

Book Reviews

Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak

Elizabeth Warnock Fernea and Basima Qattan Bezirgan

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In *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak*, editors Fernea and Bezirgan have made a valiant effort to unveil an important dimension of Middle Eastern history and society, a dimension that has been for the most part, hidden from view because of the false notion that the world of Islam is a world created by men for men rather than a joint creation of men and women.

The book is a collection of documents from different historical periods and regions of the Middle East, as well as from different social and economic groups. It provides a somewhat clearer view of the conditions, aspirations, struggles, and achievements of Middle Eastern Muslim women.

In some ways the book is a paradox. The editors show how Middle Eastern women have risen to greater political and public eminence than women in the United States, while as a sex remaining largely subservient to men and enjoying less access to the means of personal advancement.

The first book to use a documentary approach rather than essays by third persons, it is also the first book to include material unavailable in English. Many of the selections of these autobiographical and biographical writings have been translated by the editors from Arabic, Persian, or French. And, it is the first to gather together materials from A.D. 622 (beginning of Islam) to the present. Offering a fresh and lively approach the book should be of value not only to those interested in the Middle East, but also to anthropologists and social historians.

From a vast area, the editors have chosen a sample of women from twelve countries. Despite their different backgrounds and experiences, the women represented have all worked out their own solutions within the context of local practice established between the two contradictory poles of Koranic injunction and family and tribal custom.

The book has a well-presented Foreword, a detailed Introduction, and is

divided into four Parts.

The editors have succeeded in presenting an interesting range of women. At one end of the spectrum is Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah, the Sufi saint who is referred to "as a second spotless Mary", and at the other end is the poetess Walladah bint al-Mustakfi, a woman of the world rather than the spirit.

Then there is Zaynab. A thirty-four-year-old Lebanese Muslim of the Shi'ite sect who is an uneducated rural woman but possesses an alert sense of self and place. She is outgoing, aggressive, joyful, witty, clever, and opinionated, known for her sense of humor and conviviality. In short, Zaynab is happy. In contrast is Furugh Farrukhzad. Acclaimed as only the second woman poet of real or supposed greatness in the 1000-year history of Persian literature, Furugh was not a happy person. Her vitality and constant activity helped her not to dwell on her unhappiness. In 1967, she died in an automobile accident at thirty-two years of age. It is asserted that she was the founder of "feminine culture" in Persian poetry.

One chapter is a biographical sketch on Aishah bint Abi Bakr, the youngest wife of the Prophet Muhammad. She was only eighteen when the Prophet died and she became a powerful force in the political situation following the Prophet's death. Not only did she have personal magnetism but she was also learned and intelligent and publicly took an active part in the "Battle of the Camel."

Among the women who have played an important role in changing the supposedly static conditions of the society into which they were born are, Halide Edib, Huda Sharawi, Fadela M'rabet, Umm Khulthum, Layla Balabakki, Amnah al-Said, and Nazil al-Malaikah.

An excerpt from Najib Mahfuz's famous trilogy, *al-Thalathiyah*, gives a vivid picture of the lives of a middle-class Egyptian family from 1918-1944. For this monumental work, Mahfuz received the State Prize for Literature in Egypt.

Fernea and Bezirgan also introduce us to the Umm Kulthum that nobody knew. Touching scenes from her past are portrayed for us to see the greatness of this determined and humble being. On the average her concerts lasted four hours, and she is known for her tremendous physical stamina and vitality as well as for the glorious range of her voice. When she died in 1975, Cairo Radio chanted the Koran, following the news, an honor usually reserved for heads of state. Her funeral drew dignitaries from all the Arab countries and millions mourned her death. Periodicals and newspapers throughout the Arab world devoted entire issues to her life—a fitting tribute to one of the greatest artists and most beloved figures the Middle East has produced in modern times.

An interesting interview with Jamilah Buhrayd the legendary Algerian hero provides insight into the life of a woman who fought to free her country from

imperial rule.

All the women in *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak* are heroines and legends in their own right. It is not feasible to mention each one in this short review, but it should suffice to say that I found the book so enthralling and so rich in information that I could not help but read it from cover to cover.

It is a book by women for women, but in essence it is for all interested persons. One of its virtues is that it suggests the need for a fresh view of Middle Eastern men as well.

Feroza Allee