

## Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement

*Najde al-Ali. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 282 pages*

Increasingly, since the Sadat era in Egypt and especially resulting from his economic policies (*infitah*), there has been a significant rise of Egyptian women who are putting on the "Islamic dress." Whereas women in the early twentieth century were dramatically tearing off their veils and throwing them into the Nile in order to desegregate society. Today, Egyptian women are very noticeably doing the opposite as a form of protest, while utilizing the same reasoning as before. The influx of literature about this so-called "Islamism" has been discussed in nearly every realm of the social sciences.

In contrast to this phenomenon, Najde al-Ali's study on women's activity in Egypt is about a particular heterogeneous class of secular women, that she feels has been marginalized on the state level by the overarching concessions given to hegemonic "Islamist" policies. In effect, Ali states, "I had noticed the tendency to overlook secular constituencies in much of the recent scholarship dealing with Egypt, where the emphasis was on Islamist tendencies and activism."

*Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement*, is a highly informative introductory and analytical study of secular women's activities through the voice of a plethora of Egyptian women's organizations. In the introduction Ali categorizes women's activism as being independent, associational and directed. Whereas independent organizations have a power base from within and aim to implement individual goals, associational and directed organizations carry a more direct message outside the sphere of general women's issues.

In the first chapter, Ali engages in a discussion about the relationship of Orientalism and Occidentalism in post-colonial literature. The reader is introduced to the idea that these conceptual frameworks have indeed limited the indigenous authenticity of women's activism in Egypt by placing them in one of two extremes, whether it be religious or secular. Immediately, Ali strives to make clear that certain values do not need to be authenticated by any indigenous culture if they are "universal values". However, it is here where a significant weakness emerges, by not outwardly recognizing the importance of the competitive universal value systems, including the "Islamist values", that are trying to find their space in contemporary Egyptian political culture. Therefore, the message that is

understood is the implication that Islam is not compatible with certain inherent values like social justice or freedom of expression. Perhaps it might have been better expressed by categorizing "Islamists" as being separated from the traditional beliefs of spiritual Islam, subsequently determined in their quest to manipulate their audiences through the use of symbols that popular Muslims amazingly become identified with during times of uncertainty. In doing so, it might become more apparent that the "Islamists" are transferring their values into a recreated notion of tradition and culture that is further away from the inner meaning of Islam. In effect, a better understanding might have emerged conveying that in order for "Islamists" to maintain these hegemonic policies, certain "universal values" would be subjugated in the process.

In the second chapter, entitled "*Contextualizing the Egyptian Women's Movement*," Ali provides an extensive history of women's activity in Egypt. This chronological discussion parallels women's activity with the state and its particular challenges and goals during the time in question. Accordingly, Ali mentions:

A consideration of history does not only enlarge an understanding of the current movement, it is actually impossible to grasp its demands, conflicts and identities without considering its history – a history which does not only relate to the attempt to create new gender discourses and awaken feminist consciousness (Nelson, 1998: 92), but is also closely linked with nationalist, anti-colonial struggles and projects of modernization.

The positive contribution of this approach is that by going back and evaluating history, the consensus that secular women's activity is simply a response to "Islamism", is broken. Rather it is a continuation of an intellectual legacy whose origins began with women's participation in the 1919 Nationalist Revolution. Most of all, in this chapter Ali briefly traces the direction of women's activity prior to the Nasser era and all the way up to the present Mubarak regime.

While the third chapter highlights the background and personal stories of the women interviewed, the fourth, entitled "*Secularism: Challenging Neo-Orientalism and His-Stories*," identifies what secular women activists are mobilizing against. It is here that the reader comes to grasp what the author is trying to promote as secularism, in light of the women interviewed and the opponent that they are facing. Ali defines secularism

as a distinct separation between religion and politics. Additionally, the term does not denote any anti-religious or anti-Islamic connotation. And finally, it does not mean that one is without belief.

Naturally, the women interviewed did not identify themselves with any homogenous representation of secularism. Yet as Ali states, "all women were united in their opposition to the establishment of an Islamic state, the implementation of the shari'a, the existing Personal Status Law and an imposed dress code, that is, compulsory veiling. They also have shared a sense that religion should not be conflated with politics." These issues are what serve as the foundation for the mobilization of secular Egyptian women who are trying to formulate a national identity outside the framework of religious analysis, which is perceived to place women and minorities as second-class citizens.

*"From Words to Deeds: Priorities and Projects of Contemporary Activists"* is the title of chapter five, which brings to the table all the controversial issues that consume the Egyptian women's organizations. The core of these includes the Personal Status Law, FGM, the Citizenship Law and the elimination of all violence against women. In this chapter the "Islamists" and the secular women who are seen as the protagonists play out a reactionary battle, while both are vying to obtain legitimacy from the state. This battle is characterized by goals and achievements made by women activists that are swiftly refuted in the name of "tradition" and "culture" by their opponents. In other words, the author argues that as long as "Islamists" can find a way to proclaim certain practices or customs under the umbrella of Islam, the state will concede their authority to them and leave a space for these practices or customs to linger, albeit under the government.

In the last chapter, *"A Mirror of Political Culture in Egypt: Divisions and Debates Among Women's Activist,"* Ali's study draws towards an end by bringing to light all the complexities that come from not only outside, but also from inside the organizations. Ali argues that the struggle of NGO's to survive and be effective depends upon two main factors. First, the organizational structure of the group says a lot about the divisions of power and its strength to deal with the class divisions that come with the mixing of the older and newer generations. Inherently these differences lead to the notion of "different orientations" among the members. Apparently, Ali states that these varied interests are most responsible for a break-up or schism within the group.

Secondly, there is the concept of funding. Ironically, Egypt is the second largest recipient of U.S. financial aid after Israel. This means that women's organizations are more than sensitive to accepting any money that would further increase Egyptian dependence upon the spread of American culture. This is especially true for what Ali labels as the "middle generation", those women activists who grew out of the 1970's student movements. Although Ali states that the older and newer generations are less likely to deny foreign funding, the newer are more inclined to accept it due to economic deterioration. Ali, however, does take note of a noticeable trend towards looking at local resources for funding. A representative of the Alliance of Arab Women says, "People with money need to be convinced by the urgency of our work. I think we don't have the legitimacy if we only collect money from foreign donors. It's our community which should give us the legitimacy."

In her conclusion, "*Standing on Shifting Ground*," Ali reemphasizes her goal to legitimize the cause of secular women in Egypt. Additionally, it is their vision for a socially just future that differentiates them from other groups in Egypt, as opposed to their "cultural authenticity." Moreover, she agrees with Sami Zubaida's position that neither the Enlightenment nor notions of liberalism, rationality, democracy or human rights are inherently western notions. In this light, Egyptian women's organizations may politically align themselves with advocating secularism and social justice as a form of "strategic essentialism." In other words, these values and ideas will bring women's organizations closer together, rather than placing them in opposition. Ali concludes, "yet whatever 'essentialist shelter' one might have sought, the ultimate goal should not be left out of sight, namely to change the values, discourses and practices through which markers of difference signify markers of inequality."

Overall, Ali's study is a greatly needed work in a field where recent academic work in the Arab world has created a vacuum of anything of the sort. It provides a detailed sketch of over a dozen secular Egyptian women's organizations and displays their positions on private and public issues. Overall, *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement*, is a positive contribution to the field of Middle Eastern Women Studies. However, the only point to be questioned is the extent to which Ali carries secularism as a banner of "universal values" that should be fought for, over all others. I fear that even a secular society will not eliminate the misogynistic policies that prevail in much of

Egypt today or anywhere else in the world for that matter.

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### موقفنا من مصر اليوم موقفنا من مصر اليوم

الموقف من مصر اليوم: هل هي أفضل أم أسوأ من أي وقت مضى؟

عندما نلقي نظرة على مصر اليوم، فإننا نرى أنها أفضل من أي وقت مضى، سواء من حيث التنمية الاقتصادية أو من حيث الديمقراطية. مصر اليوم هي أفضل من أي وقت مضى، سواء من حيث التنمية الاقتصادية أو من حيث الديمقراطية. مصر اليوم هي أفضل من أي وقت مضى، سواء من حيث التنمية الاقتصادية أو من حيث الديمقراطية.

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