AL-ALI, Nadje: *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East. The Egyptian Women's Movement.* Cambridge University Press 2000. XV + 264 pp. ISBM 0 521 78022 5 (hardback). ISBM 0 521 78504 9 (paperback).

The situation of women in contemporary Egypt is emblematic of tensions and dilemmas which can be observed in many post-colonial societies. Inherent in the power struggles going on in most of them are fierce debates about modernization, Westernization and the value of indigenous traditions. A considerable part of the debates duly concentrates on women who have become important objects of conflicting interests. In Egypt the situation is especially tense owing to the Islamist currents which have become a strong factor limiting the discourse on women and the choices available to them. It is mainly women engaged in contesting current gender relations and various forms of inequality in Egyptian society that are being stigmatized as anti-religious and anti-national and accused of disseminating alien views and practices.

While a considerable number of scholarly texts have been devoted to the study of Islamist groups in Egypt, the struggles of secular-oriented women's activists have so far remained largely unexplored. The more praiseworthy are Al-Ali's efforts to research secular women's activities in Cairo and present the results in a book that can help to break some stereotypes prevailing mainly in general public oriented texts. At the same Time, it can be a source of useful information for students of the Middle East and scholars in the field.

Al-Ali's work belongs to the category of texts informed by post-colonial and post-orientalist scholarship. Like other authors, Al-Ali expresses some reservations believing that many critics of orientalism are often locked in the dichotomies they try to deconstruct and continue to reproduce certain binary oppositions ('secular versus religious', 'East versus West') Al-Ali speaks of a new 'school of thought', a trend that is characterized by the portrayal of the Islamists as the only alternative force to increasing Western encroachment. It stresses heterogeneity between Islamists while homogenizing the secular constituencies. Al-Ali believes that scholars themselves have been actively engaged in muting groups and individuals who have opposed Islamism. In her view, what needs to be dismantled is the notion of the monolithic West and she hopes that her work will contribute to unsettling and challenging the East-West essentialism as well as underlying relationships. To this end she explores in detail the questions of how the negative constructions of the West are mobilized to discredit Egyptian women activists and how the Egyptian women activists in turn use constructions of the West to legitimize their struggle.

The history of the Egyptian women's movement is presented in the book as seen through the eyes of several women Al-Ali interviewed. This is paralleled by the analysis of the changing relationship between the Egyptian state (from Nasser to Mubarak) and the women's movement. In a similar way the following chapter brings the life-stories of ten women activists revealing conjunctures between personal motivations and experiences and the developments that shaped the contents and forms of women's activism.

The conceptual core of the work is chapter 4 in which the author takes issue with the notion of secularism. Probably no concept has evoked as much contestation and confusion as the term 'secularism'. Within Egypt, the origin, meaning and value of secularism has been the object of fierce debates among intellectuals, politicians and religious leaders. The commentaries from outside, both scholarly and journalistic, made the confusion even worse.

In the author's view what needs to be challenged is the presupposition of the unquestioned equation of secularism with the 'West' and Christianity. Al-Ali argues that Western countries display a great deal of diversity in their approaches to religion and its relation to the state and the strict separation between state and religion cannot be found in any of them. The question whether Christianity is more compatible with secularism than Islam presupposes reified religions while ignoring *de facto* realities. All societies, Christian or Muslim or other, are exposed to secularizing factors such as mass education or industrialization and the influence of the media. As Brian Turner has put it, Tina Turner and Madonna are much stronger forces in this respect than any type of argumentation.

Al-Ali points to the fact that very little attention has been paid to the main implications secularism can have for modern citizenship in Egypt. Defining all groups of citizens as equal before the law, it could play a positive role in a multi-religious society such as Egypt.

On the other hand this very fact is seen as potentionally dangerous for the Egyptian national identity which, as some believe, is threatened from 'within and without'. Thus one of the greatest dangers of the Islamic state would be an increase of sectarian strife and discrimination against Copts.

Many secular intellectuals in Egypt abstain from openly articulating their views after the assassination of Farag Foda in 1992 by Islamic militants and after the trial of professor Nasr Hamid Abou Zeid (1996) accused of apostasy. Some formerly secularist thinkers and writers now subscribe to political Islam. Those who continue to articulate their values and political demands do not nesessarily share a common conception of secularism. These differences are related to the complex history of liberalism and modernism in Egypt. As Al-Ali argues, a split between authoritarian and democratic strains can be detected in various secular modernist discourses in Egypt. Many secular thinkers and politicians up to the present have been oppressive and intolerant, which means that there is nothing inherently democratic or pluralistic about secular thinking. Some women activists in Egypt see the modernist project of rationality and progress and its linked conceptualizations of secularism as another male strategy to discriminate against women. The truth is that academic debates show the tendency to limit discussions about secularism to its male proponents and adversaries. Thus secularism is another domain where women's voices are rarely heard.

Al-Ali refers to Azza Karam's categorization of Egyptian feminists into Islamist, Muslim and secular, and expresses the view that with regard to the categories 'Muslim' and 'secular' the boundaries are not clear-cut. The work and life of 'secular women activists' can be affiliated to religion in various ways, but, and this is important, they do not see religion as the only framework for analysis. The very dichotomy of religious versus secular seems counterproductive. Some women activists complain that Western scholars who are doing research in Egypt dismiss individual human experiences and the capacity to synthesize creatively from various value systems. Human agency is mainly framed in terms of collective ideologies. The women believe that one has to start building one's own framework based on specific realities that have formed one's life. Secularism only provides a broad umbrella under which a variety of discourses, practices and concepts may be accomodated. Although it is obvious that insurmountable differences exist between secular women activists and Islamists, even here commonalities are discernible.

The final chapters of the book examine the content and form of secular women's activism. Identifying the priority issues in the work of various groups of activists helped

the author to discern slight differences between them. The alleviation of poverty and the problem of illiteracy is high on each group's agenda, but while legal awareness constitutes one of the prevailing goals among women activists, some of them are ambiguous in their assessment of labour laws and laws dealing with women's political rights. One of the most controversial issues has been the problem of violence against women. Some women even dismiss the problem as a western imposition, others relativize its significance by pointing to more pressing priorities. In Al-Ali's view it is the small but increasing number of activists who include personal forms of oppression within the realm of the family and point to the links between the 'private' and the 'public', who might develop the feminist positions in Egypt outside the established frameworks.

Having outlined some specific projects and the wider context in which they took place Al-Ali faces the difficult problem of assessing the women's activities. She identifies obstacles in the way of implementing their goals. The translation from raising certain issues to actual implementation is often impeded by both the state's lack of commitment and the women's failure to retain momentum and display solidarity among themselves. Al-Ali expresses suspicion that some activities remain shortlived because they respond more to international agendas than local ones. The lack of models for non-hierarchical democratic structures often causes conflicts and poses yet another challenge for women activists. The last chapter of the work on the history of two women's groups also reveals personalized aspects of many tensions within the movement.

Constantly accused of being 'too westernized' secular women activists feel obliged to assert their allegiance to 'their culture', whereby they endorse the very rhetoric used against them by Islamist and conservative nationalist constituencies. The same happens when Egyptian women activists are confronted with Western feminists' harsh judgements of some native practices. There are feminists in postcolonial societies, however, who challenge an essentialist notion of culture. Al-Ali quotes the Indian feminist Uma Narayan who argues that attempts to dismiss Third World feminist views and politics as 'Westernization' should be vigorously opposed. Third World feminists cannot be labeled 'outsiders' to their nation and culture, as their struggles are deeply rooted in their experiences with their own culture and represent its complex and changing realities.

Rejecting essentialist notions of culture, identity and the subject of emancipation of course causes a major problem for anyone simultaneously committed to a politics of resistance, liberation and independence. This problem cannot be easily resolved and constitutes one of the greatest challenges for feminist and postcolonial thinkers. As Al-Ali rightly remarks her appeal against essentialism in relation to difference does not fully resolve the dilemma of trying not to lose 'the ground' while shaking it.

Al-Ali's research is based on interviews with some eighty women activists which represent a considerable amount of empirical material. The author herself is well aware of the complexities and sensitivities making the work with such materials sometimes problematic and is not discouraged by occasional setbacks. Although occasionally her method may divert attention from the line of reasoning which is being followed, her book represents a fine piece of scholarly work in the field of feminist studies.

Jarmila Drozdíková