

The Warrior Women of Islam: Female Empowerment in Arabic Popular Literature

WRITTEN by an expert in the field, this is an excellent introduction to the popular epic in traditional Arabic literature, focussing on the role of warrior women. Professor Kruk does not weigh the text down with scholarly debates or extensive references, although the notes and bibliography are there for those who want to delve deeper. There are thirty-five pages of introduction and explanation, which set the scene and raise certain issues. These are followed by eleven chapters on selected heroines, with a retelling of their stories, and comments on their place in the history of the epic. It is all immensely readable and enjoyable. Concluding observations are given in a short chapter at the end.

The introductory section points out that the popular epic is not restricted, as the average reader might think, to the well-known *Thousand and One Nights*, and that these other popular epics were, until the 1960s, largely neglected by scholars, both Arab and Western. They were regarded as frivolous tales, morally dubious and without literary merit. They were recited, sometimes over several months, often from memory, in market places throughout the Arab world and only suffered a decline with the arrival of television and radio. However there is now a revival as cassettes are published and television versions broadcast. Indeed the author often compares them to modern soap operas, with their complicated story lines and large number of characters. Polygamy here provides the opportunity for even more complicated scenarios, as long-lost sons and daughters from different spouses pop up, sometimes on the side of the enemy.

The idea of warrior women in Arabic literature is surprising to Western readers, but there are many examples. Generally they do not conform to the 'Amazon' type, in that they form attachments to men and bear and raise children. They do not normally form an exclusively female

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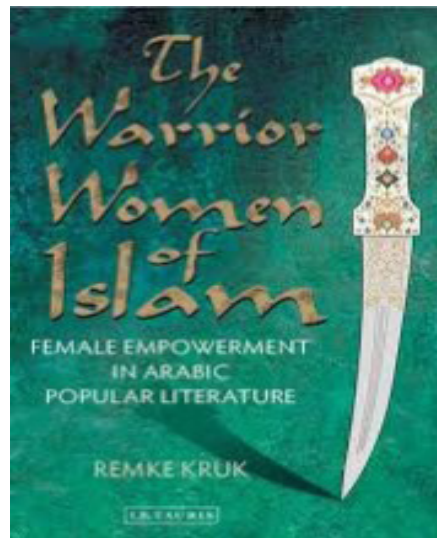
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society. Sometimes the heroine has been brought up as a boy and trained in the martial arts. Often she will only marry a man who has defeated her in combat. A somewhat underhand technique she often uses to defeat her male opponent is to remove her clothes at a crucial point in the fight, so disorientating the man with her beauty that she easily defeats him. Kruk points out that, although these stories feature female warriors, they were recited by men for a male audience and possibly

this scenario appealed to them, as did the eventual domination by the man of a fierce warrior woman. She warns against taking these strong women as a 'feminist development *avant la lettre*'.

Most of the book is devoted to a retelling of the stories of significant warrior women: first of Princess Dhat al-Himma, then of various warrior women in *Sirat Antara*. Next there is an account of women in *The Tale of Hamza*, subtitled *In Praise of Traditional Womanhood*. Here the warlike activities are played down and more conventional female attributes are stressed. Chapter 9 is titled *Lionesses* (female *fedawis*) and features several women characters in *Sirat Baybars*. These women are not chivalric, trained fighters as in the earlier epics, but fierce assassins operating in an urban context. Here the language and actions are often crude, comic and violent. *Sirat Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan* follows, with the stories of *Qamariyya* (Sayf's mother), Tama (one of his wives) and *Munyat al-Nufus*, the latter showing remnants of the classical Amazon myth. These later stories also have magical elements reminiscent of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

Professor Kruk, while acknowledging the immense step forward made by the publication in 1995 of Malcolm Lyons' *The Arabian Epic*, frequently points out how much work still has to be done on these epics, which exist in multiple versions, often only in manuscript form. In addition they lend themselves to analysis from so many perspectives: comparative literature, literary theory, gender studies, folklore and history. Her aim has been to tell the stories, intersperse them with helpful comments and guidelines and introduce them to a wider audience. She has opened up an immense field of research to others as well as giving the non-specialist a fascinating and enjoyable read.

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Islam, Sharia and Alternative Dispute Resolution: Mechanisms for Legal Redress in the Muslim Community

IT is somewhat astonishing that Ali Abd al-Raziq's *al-Islam wa-ushul al-hukm*, one of the most discussed and most significant books of early twentieth-century Egyptian, Arab, and Islamic intellectual history, should have gone so long without a translation into English. Its appearance, in Edinburgh's 'In Translation: Modern Muslim Thinkers' series, is therefore especially welcome. Following Abdou Filali-Ansari's French translation published in 1994, this new translation is the product of a joint effort by Maryam Loutfi with Aziz Esmail and Filali-Ansari, who both (as the Preface informs us) reworked aspects of the English version. The essay's historical and continuing significance is expounded in a 17-page introduction by Filali-Ansari, which draws particular attention to the importance of the author as representing a liberal-modernist current of modern Islamic thought often overlooked by readers in the West, where works by (for example) Hasan al-Banna or Sayyid Quthb have long been available, and widely circulated and commented upon. There is also a brief but valuable, personal prefatory note by the author's grandson, recalling his character as remembered from childhood, that serves to ground the text in a testimony of the author's personal piety. As well as reproducing Abd al-Raziq's original footnotes, the editors have added their own explanatory notes where necessary, as well as an appendix listing the sources and classical authors referred to by the author. These additions are all very helpful, and make the text very accessible and usable both for students and scholars of Islam who might be familiar with the work (for most, perhaps mainly from other

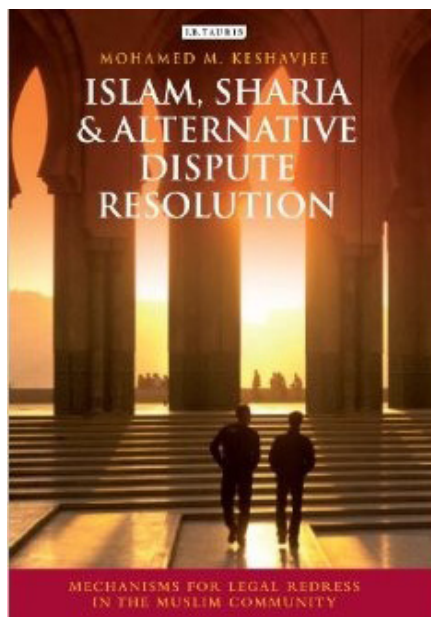
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sources referring to it) and for the general English-language reader encountering it for the first time.

The short text is presented in the same format as the Arabic printing, fol-

lowing the chapter and section divisions of the original (although some of the section numberings differ from the first, 1925 Cairo edition), which makes for a somewhat unusual style in English. The essayistic tone of the original may be a little lost for English readers, seeming somewhat fragmented as a result; but on the other hand, the traditionally scholarly, point-by-point elaboration of Abd al-Raziq's argument is emphasized, allowing us to appreciate both the relative novelty and (as the Introduction points out), just as importantly, the relatively traditional nature of the work. Abd al-RAziq's constant reference to the Qur'an emerges especially clearly. Concern for ease of understanding might occasionally lead the translator to be slightly too expansive: for example, the line of poetry quoted at the end of Book One, *banu fa-ma bakat al-dunya li-mas ra' ihim* ('They departed, and the world wept not for their ruin') is rendered 'The Caliphs were gone. The world did not lament their death' (p. 56), which certainly conveys Abd al-Raziq's idea at this point (discussing the fate of the last Abbasids in Mamluk Egypt), but does so in more explicit terms than he himself used. More generally, though, the translation is both faithful and felicitous, conveying clearly Abd al-RAziq's pugnacious (occasionally slightly sardonic?) prose as well as the very earnest and heartfelt conviction of his writing, especially in the central passages distinguishing prophetic from political authority, and emphasizing the unique and irreducible nature of the Prophetic mission (ch. 5, and pp. 82–6, 106).

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