

May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt

Marilyn Booth

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Marilyn Booth's remarkable study blends literary criticism with historical research to better understand the construction of modern Egyptian womanhood. Booth analyzes hundreds of women's biographies that were written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and published in the popular women's press. She situates this activity within the context of Egypt's nationalist struggle and burgeoning feminist movement at a time of foreign economic, military, and cultural domination. With the publication of biographies of women as diverse as the Prophet's wives, Jeanne d'Arc, Hatshepsut, Jane Austin, and Safiyya Zaghlul, Booth uncovers the diversity of the Egyptian women's press in its scope and vision of what Egypt should expect of its women.

Booth complicates our understandings of women's participation in the public sphere by illuminating the ethnic and religious diversity of the Egyptian women's press. She also delves deeply into the class issues motivating the construction of the ideal Egyptian woman as a selfless member of her family – both nuclear and national – conforming her domestic sphere to the mold of communal, nationalist needs. Revealing women authors as both shaping and being shaped by contemporary ideas of successful femininity, Booth's study is perhaps the most potent analysis of Egyptian feminism published in quite some time. It is an indispensable guide to a literature steeped in the Arabic literary past as well as modern Egyptian society.

In a complex prologue, Booth argues that any examination of authorship can only vaguely determine how audiences react to published texts. Thus, although she sets out to analyze the messages inherent in women's biographies, she cannot relay the manner in which the women's press was received by its audience. Her book is an analysis of prescription through example, but only can hint at the resulting impact. Booth focuses on how these biographies became part of a larger social project to define women as national symbols situating the nation as the ultimate community, all the while maintaining patriarchal constructs in the home and other social spheres. She declares the biographies she examines to be ultimately "feminist," for, although they often maintain crucial elements of the status quo

vis-à-vis women's social status, they reject the binary essentialisms of such key divisive subjects as "West" and "East" by merging aspects of indigenous and foreign culture into the portrayals of exemplary women.

In chapter 1, "Scattered Pearls and Mistresses of Seclusion," Booth analyzes ways that modern biographies of women borrowed from the tradition of Arabic biographies of *tabaqat*, while, at the same time, they used characteristics of *adab* to turn past female tangential characters into historically praiseworthy subjects in their own right. This theme, that women deserving biographical commemoration were not merely the "women behind the men" who were successful but were actually harbingers of personal success whose methods should be studied and emulated, is taken up throughout the book.

In chapter 2, "Siting Biography [sic]," Booth argues that biographies are an excellent source for understanding the shifting political scene in pre- and post-1919 Egypt as regards nationalist and anti-imperialist aspirations. Biographies exemplified conduct literature, with the lives of famous women presented as models for women's participation in nationalist causes. One remarkable revelation provided by Booth in this and subsequent chapters is that biographies of western women were common even in an increasingly anti-imperialist Egypt. Sometimes these women's successes were held up as challenges to the East, but more often western women's biographies were stripped of their imperialist contexts and turned into exemplaries whose conduct could be emulated by Egyptian women to lead to their own nascent nationalist cause's success.

Exemplary biography is explored in depth in chapter 3, "Exemplar and Exception." Booth explains how biographies both recorded and shaped women's lives by challenging women to live up to the historical models presented in the literature. The paradox of the exemplar as an exceptional-yet-emulatable character was overcome by stressing their remarkable character and morality rather than their exceptional accomplishments. Not all women were capable of the achievements of a Jane Austen, a Khadija, or a Hapshepsut, but all could lead virtuous lives that would reward their families and nation. Booth explains that female biographies used Islamic and Egyptian history to provide precedents for women's participation in the public sphere. In this way, the female press implicitly called for women's action in society without taking part in the western imperialist discourse of "liberation."

In chapter 4, "May Our Daughters Listen," and chapter 5, "Catherine the Great's Embroidery and Maria Mitchell's Stewpot," Booth details the variety

of ways female biographers used other women's accomplishments to mask their own (and thus maintain their modesty) as well as assert the fundamental belief that women's public accomplishments do not inherently result in domestic failure. By promoting female education – both literary and domestic – as a benefit to the family and future generations of nationalists as well as a blessing on the men who made it possible, biographies of accomplished, well-educated and yet rigorously domestic women served as models for those who read the women's press. Women who maintained domestic stability while becoming accomplished public individuals were presented as the key asset for a successful, independent nation. The home was a microcosm of the nation, and its successful regulation by a well-educated yet modest woman was a harbinger of national prestige and personal acclaim.

In chapters 6 and 7, "Jeanne d'Arc: Egyptian Nationalist" and "From Sober to Salacious," respectively, Booth presents very interesting cases of how biography shaped larger political discourses. In one of the most remarkable revelations of her review of this extensive literature, Booth exposes Jeanne d'Arc as the most popular biographical subject in the women's press up to 1940. This shows the immense variety inherent in the genre. Despite her transgression of gender roles and western origin, the French heroine was portrayed as the model of virtue and an ardent fighter of British imperialism – certainly a character to be praised in the Egyptian context. Conversely, the lives of scandalous women often were presented as anti-heroines. Stories of criminal behavior and fallen morality became templates of how *not* to behave.

Finally and very importantly, in chapter 8, "Famous Wombs and Women's Memories," Booth compares the biographies of women from the start of the twentieth century to those produced by Islamists in late twentieth-century Egypt. Although biographies remain key for understanding the public discourse of women's social roles, contemporary publications have replaced western women exemplars with female Companions and largely have collapsed the present into the early Islamic past. In the current world of postcolonial tension, women are mostly presented in biographies as wombs that give birth to men or to the children of important men. Thus women find emotional fulfillment in the domestic sphere and their functions are directed more toward raising the next generation of *Muslims* rather than of *Egyptians*. Although biography was instrumental in shaping Egyptian feminism, its uses go far beyond the national context in today's Egypt.

This is a complex book, densely researched and exhaustively analyzed, with 335 pages of text, 125 pages of footnotes, and a comprehen-

sive selected bibliography of 14 pages. It is not merely a book to be read on its own, but to be read against the larger literature of Egyptian feminism, and, indeed, nonwestern feminism, for its exhaustive nature stands as a solid model for comparative study.

For scholars of the Middle East and the larger Islamic world, Booth provides an irreplaceable volume that successfully links modern biography with the rich Arabic literary tradition of biographical dictionaries. She also situates the nationalist debates about women's role in the private and public spheres in British-era Egypt without glossing over the significant differences between the country's Muslim, Christian, Egyptian, and Levantine populations – all of which were active in the female press. For non-Arabists, Booth provides a wonderful series of translations from the women's press, thereby making available an excellent comparative case for the debates over imperial motherhood, women's roles in nationalist movements, international feminism, and women's roles in the public and private spheres.

Perhaps most importantly, Booth sheds light on the precursory literature of today's Islamist literature in Egypt. This gives her volume remarkable relevance for understanding the exemplary conduct literature that shapes women's ideals in vast segments of contemporary Egyptian society. In sum, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt* is a masterful study that will have a long-lasting impact not only on the way that modern Egyptian nationalisms and feminisms are studied, but on how the portrayal of women's exemplary public roles in published biographies engender nationalist debates in the Islamic world and beyond.

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“Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an

Asma Barlas

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Does the Qur’an permit the oppression of women? Can women pursue equality and remain within the framework of its teachings? In this original and thought-provoking work, Barlas attempts to address these controversial questions.