Feminism, Nationalism, Modernity

Aysha Parla, doctoral candidate in Anthropology at New York University interviews Lila Abu-Lughod, Professor of Anthropology and Middle East Studies at New York University, USA.

A.P. — Beginning with the 1960s, 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 remade themselves as modern women. What inspired the collection 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 Denis Koiral’s published Egyptian women’s emancipation are special, that 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 different political projects of nation-states, with their distinct histories, relationships to colonialism and the West, class politics, ideologies, 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 take a more 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 movements, 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 intersected with nationalist projects but the actuality of feminism in the Middle East, working against the language of accusations and counteraccusations about cultural authenticity, and yet appreciate the forms of energy, possibilities and critical of its social and cultural operations domesticity worked to enforce a single bourgeois marriage, the making scientific of child rearing, the wifery, the making science of the Middle East. This new vision of wifehood and motherhood 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 happening is not debated. The rhetoric of reformers and literate women themselves was full of references to the ‘new’ – with calls for women’s awakening, and the revivalist re-energizing 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 to the ways in which they might not only be liberatory.

A.P. — You seem to be asserting that there was something new in the way(s) in which feminism was experienced across the Middle East. How might the formative power of colonialism in the development of the Middle East.

L.A. — This is an adapted version from an interview published in the Turkish Journal, Cogolte, 10, Fall 1998.

encourage them to enter it) while enforcing new norms of the private, now elaborated as a unique and busy domain in which women should assert themselves.

A.P. — The implied term prevailing around the usual terminology connected to feminism and feminism, is as you stress, the West. In nationalist discourses of modernization, we witness a valuation of the modern, often non-critically, as authentic, traditional values that distinguish the nation from the aspects of the West seen as corrupting, such as sexual license, excess individualism. Similarly, you emphasize how writers in women’s journals as conservative writers, working across different 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 tension between modernity and the West. In colonial or semi-colonial contexts, the distinction between modernity and tradition and modernism and nationalism is feeble. A number of questions that needed to be assessed the modern. Moreover, this new domesticity worked to enforce a single bourgeois marriage, and even the involvement in new educational institutions – may have initiated new coercive forms and subjected women to new forms of control and discipline, many self-imposed, even as they undermined other forms of patriarchy. This new vision of wifehood and motherhood 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 happening is not debated. The rhetoric of reformers and literate women themselves was full of references to the ‘new’ – with calls for women’s awakening, and the revivalist re-energizing 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 to the ways in which they might not only be liberatory.

A.P. — Given these new modes of subjectivity – with calls for women’s awakening, and the revivalist re-energizing 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 to the ways in which they might not only be liberatory.

A.P. — Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East, 1800 to 1939, edited by Ayesha Parla and A.P. Nasr. This is a book of literature?