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## Allen Keiswetter on Women in the Middle East: Past and Present by Nikki R. Keddie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. 416pp.

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**Abstract**

A review of:

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**Keywords**

Human rights, Middle East, Women's studies, Islamic history

**Women in the Middle East: Past and Present by Nikki R. Keddie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. 416pp.**

Now in the latter part of her career, Nikki Keddie, prominent author on the Middle East—and in particular Iran—has codified her thoughts regarding women’s issues in her latest book, Women in the Middle East: Past and Present. Keddie’s work is really three books in one, combining history, essays about the feminist movement, and reflections on her personal journey. Book One is titled “Women in the Middle East: A History;” Book Two is titled “Approaches to the Study of Middle Eastern Women,” and is a collection of five essays written by Keddie over the past 30 years; finally, Book Three is titled “Autobiographical Recollections,” and includes a transcript of one interview, with an updating addendum.

For most readers, the 200-page history in Book One will be the major attraction, as it reviews the 14 centuries of Islamic history from a feminist perspective. A central question Keddie raises is whether Muhammad and the Quran “brought a great favorable change in the position of women” (19). The author juxtaposes improvements Muhammad made to the status of women, especially the ending of female infanticide, against the fact that the Quran sanctifies superior rights for men.

Her history and essays clarify that a process of interpretation, or *ijtihad*, is the key to answering the questions raised by such juxtapositions. For example, feminists argue that the trajectory that Muhammad set in broadening the rights of women is the pattern which should be emulated today. In contrast, traditionalists insist that Muhammad’s example in the 7th century set, for all time, the rules to be applied, immutably. Keddie traces the influences that culture and theology have had on customs across the 14 centuries of Islamic history. Strictly speaking, the Quran requires veiling only for Mohammad’s wives, even though the practice is a religious mandate in many Muslim communities. She aptly closes her essays with an observation: Scholars outside Muslim countries frequently answer the question of whether Islam can be gender egalitarian with “global general statements about Islam” that are “unwarranted reification[s] of a phenomenon that has varied by time and place” (237).

This idea of the importance of the context of time and place for *ijtihad* permeates all parts of the book. In the early Islam period, restrictive pre-Islamic cultures shaped the treatment of women. In the 9th century, the *ulema*, or clergy, who established the four major schools of Sunni Islam, further tightened restrictions through their interpretation and selective codification of the *sunna* and *hadiths* (example and sayings) of Muhammad. In the Ottoman period, practice varied widely as the Empire expanded. In the 18th century, the Islamic modernists, especially Muhammad Abduh, separated Quranic rules into those that were eternal and those that were time-related and he placed many male-dominant rules in the later category. For Keddie, the two near-constants across time and place are: treatment of women have varied according to class and setting, with upper class women in urban environments being the most secluded; and age hierarchies have cut across sexual patterns, with older women commanding great authority even over younger men.

The two chapters dealing with “1914-45: Nationalism and Women’s Movements” and “1945-Today: New States and Trends, Women’s Activism and the Rise of Islam” are subdivided into regions or countries and are useful for particular area studies. An excellent companion piece

would be the U.N. Arab Human Development Reports, especially *Arab Human Development Report 2005: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World*.

The essays collected in Book Two often provide the basis for the historical feminist themes in Book One—especially pertinent is “Scholarship, Relativism and Universalism,” initially published in 2000. Keddie questions the efficacy of Islamic feminist scholars’ appeals to revisionist views of the Quran at a time when masculine-centered interpretations were more common among both religious and lay authorities. Instead, the author argues that most advances for Islamic feminism in recent times have not stemmed from such reinterpretations; rather, they have stemmed from an “effective emphasis on the needs of modern society for educated, working women and for lower birth rates” (236).

Book Three’s “Autobiographical Recollections” charts Keddie’s life as a scholar. It is interesting not only because it describes how she entered a field dominated by men, but also because it speaks of her struggles against charges of un-American activities in the 1950s and 1960s. Nonetheless, at age 77, Keddie concludes that despite serious illness, “for all its difficulties, my life has been one of major satisfactions...” (354).

In many ways a valedictory work on an issue of life-long interest to Keddie, this book aims at several audiences. For Middle East experts, Book One is a useful survey by a first-rate historian. For feminists, Book Two codifies Keddie’s essays and insights. And for budding scholars among the above, Book Three offers personal advice about academic life and accomplishment. Overall, this book works well despite its occasional lugubrious prose. As a capstone, it places Keddie along with Judith Tucker, Lela Ahmad and Barbara Stowasser as major Middle East historians who lay the basis for further work.

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