

Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women

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Muslim women have for centuries been vaguely perceived by the Western world as exotic creatures hidden behind veils, an aura of mystery and interdiction surrounding them. But in recent years, media events such as Saudi women taking to the streets to manifest their desire to drive, a fatwa imposed on Bangladesh writer Taslima Nasreen, and the continuing saga of French schoolgirls of Muslim origin being banned from school for wearing veils, have all served to pique Western curiosity. As the trend towards "Islamisation" continues, so does the interest to take a closer look.

Geraldine Brooks, Middle East correspondent for the Wall Street Journal for six years, portrays an extremely varied and complex universe in her first book, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*. In the initial chapters, Ms. Brooks tackles such aspects of women's lives sex, marriage, seclusion, polygamy - as dictated in the Koran and recounted in various Hadith narratives about Muhammad's life. Her task is a difficult one Islamic teachings are subject to myriad interpretations - but Ms. Brooks does her best to arm the readers with a few of these. She finds that "Islam did not have to mean oppression of women. So why were so many Muslim women oppressed?"

Ms. Brooks guides the reader through a number of Muslim countries trying to answer the question. She delves into Iran early on, and brings to light a form of feminism wrapped in a chador. "I needed to understand", explains the author "... somehow, Khomeini had persuaded women that the wearing of a medieval cloak was a revolutionary act." Ms. Brooks meets an array of women, who benefited from Khomeini's view that if women were correctly veiled, they could participate in politics, economy and other aspects of the working world, among them Khomeini's daughter, a university professor, President Hashemi Rafsanjani's denim-clad daughter, organiser of the first Islamic Women's Games and a woman heading a commercial trucking company. Women in hard-line Iran, Ms. Brooks discovers, have paradoxically gone further in politics than women in a more moderately Islamic countries such as Jordan.

Iran's politicised view of religion differs greatly from Saudi Arabia's largely apolitical world. This world is, for women, "sterile, segregated" and "the extreme". Until 1980 Saudi women could get at least a whiff of freedom while studying abroad. Now that the country has seven universities of its own, women no longer receive scholarships to study in foreign countries although men do. As a result, a cadre of women professors find themselves teaching a conservative student body of girls. Indeed, writes Ms. Brooks, rather than offer their support to the recent bid for change to allow women to drive, female students marched in protest against those women who took to the streets to demonstrate for the right in 1990.

Islamic movements are increasingly present in Middle Eastern universities and students who would have been Arab nationalists 25 years ago are now being pulled towards Islam. According to Ms. Brooks, the "Saudi way" is influencing universities that were tolerant or progressive in the past. At the Islamic University of Gaza she notes: "Palestinians had always been among the most progressive on women's issues... But in Gaza the militants had latched onto a brand of Islamic radicalism that threatened to do worse than set the clock back for Palestinian women." At the West Bank's Bir Zeit University women were reassuringly progressive, and felt that Islamic movements were uprooting traditional Palestinian culture. However, Ms. Brooks observes that the Bir Zeit women professors "while acknowledging the problems, seemed to be in deep denial about its extent."

Some women, however, are reshaping tradition. In an amusing chapter on the United Arab Emirates, Ms. Brooks describes the army's first (and highly successful) female corps, trained by U.S. women army officers. Hessa al-Khaledi, responsible for organising the women's military academy used historical evidence that women had fought battles alongside Muhammad, to convince the Emirates' Muslim authorities.

The reader is also introduced to Hero Ahmed, a Kurdish politician whose style embodies a more realistic approach for Muslim women politicians. "I don't believe some habits and ways of thinking can be changed by making a new set of rules...It needs time, publicity, education; first to make people understand it; then gradually to get them to accept it."

Finally, the question of women's sexuality is amply treated. Women in Islam are faced with the enormous responsibility of carrying their family's honour on their shoulders. They are also linked to fitna, which means a woman's overpowering seductiveness as well as chaos

and civil war. Nawal El Saadawi, the Egyptian doctor and militant for women's rights wrote in 1980 "Islam confronted its philosophers and theologians with two contradictory, and in terms of logic, mutually exclusive conceptions: 1. Sex is one of the pleasures and attractions of life; 2. To succumb to sex will lead to fitna in society - that is crisis, disruption and anarchy."

Ms. Brooks point out that in the Catholic tradition: "Women bear the brunt of fending off social disorder... because they aren't considered sexually active, and in the Muslim tradition because they are. It is this notion of women's barely controllable lust that often lies behind justifications for clitoridectomy; seclusion and veiling." Genital mutilation, she notes, often wrongly attributed to the Muslim faith, is never mentioned in the Koran and finds its roots in pre-Islamic customs. Ms. Brooks navigates through an extremely complicated subject and presents her readers with a valid and comprehensive overview.

It would have been interesting to see a chapter on Algeria, a highly politicised country in which thousands of women are voluntarily adhering to Islam, while at the same time working towards a more literal interpretation of the Koran. Ms. Brooks grudgingly admits that a Western brand of feminism cannot be applied to the Islamic world. She nevertheless holds that today's Islam - or the contemporary interpretation of it - is responsible for a lack of basic human rights for women.

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