and its role in social changes throughout the 13th century socio-intellectual history of the Arab-Islamic world. She explained the Islamic view in accommodating social changes through the principle of *al-tawhheed*.

To illustrate how the principle of al-tawhheed sustained the material and spiritual development of the Islamic society, and shaped the evolution of its socio-political and scientific structures over time.

Throughout the rest of this chapter the author described even more the network and the process of the evolution of the Arab-Islamic culture into world civilization. This network illustrates the role of *al-waqf* as an overall policy based on the principle of *al-tawhheed* to maintain the Arab-Muslim's leadership at the both regional (*Mashriq* and *Maghrib*), and external level (Europe). *Mashriq* represented by Egypt and the *Maghrib* represented by Morocco relied on *al-waqf* even when the Arab-Islamic civilization was engaged in *asral-inhitat* (15th-18th centuries). The author in this chapter discusses the role of *al-Salafiyya* in reconstructing the Arab-Islamic culture both in the *Mashriq* and the *Maghrib*.

Book Review
By
Ghazwa Al-doori

Here, I focus on the role of al-salafiyya as “a buffer” between the state and the community in the socio-political and cultural governance of the Arab- Islamic society in the Mashriq and the Maghrib alike

In another section of this chapter the author showed that Egypt and Morocco maintained their leading role in shaping social changes despite the tension between the states and the communities' pattern of development through out the 20th century. The chapter has a wealth of information about the evolution of the Arab-Islamic culture into a world civilization starting from 1st/7th – 4th / 10th centuries. I imagine that doctoral students will find the book provocative. But I also think that too many entries are presented for one chapter. As an example, *al-waqf* was defined and its origin and significance were explained as an independent legal institution and one of the greatest social laws, the author continued to trace kinds of *waqf* during the prophet's time by introducing the two kinds of *al-waqf*; *waqf- khayri* and *waqf-ahli* and explains the difference between them and the role of each *waqf* and how it governed Islamic infrastructure which led to the emergence of Islamic schools of thoughts while still the four *mathahibs* were in the making. The author continues to explain the turnover by the prophets decentralizing the governance of *al-waqf* to sustain a balance in the power regulating state and community and the formal/informal structural organizations of *al-waqf* that maintained religion and civil order of the Arab/Islamic world throughout the 2nd, 3rd and 4th centuries. The scholarly literature continues in this chapter showing Al-Azhar University in the 5th and 11th and 6th century.

Furthermore, the same chapter provides in detail the first reform movement “*Al Salafiyya*” in the 18th century led by Mohammed Ibn Abdal Wahhab (1703-1789) which reclaimed the Arabs' political leadership because the Islamic state was founded on the *Uruba* and accordingly you will read about him challenging the Turkish authority by calling for Islam as a symbol of unity under Arab leadership. I think too many entries could be intimidating because, at this point, to follow up with the historic events listed in this chapter, the reader needed to be well educated in the history of the Arab- Muslim world yet I strongly feel very supportive of Zakia's huge

Book Review
By
Ghazwa Al-doori

effort in gathering quotes and point of views about every issue she discussed in this book, and her ability to connect these ideas, many of which she had her own say in them, but in some, she didn't. And my example in this is the conclusion of Al- Jabiri mode about *al- Salafiyya*.

Al-Jabiri concludes that while the significance of the Wahabi Movement lies in enabling Morocco to formulate an endogenous view of modernism, its cultural power resides in Al-Salafiyya philosophy. This philosophy he explains paved the way for Islamic Reformism in the Mashriq in the 19th century led by Abduh in Egypt, and was later recaptured by Morocco's intelligentsia both in the renewal of Islamic knowledge and in the mobilization of public opinion against acculturation and colonization.

Among others I would show strong rejection towards two expressions used in this quote to explain al-Salafiyya's philosophy: Islamic reformism and renewal of Islamic knowledge. I think the author avoided defending her *deen* against the *salafieen* and their philosophies. Muslims in general, present The Qura'n and its *tafseer* to be the source of their Islamic knowledge and that Muslims do not need reformism or renewal of their knowledge, instead, they need the in-depth of the *tafseer*. The holy Qura'n is a miracle from different aspects. Actually it calls itself the book of guidance... So everyone who has perceived that it is a miracle should not accept the word reformism or renewal of the Islamic knowledge when it comes to the true belief in understanding of our path in this life through The Qura'n.

The question is why we need Islamic reformism or a renewal of our Islamic knowledge when we have the prophet of Islam who raised the divine flag, and invited the world to *al-tawheed* and to accept Islam and submit to one God. This invitation to Monotheism denied duality of Zoroastrians, Trinity of Christianity, and improper attributes of Judaism to Allah and his prophets, and all the bad habits and traditions from the time of ignorance. The prophet of Islam alone faced those nations, nonetheless, with the holy Qura'n as his proof of prophecy. With The Qura'n he challenged all the emperors of his time, the religious scholars of Judaism,

Book Review
By
Ghazwa Al-doori

Christianity, Zoroastrianism and idolaters. Up to now, Islam has continued this way of challenging with the holy Qura'n. Holding on to the *tafseer* backed up with the *hadeeth* and not to the philosophy of some political movement trying to reform and renew a miracle sent to us to be accepted and enforced.

As a Muslim, I'm a true believer of the language miracle of Qura'n which no one during the past 1400 years has been able to refute in bringing even one chapter like that in the holy Qura'n. So there is a focus on the eloquence and fluency of the verses, though I should note here that it is not a literal book or book of mysteries of creations. The holy Qura'n calls the entire world to bring words like its verses, so shouldn't we be holding on tight to it instead of reforming and renewing?

Also, the miracles of previous prophets belong to their own era and today nothing of them is available for us. But now we only find The Qura'n that claims it is a miracle of all Times.

The author in the same chapter continues with the submission of historical fact in sequence as they happened and that's why I admire the wealth of knowledge the author has presented here which could be very informative to graduate students seeking summarized history of Arab-Islamic countries. On the other hand, I found the book has too many subdivisions and extensions at once repeatedly in many pages of this book. As an example, the author used the following statements regarding Szylowicz explanations:

Similarly, Szylowicz explains, Muhammad Ali's Arabization plan involved two main aspects:

First, building and Arabic administrative structure to replace the existing one...

Second, coordinating the existing waqf schools with the new one...

On the other one hand, Szylowicz discusses Muhammad Ali's achievements through...

First, he engendered "the transformation of the social core group"...

Second, he displaced the Christian Copts from power; thus providing...

And third, he restored Arabic as a medium of instruction, and learning...

On the other hand, Szylowicz highlights Muhammad 'Ali's shortcomings in the...

Book Review
By
Ghazwa Al-doori

Another example depicted from the methodology section, page 52, when the author presented her analysis of Al-Sa'dawi's and Marnissi's feminism research from 1970's to the 1990's to be a documentary analysis and based her reasoning in selecting those two authors on the following points.

I have selected these two authors for three reasons. First, these authors are the proponents of a contemporary scientific feminine mode of feminist research in Arab Islamic Culture... Second, this scientific feminine mode represents a gendered perspective of two most influential ideological trends in knowledge production in Arab- Islamic

The author then continues her data analyzing of her rational, but his time from a "balanced perspective" and her exact statement was:

That reconciles particularism and universalism in the theorized and portrayal of women in history, science and cultural.

Accordingly she rejected historicism and scientism and instead she affirms that science is a socio-political construction and essential to maintain the link between scientific knowledge and the political-cultural development of this society. That being said, I wanted to follow up with the critical, reflexive epistemological analysis of Al-Sa'dawi's feminist research where the author's purpose of this book was to examine/evaluate feminine research after situating Al-Sa'dawi's scientific feminine mode in its systemic relations to the power structure of scientific practices in education and in society during the 1970-1990 period.

To begin, I support Dr. Zakia's decision to avoid presenting Al-Sa'dawi either in comparison with western feminist writing like Park (1988), or in comparison with male feminist like Tarabishi (1982), and Salah Dean (1998), or in attempt to rehabilitate her as a feminist scholar like Malti -Douglas (1995, P.ix) and that is as she described it to break away from cultural relativism and apologetic feminism. I can't agree more with the author when she tries to unfold Al-Sa'dawi's scientific feminine mode from a balanced perspective that shows both the positive and the

Book Review
By
Ghazwa Al-doori

negative elements contained in her feminist consciousness and discourse on gender in the contemporary Arab-Islamic Society. As for sampling, Al-Sa'dawi's discourse of femininity, the author used the Arabic version of three specific books listed below which I think was very legitimate for the fact that the translated version excludes essential elements of her feminist thought which would concern the author's critique of western culture imperialism, gender egalitarianism in Arab-Islamic heritage, and the role of socialism in the liberation of Arab-Muslim women from all forms of patriarchy. So this way the author maintained the accuracy of Al-Sa'dawi's stand point and voids the distortion of her feminist thought and consciousness. In listing, these three books: first is Al-Mar'ah Wa Al-Jins which as the author mentioned was the first book to study gender and sexuality in Arab-Islamic culture from a woman point of view. The second book Al-Mar'ah Wa Al-Sira' Al-Nafsi is again unique because it is the only non-fiction book where by Al-Sa'dawi describes Arab-Islamic social reality entirely in women's voices and explores various layers of their oppression. The third book is the most mature work, Al-Wajh Al-'Ari lil Mar'ah Al-'Arabiyya. Where by she positions herself as a feminist Arab-Muslim woman with respect to the status of women in Islam, their role in advancement of Arab-Islamic culture in general, and their role in women's liberation in particular. These books, I think, illustrate the discourse of femininity articulated by Al-Sa'dawi and pertain to both the theoretical and empirical variations of the author's work.

The methodology Zakia Belhachmi adopted in this book was a documentary analysis, and she focused on non-fiction genre, but my focus here is on the author's chronological analysis of Nawal Al-Sa'dawi's work.

Nawal Al-Sa'dawi is a well known figure in the Arab-Muslim world for being the first Arab-Muslim feminist to publicly confront sexual issues as virginity, sexually transmitted diseases (STD's), prostitutism, female circumcision, incest, and various forms of sexual exploration. Yet her writings were very much informed by her practice of general medicine and psychiatry, both in the country side and the city in Egypt. She provoked the antagonism of highly political and theoretical authorities of Egypt, but what I would argue with Zakia for her book did not point out what went

Book Review
By
Ghazwa Al-doori

wrong strongly. Since Al-Sa'dawi's book represented the majority of Arab-Muslim society and she was clear, firm, relentless, and brave enough, in my opinion, to openly share her personal experiences. Zakia's analysis should point out clearly why Al-Sa'dawi would be a rejected figure. I used the word "clearly" because the analysis is coming from an Arab-Muslim woman which by all means is not a stranger to Al-Sa'dawi's documents.

I found this book review to be an opportunity for me to represent the opponent side to Al-Sa'dawi. Even though I agree and believe in most of her experiences, yet when it comes to religion Al-Sa'dawi took the wrong turn. Taking the wrong turn is where I expected Zakia will be focusing on throughout her documentary assignment for the fact that she had her input in some of the documents and ignored others, although even when she argued Al-Sa'dawi's views she was too general in the sense that the author suggested the *sharee'a* for the comparison between her ideas knowing well that Al-Sa'dawi is not a stranger to the *sharee'a*. The argument is to pull what was relevant from the *sharee'a* to contradict Al-Sa'dawi's views, for instance, in Al-Wajh Al-'Ari lil Mar'ah Al-Sa'dawi views the roots of women's oppression are caused by the stagnation of religious law. Zakia's comment was that she should have instead explained how *The Sharee'a* is static and how Al-Sa'dawi shouldn't have compared her view on women's oppression to Christian religious laws.

Just as Church developed in Europe to adapt the modernity, so did the Islamic religious institutions develop the ideas and explanations to suite modern times. As much as the political authorities hastened in changing religious laws to fit the economic changes from feudalism, to capitalism, and socialism, they hesitated in changing the laws related to marriage and women's life. The reason for that is clear. The political authority at all times and places do not reflect women's interest, and in most Arab and non Arab countries, this authority is patriarchal founded on the authority of men inside and outside the family. (P. 839)

This modernist adopted by Al-Sa'dawi imposes in Zakia's opinion, the universal pattern for women's liberation that requires fighting against religion in order to achieve equality (gender egalitarian). Also, this modernist theory denies the

Book Review
By
Ghazwa Al-doori

ideological specificity to world religions and focus on economic relations alone as bases for the so called universal comparison.

I would present another example of Al-Sa'dawi trying to avoid The Qura'an is when she claims that the stories of The Qura'an are misogynous in nature. She compares these stories to those in One Thousand and One Night book and that is to highlight the similarities between the stories of this source and the common stories from her society influenced by previous stories from other cultures.

The kaid and cunning are linked in A Thousand and One Night to women on matters of love, sex, and fatina...This proves the depth of the story of Eve in the psyche of the Arabs during those times. In addition, The Qura'an contains similar stories such as the story of Yussuf and the wife of Al-Aziz. Thus, the Qura'anic verse "The women's kaid is great" is a confirmation that the woman's cunning as the truth of the essence of women...

In the stories of One Thousand and One nights we find stories similar to Eve's story that causes Adam to leave Heaven...And we find women similar to the wife of Al-Aziz who caused the imprisonment of her husband in the story of kamal Al-Zaman (PP. 781-782)

Al-Sa'dawi's clearer treatment of femininity in the Arabic literature does NOT in my opinion substantiate her claiming misogyny in The Qura'n. The official and popular analysis she made to fold literature should have been rejected in the Arab-Islamic society not by boycotting Al-Sa'dawi, but simply by enforcing the *tafseer* of The Qura'an. So if The Qura'an states "The women's kaid is great" and the *tafseer* agrees that women's cunning describes the truth of the essence of women, then so be it, but on the other hand, the verse did not suggest that men don't practice kaid. Any Muslim will dig deep enough to reach down to the truth of this matter; nevertheless, I think Al-Sa'dawi will have done the same thing.

In continuing, I emphasize in the following example that Al-Sa'dawi lacks the true *tafseer* of The Qura'n and needed guidance to explain oppression against women, this thing was supposed to be addressed strongly in her time. For example, in solution to woman's liberation she asserts in Al-Wajh Al- Aril lil Mar'ha that the universal and

Book Review
By
Ghazwa Al-doori

comprehensive solution to women's oppression is possible by the abolition of patriarchy and the establishment of a socialist political system. Zakia's analysis was:

However, instead of describing how various forms of patriarchy (feudal, capitalists and socialists) are to be abolished, she merely denounces these forms of patriarchy as though identical or similar in their effect on women.

A most effective analysis in my view is "putting the dots over the letters", an old say, well known to any Arab-Muslim person. As The Qura'n has the answer in the following verse: Al-rejal Qa'wa' Moon Ala Al-Nisa'a. This statement simply lifts the burden off of women's shoulder giving her more freedom and assigning more responsibilities to men. At the beginning of this review I mention the word 'myths' about the women in the Arab- Islamic world and I think that what went wrong is the over power of these myths and how the Arab-Muslim society at some point distant themselves from the actual meaning of The Qura'n i.e. the *tafseer* of the verses was individually practiced, not to forget the lack of The Qura'n linguistic skills for most Arabs and non Arabs, instead, Muslims in general should have relied on the *Ulama* for the *tafseer* or even the five trusted books for the *hadeeth* that mostly have the historical explanation of any event.

To explain my argument better, as an example, The Qura'n clearly asks for two men in the case of witnessing an event, but if only one man is present The Qura'n asks for two women to substitute the absent man. The Qura'n smoothly explains that the substitution of two women for one man is because women tend to forget more than men and so in the case of one of the women forgets about what she witnessed, the second woman will remind her.

In reminding Al-Sa'dawi of this example, I think she will think twice in blaming the Islamic family law for the inequality between men and women. Instead, I would say that we are Gods creatures and this is how women are intended to be. Yet, when it comes to Arab-Muslim families, distinguishing between boys and girls in food, clothing, and presents in the sense that a girl has to clean the house, help in cooking, and study, too, if she goes to school, but the boy, has only to study. I totally agree

Book Review
By
Ghazwa Al-doori

with the oppression over girls from ignorant Arab-Muslim parents, but I can't blame the Islamic family law, instead, I would say, parents aren't practicing Islam, or they are too far distant from the true message of Islam, in other words, you can practice *Salah* five times a day, admitting to one of the five pillars of Islam and still go wrong in mistreating your children. As an example on this, there was this man who approached the prophet Mohammed (PBUH) asking him how appropriate it is to give one of his sons a special valuable gift. The prophet asked him if he has the same gift for his other sons and the man answered no, so the prophet asked him not to give his son that valuable gift since he doesn't have the same gift for the rest of his kids. This is a *hadeeth*, *saheeh* written in all five trusted *hadeeth* books. So, if Al-Sa'dawi had the proper Islamic education of the *tafsieer* and the *hadeeth*, she wouldn't be blaming the Islamic family laws. It is her lack of knowledge in Islamic education, furthermore, it's a personal misinterpretation of cultural habits.

The author in this book did an impressive job in gathering this wealth of information though the weakness of this compelling book is that each subject documented from Al-Sa'dawi and Marnissi was not problemized entirely. I think the author should have suggested fulfilling arguments for each subject discussed, supported by The Qura'n and the *hadeeth*, and I comfortably say that throughout the reading of this book that each and every issue Al-Sa'dawi presented has a complete and satisfying answer if the *tafsieer* and the *Sunna* were to be the path of Al-Sa'dawi. The author took to explain socio-cultural behaviors properly but did not bring relevant verses or a *hadeeth* to support a proper argument; instead, she suggested referring to the *sharee'a*.

Throughout the text, I notice quotes were repeated emphasizing on the same issue. For example, when documenting data about female circumcision, the author used the same quote, about how the prophet Mohammed (PBUH) opposed this custom, twice both in the same chapter. Among the other problems were some spelling and grammatical errors. At the end I like to say to the author, job well done, and an effort well spent, for you have increased my knowledge in this integration of history, education, science, and feminism and in realizing where the misunderstanding lies in

Book Review
By
Ghazwa Al-doori

the implication of culture and religion in our social changes, and in our social identity.