

Published on FT Magazine 23/7/2005

## **Fear-free Islam**

*By Noha Mellor*

The images and meaning of Muslim womanhood are now high in world attention, an attention quite different from that which they have received before. On the one hand, veiled women from Arab and Muslim states have been deployed as a symbol of national and religious identity defying the powerful west that seeks to radically change this identity. On the other hand, veiled women in the west have been the target of several public campaigns – as in France and Denmark – which aim to ban the *hijab* (veil) at school or at workplace, aiming towards modernising Muslim citizens in the west and thus eradicating the threatening roots of fundamentalism.

It's fantasy to believe that all Muslim women perceive their religion as an oppression clamped upon them by fathers, brothers and husbands. Fawzia Afzal-Khan's *Shattering the Stereotypes, Muslim Women Speak Out* and Naima B. Robert's *From my Sisters' lips - a unique celebration of Muslim womanhood* are both fervent defenders of Islam. On the other hand – almost at the other extreme – the *Trouble with Islam Today* accuses Islam of being an inflexible religion that needs to be reformed. Between these two conflicting poles, there are other voices of women who prefer to focus not on Islam and Muslim women in general but on the everyday problems of Arab women in particular. These voices are channelled through Dalya Cohen-Mor's (editor) *Women Arab writers - an Anthology of Short Stories*.

One thread connects all these voices: They seek a re-interpretation of the context in which they were born. Above all, they want to clarify the whole issue of their rights and duties as Muslim women without the mediation of a male voice, and without the mediation of a medium which is either too “biased” or too “politically correct”.

Afzal-Khan's collection of essays, poetry and stories has one mission: to defend Islam and to assert that the authors' religion, Islam, is not the direct reason for the oppression and lack of development of women; rather it is the power of the capitalist system that subtly uses Islam as rhetoric to hide its “global injustice”. Afzal-Khan, in her introduction describes a world of escalating power hegemony and injustice: In her opinion, “religious fundamentalism ... is but a symptom of this deeper malaise of unequal power-sharing and unbalanced access to the world's resources”.

Na'ima Robert – a black South African woman, born in Leeds and growing up in Zimbabwe - converted to Islam as an adult woman. Her curiosity to know more about Islam began on a trip to Egypt where she met a veiled Egyptian woman, and asked her why she was covering herself, when she was so pretty. She was taken aback by the woman's answer: “Because I want to be judged for what I say and what I do, not for what I look like.” Throughout the book, Robert presents Islam less as a religion and a holy book, rather as an ideology and a lifestyle. For her, Islam is a liberating ideology offering a challenge to the consumer “culture of celebrity” promoted so ardently by the western media. “Our society”, she writes, “teaches us to be obsessed with appearance. As long as someone is beautiful, thin, wealthy, fun loving or talented, we

are happy to accept him or her at face value. We are not ever taught to look for – or care about – what lies beneath the surface.”

Islam, here, is a new kind of female empowerment that sees the wearing of the veil not a sign of oppression but of liberation from the insistence that image *is everything*. (though the society of the spectacle is not so easily cheated: the veiled or partly veiled woman is now a modern image). She writes - “The first effect that the hijab, the headscarf, seemed to have on us was to encourage modesty – in dress and in conduct. After a lifetime spent showing off our clothes and our bodies, we suddenly felt shy to flaunt ourselves in public.” She noticed a change in men’s attitude towards her and her sisters, for now “they would no longer observe our movements, watch the way we walked, size us up or compare us. The old ways of relating to women’s bodies were no longer applicable because our bodies were not on display.”

Cohen-Mor’s collection is in a different register. Her anthology of stories written over the last half century is literature deployed as a means to rebel, to assert authority through a voice equal in importance to that of a male, deliberately using the short story as a media easy “for women to access, and to print in newspapers and magazines”. Cohen-Mor grasps what I’ve written about in a book on the Arab media: that, as she puts it, “the impact of television, of the technological and communication revolution and of the process of globalisation, transcends linguistic and geographic boundaries making inroads into all areas of life in Arab society”. The short stories provoke a mix of contradictory emotions; of fulfilment versus frustration, or oppression versus liberation. The rather idealised world of Na’ima Robert is contrasted with another, practical world where Muslim women face many hardships. Contrast, for instance, Robert’s account of the kindness of a Muslim man whose deep desire to follow the Prophet’s path in treating orphans well led him to embrace a new life with a widow who had a child from previous marriage, with Najiya Thamir’s story *Slave* in Cohen Mor’s anthology, an account of an orphan girl who grew up in strangers’ house only to serve them as a maid, or slave, deprived of her basic rights to learn and even marry.

The Emirates writer Zabya Khamis, arrested in 1987 in Abu Dhabi and jailed for publishing “transgressive poetry”, portrays the dilemma of a young Arab woman from the Gulf, returning back home after six years of study in the west, accustomed to wearing western clothes and indulging in western life style, only to be stopped and humiliated at the airport of her country on her journey back home. “In the past”, Khamis writes, “the authorities had not feared women as they do now. Seized by an overwhelming fear, they have started to search, arrest, and even torture them. They have also cancelled study-abroad programs for many female students.” The virtue of premarital chastity and a woman’s virginity, whose violation may provoke crimes of honour, is explored in the story *Questioning* by Bahraini Fawziya Rashid. The converse, polygamy as a man’s right, is skilfully described as a young woman’s ordeal in the short story *Sun, I am the Moon* by the Lebanese writer Hanan al-Shaykh.

Irshad Manji is not just in a different register, but on a different planet from these women. High profile, ambitious to be noticed, bravely provocative, her best-seller *The Trouble with Islam Today* pushes the instance of aggression to women with detail and incident. The Nigerian girl who was punished with 180 lashes after being raped by three men, for example - or the fact that in Tunisia and Algeria, Muslim women

cannot marry non-Muslim men (and I have to correct her here: not only there. This applies to several other Arab states!). In Pakistan, an average of two honour killings – the murder of young women, often by their family, for “dishonourable” behaviour like having a boyfriend - is registered daily. In Mali, Mauritania and Sudan, slavery is still practiced; in Bangladesh, artists have been arrested for propagating the rights of minorities; in Yemen and Jordan, where of those working for aid agencies, only Christians were killed.

Manji goes deep into forbidden territory, in taking on the attitude of Muslims towards Jews. At the age of 14, she asked her teacher for proof of the “Jewish conspiracy” theory against Islam; and bluntly posed the question (which caused her to be dismissed from an Islamic school in Canada) - “If the Koran came to Prophet Muhammad as a message of peace”, she asked “why did he command his army to kill an entire Jewish tribe?” If this marked the end of her days at the religious school, it was the beginning of her intellectual journey to freely debate Islam. Irshad - ironically meaning *guidance* in Arabic - calls for *Ijtihad* (not to be confused with  *Jihad* or holy war!) or the re-interpretation of Koran, based on critical thinking as opposed to literalism. She defines herself as “a Muslim Refusenik” and she justifies this title with her refusal “to join an army of automatons in the name of Allah.” Being lesbian made her wonder, “How can we be sure that homosexuals deserve ostracism or death when the Koran states that everything God made is ‘excellent’?”

The real imperialism for Manji is not that of the west, but the imperialism of the Arabic tribal culture. She wonders, for instance, why Arabic has become the legitimate language of Islam, when 80% of Muslims are non-Arabs? Or why should Muslims turn to the direction of Mecca when praying, when God is said to be everywhere? Or “Why are we all being held hostage by what’s happening between the Palestinians and the Israelis?” “Honour killing”, she says, is a phenomenon closely related to the Arab culture, but not of Islam as a religion. Manji’s mission here, therefore, is two-fold; to liberate Islam from the Arabic cultural context (or “desert Islam” as she calls it), and to question the holy texts and their relevance for the modern times. She sees this, however, not as a battle of Islam *versus* secularism, as many in the west may do, but sees the Islamic world as being in need of a Martin Luther to lead a new “protestant” movement among Muslims and re-introduce the notion of *ijtihad*, which stopped towards the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century for political reasons.

One thing is missing from the books reviewed here: it is, as Cohen-Mor puts it, referring to the privileged background of most women writers, the absence of attention paid to the “plight of women from the poorer classes of society”. Education is one concrete solution, as well as economic independence. But political and social pressure should accompany efforts to educate and liberate women, regardless of their religious background. It does not help, for instance, to exercise political pressure on some Arab states to release dissident prisoners, as Condolezza Rice did in her latest visit to the Middle East, while turning a blind eye to female oppression in the same societies.

The debate raised by the above writers has no winners or losers, and it has certainly not ended here. Manji thanks God for the West where it is possible to practice the freedom of speech: perhaps we should rather thank the globalisation that has indeed

made our world more interconnected than ever. It is now impossible to ignore the plight of women anywhere in the world “as if” we don’t know about them. “Honour killing” is a crime that does not only occur in some faraway lands, but takes place in the heart of the west – in Germany, France, Sweden and Denmark. A free debate with native voices from East and West will be Bin Laden’s real nightmare. For what matters is that we will, hopefully, end up with a fear-free debate that transcends the geographical limitations, and which questions, challenges, and seeks solutions for these dilemmas.

Noha Mellor is a journalist at the BBC World Service and author of “*The Making of Arab News*”

*Shattering the Stereotypes. Muslim Women Speak Out.* Fawzia Afzal-Khan (editor). Arris Books. 15.99 £ 338 pages

*The Trouble with Islam Today.* Irshad Manji. St Martin’s Griffin. 12.95\$ 234 pages

*From my Sisters’ lips. A unique celebration of Muslim womanhood.* Na’ima B. Robert. Bantam Press. 12.99£ 286 pages

*Arab Women Writers. An Anthology of Short Stories.* Dalya Cohen-Mor (editor). Sate University of New York Press. 305 pages