Gonzalez, Alessandra L.


*Islamic Feminism in Kuwait* discusses a relatively new social phenomenon, Islamic feminism, as it appears in one of the smallest countries in the Middle East, Kuwait. The author provides details about the varieties in the personal experiences of being a Muslim feminist in one of the most controversial regions of the world. Her admirable contribution to the literature of Islamic feminism analyzes social variables in Kuwait and deconstructs clichés about women’s lives in Islamic societies for the western audience.

Islamic feminism references Muslim women’s advocacy for rights based on new interpretations of sacred texts. This women’s project can be explained as an effort to reconcile contemporary Islam with modernity, attempted this time by female Muslim agents. *Islamic Feminism in Kuwait* is a sociological inquiry that poses a simple but crucial question about the source of legitimate authority in the lives and thoughts of Kuwaiti Islamic feminists. This question is powerful enough to challenge colonial desire of speaking of the West and its ignorance toward listening to non-western voices. Gonzalez intentionally locates her work inside the postcolonial paradigm, and her book speaks to the Spivakian question of the possibility of speech for non-western women, although it leads to a radically different conclusion.

Gonzalez’s sociological training highlights the importance of methodology and her study provides readers with a bold multi-methodological approach. Since the topic is so new, she tries to get as much help as possible from the available resources. In first pages of introduction, she reviews the historical aspect of Kuwaiti society. This historical narrative starts with introducing Kuwait as a rich oil treasure that was first exploited in the early twentieth century by British colonial stakeholders. This colonial period ended with Kuwaiti independence in 1961, and the narrative continues by introducing readers to the Kuwaiti experiences of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Gonzalez explains that feminist milestones were still far off at the time, as women were not granted the right to vote until 2005, which was followed by an opening of the professional political sphere for women’s participation as candidates in 2006.

In this context, Gonzalez defines Islamic feminism as “a movement that seeks to further a progressive agenda for women’s rights within an Islamic framework” (6). She is well aware that a coherent and consistent “Islamic world” does not exist. It is evident in the text that Gonzalez acknowledges a certain fluidity of identity in a society that struggles with the conflicts engendered by a deep respect for Islamic tradition on the one hand, and by a deep desire to embrace
the modern world on the other. When addressing Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait, Gonzalez does so alongside the Kuwati government’s strategy to promote an anti-terrorist agenda as part of the broader category of “women’s issues.” In so doing, the author makes a significant contribution to explaining identity politics for Kuwati Islamic feminists. Indeed, Gonzalez explains that although Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait helped to galvanize nationalist aspects of Kuwati Islamic feminist identity, resistance against global pressure on Muslim communities aggravated the Islamic components of the movement, which made for often contradictory gender politics.

Gonzalez thus sheds light on the broad spectrum of identity politics among Muslim women in Kuwait that ranges from traditionalist Sunni (Salafi and Wahhabi communities), to women associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, to Shi’a Islamic feminists, to liberals. The data analyzed for recognizing identity politics comes from field interviews conducted with a small group of Islamic feminists and with their opponents from Salafi and liberal groups.

Gonzalez employs some quantitative data throughout the book, but she is careful to avoid clichés about a “third world” Muslim women, and thus chooses to rely primarily on her own interviews with Kuwati Islamic feminists, and interprets other data within this framework. Gonzalez’s respectful manner of gathering data (by interviewing different groups of people) and her honest attempt to understanding the norms and values of the society in she is studying help to create an air of legitimacy that instructors of Islamic feminism in particular, as well as those interested in the ethics of research in non-western societies, will find useful.

Gonzales arranges the five chapters of Islamic Feminism in Kuwait as individual challenges to existing stereotypes about Islamic societies and Muslim women. In chapter 1, “Western Feminism Has Not Taken Root in Muslim Hearts and Minds,” she explains Muslim women are not jealous of western feminists. She quotes from interviewees of all social groups to show that even people who do not identify as Islamists, such as Kuwati liberals, look for solutions inside the context of Islam. Gonzalez recognizes the mixed rhetoric that these groups choose for their arguments. Chapter 2 presents evidence that “Islamist Are Winning Elections” one after the other with the help of both Islamist women and Islamic feminists. Since Islamism is understood against women’s rights, Gonzales recognizes such broad-based as a rhetoric of challenging women’s right in Kuwait even among democratic liberals who advocate for more western approaches to women’s rights. These groups pose timing question for women’s right to vote and tell the author that if Islamic feminists advocate for Islamist groups, maybe it wasn’t the right time for the women’s right to vote!