



Ellen Anne McLarney

**Soft Force, Women in Egypt's Islamic Awakening**

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Ellen Anne McLarney's *Soft Force, Women in Egypt's Islamic Awakening* stands out as in depth study by a Western scholar, which places women and their contribution to Islamic revivalism centre stage. She thereby challenges conventional Western impressions of Muslim women in Islamic activism and gives voice to ideas well known in the Muslim world, but not often heard in other countries. Through her eloquent, sophisticated and careful analysis, McLarney offers a very important but somewhat overlooked contribution to the in depth understanding of the various roles of women in the historical and current developments within the Muslim world.

The book focusses on the soft force of women's influence on the Islamic public sphere in the decades leading up to the 2011 revolution in Egypt. To support her analysis, McLarney primarily uses writings (ranging from fatwas to sermons; and from lectures, theses, essays and newspaper articles to social media) as well as visual actions, taken by a variety of influential women to support the advance of Islamic awareness and revivalism in Egypt. These include professors (Bint al-Shati'), preachers (Ni'mat Sidqi), journalists (Iman Mustafa), theatre critics (Safinaz Kazim), activists (Heba Raouf Ezzat), actresses (Shams al-Barudi) and television personalities (Kariman Hamza). The book thereby brings together the work of very different women, who, while working independently, contribute as an entity to social and cultural transformation.

The book is arranged in three parts and proceeds chronologically through sets of interlocking thematic analyses of the work of outstanding exponents of the relevant fields. Part I considers women's liberation in Islam and focuses particularly on the world of letters (chapter 1) and on Islamic and personal status law (chapter 2). Part II analyses the gendering of Islamic subjectivities by concentrating on the themes of motherhood and childbearing (chapter 3) and on veiling and the cultivation of the self (chapter 4). Finally, part III showcases the politics of the Islamic family by focusing on women and work (chapter 5) and the family as the political unit of the umma (chapter 6).

Each chapter follows a clear line of analysis, through which, the reader learns not only about the public figure and her writings, but also about Egypt's history and politics as well as the surrounding academic discourse on women and Islam. McLarney adopted a holistic approach to each representative's corpus of work, by detailing the progression of their ideas, the evolution of their private and public persona as well as the political and social issues they address. Further she explores how each author positions him or herself as an Islamic thinker.

As she explains in the introduction, McLarney provides a platform for each author and their work, placing it into the socio-political context of the time, which both produced them and which they helped to produce. She uses a literary analysis to explore the various writings by discussing not only what is said but also how it is said. Furthermore, she continuously sets the works and their influence on Egypt's political and social development into context by relating them to other theoretical literature on Islamic revival.

Linking all of these topics and methods of analysis is the recurring subject of "family", which runs through the book as a common theme.

When reading the book, it becomes clear that the author is passionate about her writing. The details provided in the text reflecting the enormous amount of background research are quite remarkable. Her analysis is very sound and McLarney has certainly achieved her aims as set out in the introduction. The work is outstanding and should be valued as a unique contribution to bringing together different Islamic voices and conveying information to the English speaking world which would otherwise not be widely available.



However, by attempting to analyse and explore not only the different representatives' personal and private lives, but also their work and the associated social and political situation surrounding Islamic revivalism over several decades, the book is arguably attempting to achieve too much within a limited format. While there is a unifying theme, the topics introduced along the way are so manifold that a lot of information gets lost trying to assimilate the various arguments presented. This applies also to the methodological approach. The author not only analyses her subjects' lives, but also applies literary as well as political analyses to their texts. There is no clear boundary between the one or the other type of analysis. While they are all individually interesting, they provide so much detail that the bigger picture sometimes gets lost. Finally, the title of the book is likely to raise a variety of expectations, which might or might not be fulfilled in the book. The reviewer, who has a political science background, associated the use of the term "soft force" in the title with the notion that the book will primarily be based on the analysis of the various women's influences on local and national politics through non-violent ways. This was only partially achieved.

Despite the points of criticism, the importance of the book should not be underestimated. While it might have been advantageous to create a series of books to cover all the topics and styles of analysis, the wealth of information in this volume makes it an important contribution to the study of Islamic revivalism, women and Islam within the context of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century developments in Egypt and the wider Middle East.

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