

## BOOK REVIEWS

**NIMAT HAFEZ BARAZANGI**, *Woman's Identity and Rethinking the Hadith* (New York: Routledge, 2015). Pp. 248. \$119.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781472446787.

**N**imat Hafez Barazangi's new book *Woman's Identity and Rethinking the Hadith* is a courageous invitation for all "Muslim-identified women" to actively participate in their Islamic societies, either by producing Islamic knowledge or by taking a role of leadership in the Muslim community. The purpose of such an invitation is to return Islamic societies to their authentic "religio-moral rationality" (x) through a necessary discursive shift in understanding the meaning of Islamic scriptural traditions, and particularly the corpus of the *hadith*. The author is actively concerned with the dominance of the jurisprudential version of Islam, which she believes has been produced by mostly male narrators who overlook the ethical aspects of the religion and therefore misinterpret the Qur'an and *hadith*. She recognizes such mechanisms of misinterpretation as the central root of injustice against women. Barazangi provides her audience with examples of the *hadith* and their possible reinterpretation, shedding new light on notions of political leadership, women's testimony and witnessing, as well as marital issues such as sexuality, inheritance, and slavery in Islam.

Structurally, *Woman's Identity and Rethinking the Hadith* juxtaposes Qur'anic verses with Barazangi's reflections on the existing interpretations, making this work an epistemological and methodological guidebook for a variety of disciplines. Barazangi begins her book by identifying three problems in the history of narrating the *hadith*. She argues that Muslim communities caused the first mistake by relying on the *hadith* more than the Qur'an. Throughout the book, she critiques Muslim interpretive practices, more than other forms of scholarship, for misunderstanding the Qur'an and *sunna*. Further, she argues that scholars (Muslims and non-Muslims alike) relied on the same methodologies as early male narrators in adopting similar sources and strategies. Finally, she suggests that these two missteps lead to an overgeneralization of one interpretation as the truth.

Barazangi summarizes three techniques in her work adopted to avoid generalizing interpretation. First, she looks for a *hadith* theology that stands

in line with the Qur'an, not in opposition. Second, in response to a presumed absence of historical background, Barazangi crafts the historical context related to discussions on women and gender at the time of a particular *hadith*'s original narration. Since her substantial criticism of the history of the *hadith* originates from the absence of Muslim-identified women, she advises that Muslim women participate in active reading and interpretation, offering her readings of Qur'an and *hadith* as an example.

Barazangi cautions scholars in gender, religious, and Islamic studies for adhering to a vision of Muslim women derived from their epistemological fallacies. She believes that many academic disciplines have played a role in either representing Muslim women as victims of *shari'a* law, in need of saving, or incorrectly categorizing their movements in a way that has deprived Muslim women of their right to speak of their own struggles. Following Edward Said, she goes further to call out the western Orientalist humanities for misrepresentation and misinterpretation, and then denounces the "west" in general for an incapability of understanding Muslims.

The author argues "a Muslim [woman] who self-identifies with Islam is ... mainly reclaiming her primary identity with Islam, not as a cultural, nor ideological, but as a worldview that recognizes human reason above sex or gender" (68-69). This definition of a Muslim-identified woman, also serves as the foundation for Barazangi's criticism of Islamic feminism. She refutes the term "Islamic feminism" by insisting that the issues of sex and gender exist only in the margin of Muslim-identified women's devotion to Islamic justice. Rather than Muslim-identified women using feminism as the primary reference for gender justice (76-77), Barazangi concludes that the "unit of analysis for Qur'an interpretation is Taqwa [Muslim self-accountability]" (53), and gender is not the primary lens used in Qur'anic interpretation for women.

*Woman's Identity and Rethinking the Hadith* offers Muslim women a space to critically engage with their faith. Barazangi's solution to the absence of Muslim women in the process of rethinking the *hadith* is straightforward: "I am asking Muslims and non-Muslims to please let [a] Muslim woman... think for herself and act on her own behalf" (ix). It is worth noting that Barazangi, a prominent scholar with decades of scholarship to draw from, acknowledges every Muslim woman's agency for the interpretation of sacred texts. Furthermore, she invites male Muslims to respect female interpretation, even if it seems threatening to the old masculine order of the Muslim community. Her call for change is, again, supported by her definition of Islam as a worldview that "recognizes human reason above sex or gender."

As a Middle Eastern feminist scholar who is invested in the lives of Muslim women and their activisms, I have my concerns about the exclusivity of inviting only Muslim-identified women to rethink Islamic texts. Although I understand the author's concern about Islamophobia, Muslim women's lives in the United States, and the pressure they receive from both the public and academic sphere, I am also apprehensive of the lives of "non-Muslim-identified" women outside Europe and North America. Many women who do not identify as practicing Muslims, may endure the same tensions emanating from a dominant Islamic religious sphere in a range of Muslim-majority global contexts. Therefore, I wish for a more inclusive invitation to rethink the Islamic *sunna*, one extended to both those who identify as practicing Muslims and those who do not. My final concern returns to the definition of Muslim-identified women solely through the lens of their religious beliefs. Despite all the right intentions, overlooking the intersectionality of different social influences that construct Muslim womanhood fails to help the reader understand the reinterpretations these women offer and what their notions of Islamic justice can add to debates concerning global human values or democratic human rights.

Despite these concerns, Barazangi offers an invaluable take on Islamic feminism. I recommend this book for graduate and undergraduate level gender studies courses including transnational feminism, Islamic feminism, special topics about Muslim women, or in general women's studies classes that seek an opportunity to offer an internal view of Muslim women's navigation of the modern world. ✂

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**ISSA J. BOULLATA**, *True Arab Love* (Westmount, Quebec: Linda Leith Publishing, 2016). Pp. 87. 12.95 paper. ISBN: 9781988130088.

**Issa J. Boullata's** *True Arab Love* is a re-publication, for American audiences, of a collection of short stories published in 2007 by Banipal Books (London) under the title *A Retired Gentleman*. It follows a 2016 translation of the entire collection into French by Joanna Gruda under the title *Amours Arabes*. Boullata, who retired as Professor of Arabic Literature from McGill University in Montreal in 2004, has actively pursued a rich parallel career as a creative writer alongside academic contributions to his chosen field. Notably, his short stories and the fine Arabic novel *'Ā'id*