May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt
Reviewed by VICTORIA ROWE, University of Toronto

The last seven years have witnessed a proliferation of studies on the “new woman” of the Middle East at the turn of the twentieth century. Some of these studies explore feminist movements and state policies on women’s status while others have begun to utilize the rich and largely unmined textual sources of the Middle Eastern women’s press in order to interrogate the gender polemics of the period. Marilyn Booth’s May Her Likes Be Multiplied contributes to the scholarly discussion of gender, national identity and modernity in innovative and valuable ways by analyzing the:

...writing of biography in modern Egypt that contemplates it as a gendered discourse of prescription by way of encouragement; a discourse exemplarity through which women explicated and explored their situations and their hopes, a discourse of circulating texts in which women and men proposed and debated their ideas on social change and the pertinence of women’s lives thereto (p xiv).

The subject of Booth’s analysis is the Famous Woman biography that was popular in Egyptian women’s magazines. Biographical subjects covered a broad geographic and temporal scope, from the ancient world to the contemporary and East and West, and included women involved in a variety of occupations such as writers, intellectuals, queens, actresses, teachers and nurses. A short list of Famous Women who appeared in the press illustrates this diversity: Zenobia of Palmyra, Nefertiti, A’isha bt. Abi Bakr, Sarujini Naidu, Mayy Ziyyada, Safiyya Zaghlul, Jeanne d’Arc, Florence Nightingale, Christabel Pankhurst and Greta Garbo.

May Her Likes Be Multiplied demonstrates careful and extensive research. Booth examined 571 biographies published in eighteen magazines focusing on women as writers,
in Egypt
California Press, 2001, pp

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subject and/or audience from 1892 to 1939, plus selected ad-
itional biographies from other magazines and collections
from 1879 to 1967” (p xxxv). Booth’s rationale for choosing to
examine the Famous Women genre is sound and convincing:
Women’s magazines in Egypt from the 1890s on are a
fabulous source for the study of gender politics. But what
can a focus on a single genre in this wealth of writing tell
us? Why study the “Famous Women”? To sort out the
contradictory implications of nationalism for women de-
dmands (among other approaches) that we follow closely
the rhetorical leads of discrete groups of texts while setting
them firmly within the histories of which they are part. This
methodology, if unable to encompass “the big sweep,”
usefully complicates our understanding of how gender,
nationalist politics, and the search for indigenous identities
intersected and competed under the weight of imperialist
practices (p xix).

Booth demonstrates how Egyptian women participated
in the polemics of the woman question through constructions
of ideal femininities, pushing the boundaries of the domestic
by redefining the nation and the home, advocacy of female
education and employment, within the genre of biography.

In biographical dictionaries and women’s magazines,
writers in Egypt wrote women’s biography into polemics on
the woman question. They produced a body of texts at once
defiant and ambivalent, argumentative and conciliatory. They
instituted a discursive practice that sometimes converged
with, sometimes challenged, other productions of
“woman.” (p xviii)

May Her Likes Be Multiplied dispels the myth of the pas-
sive Egyptian woman by showing women’s active engage-
ment in the debates about women’s role in social and political
organization in the context of nationalist and anti-imperialist
movements.

Booth’s final chapter, which compares the Famous
Women biography published by Islamist presses in Egypt in
the 1980s and 1990s with the early twentieth century biogra-
phies, offers further insight into gender, political organization
and biographies. She argues that male-authored biographies
on women “demand analysis as a discourse on masculinity, a
conversation perhaps not yet acceptable on its own terms. One must write the oppositional term, one must write femininity, to get at masculinity. This imperative, I think, is much of what the dynamic of the woman question is about, now and eighty years ago" (p 307-8). In this Booth points the way to a new area of scholarly inquiry that has not been addressed in Middle East studies, but is one awaiting further exploration. 

*May Her Likes Be Multiplied* is a fascinating window into the relationship between gender, biography and politics. Unfortunately, the book is somewhat marred by its extensive use of literary critical and cultural theory jargon, which makes it incomprehensible for anyone not versed in this language. In addition, Booth uses Arabic phrases occasionally without a translation or adequate explanation of the terms, forcing the non-Arabic speaker to guess at some of the meanings of the terms. Nevertheless, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied* will be of interest to scholars and students of gender studies, comparative literature, and the history of the Middle East.

*Chinese Femininities Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*


Review by KAZ ROSS, University of Melbourne

One of the most exciting trends in China Studies over the last fifteen years has been an increase in interesting and sophisticated works dealing with gender, sexuality, and feminism in China. Unfortunately, these works have tended to remain within the specialised world of Sinology and have not made as deep an impact on the wider fields of Western feminist and gender studies as it might have. Brownell and Wasserstrom’s *Chinese Femininities Chinese Masculinities: A Reader* aims to counteract this situation. The main theoretical underpinning of the collection is that gender is a cultural construct which can best be under-