

WOMEN AND ISLAM IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Bernadette Andrea
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007

REVIEWED BY TABASSUM F. RUBY

Focusing on female writers, Bernadette Andrea examines the ways English women negotiated conflicting discourses of gender, Orientalism, and imperialism at a time when the Ottoman Empire was influential and England was still a marginal nation with limited global influence. She argues that studies on Anglo-Ottoman relations often focus on gender representation in male-author travel narratives and they ignore early modern women's writings. For her, female writings are an alternative to those male voices, a "feminist critique." Hence, Andrea asserts that while the masculinist travel literature usually represents Muslim women as "oppressed," female textual production (i.e., diplomatic letters, travelogues, prose fictions, poetry, and dramas) engages with their own patriarchal culture by refusing to displace female oppression onto the Islamic "other" without first confronting its effect on English women themselves.

In the first chapter Andrea focuses on the exchange of gifts and letters between Queen Elizabeth and Safiye, the Ottoman Queen mother, and examines the sixteenth century emergence of "the sultanate of women." Andrea argues that the two women deployed shared signifiers of femininity to establish their sovereignty in their respective patriarchal cultures and become "objects that speak" as agents of cross-cultural exchange. Their "agency" marks continuities in early modern English women's identification with women from the Islamic world as

a means to challenge patriarchy in their own realm.

In the second chapter Andrea examines Lady Mary Wroth's prose, which was met with immediate resistance from the king and his male courtiers for its critique of Jacobean patriarchy. The prose shows Wroth's experience of gender subordination by means of her identification with the doubly othered Persian wife of Sir Robert Sherley, Lady Teresa. Since Lady Teresa does not appear in many English documents, Wroth draws our attention to the "first" Persian in seventeenth century England as "racially other." However, she positions herself on the side of western European imperialism and also tries to negotiate gendered imperialist identity in both parts of the world. As Andrea underscores in her third chapter, writings of early Quaker women illustrate similar contradictions in their dual capacity as missionaries and publishing women because during the mid-seventeenth century Quaker women published enormously and they were at the forefront of the Anglo-Protestant missionary movement. For instance, Mary Fisher set off to the Near East in the late 1650s because she was convinced that the Great Turk was "the one man in Europe who was most in need of her message." Yet, in her own country, she was marginalized as a "masterless woman" with neither a husband nor an employer, but *just* a publishing woman.

However, it is not until the last two chapters that Andrea really brings out her main argument. Drawing on several accounts, Andrea states that the masculinist travel literature of the seventeenth century depicts Muslim women as "oppressed" and a typical narrative of the Turk man is: "a cruel, rigorous, or tyrannical man; one who treats his wife hardly." This depiction "sets the stage with dictum that western women should feel grateful for their gender status quo because...Muslim women must subsist as virtual slaves."

However, Mary Wortley Montagu challenged this representation of Muslim women. Since this was a time when English women could not own property, she wrote in her travel letters (1716-1718) that the "Turkish women are the only free people in the empire" because they control their persons and property upon marriage and they take their wealth with them upon divorce with an addition which he [the divorcing husband] is obliged to give them. Likewise, many other female writers corrected this narrative in male writings that the harem of Ottoman men are filled with slave Muslim women and they have unlimited wives. They argued that neither a Muslim woman can be a slave according to Islamic laws, nor men can have more than four wives at a given time. In contrast, they highlighted England's engagement with the African slave trade and how polygamy was practiced in England.

Andrea's work, hence, distinctly departs from earlier studies that rely on male accounts where images of Muslim women remain squarely within the framework of "Islamic patriarchy." However, since Andrea dedicates significant space to show that English women pointed to their own patriarchal culture, rather than embracing the accelerating western imperialist project, this book is about "English patriarchies" of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. From that viewpoint, it is not limited to those aspects of English women's writings that refused to displace female oppression onto the Islamic "other." But it is equally about how English women articulated their own oppressions through encountering Muslim women where they realized that the Islamic "other" actually enjoys more rights than they do despite the English men's assertion of "freeborn" English woman and "slave" Muslim woman. In sum, it is an invaluable book for Women's Studies, Ottoman Studies, Transnational Studies, etc., since it helps challenging the dominant

narratives that construct Muslim women as “oppressed” due to their “Islamic identity.”

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WAR BRIDES

Melynda Jarratt
Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2010

REVIEWED BY CLARA THOMAS

“I have wanted to write a history of Canadian War Brides for twenty years now, since I first started working on my Masters thesis in History at the University of New Brunswick in 1987.” This book is the valuable result of Jarratt’s enthusiasm, a collection of excerpts from letters, well chosen and well edited. She takes us across Canada, with chapters on the Maritimes and Newfoundland, Quebec, Ontario, Western Canada, Military Service (The WRENS, WDS, and CWACs), War Fiancées, Children of War Brides, and Canadian War Brides of the First World War. Her collection is comprehensive and unfailingly engrossing.

As was inevitable, the stories relate every imaginable tale; though the vast majority of marriages weathered adjustments and inevitable strains and their brides became satisfied, gradually enthusiastic, Canadians, it was not easy for any of them or their families back home. In those thousands of marriages, there were some who should not have married and inevitably others who encountered conditions that were inescapably and irremediably bad. I wonder, for instance, about those women who found their new home to be an Indian reservation—we have nothing to be proud of in our treatment of our aboriginals, particularly the

forcing of their children into residential schools and the alienating of them from their own culture. The finding of an outdoor privy was a minor shock, one which many of the brides faced and weathered. Also in a considerable number of cases the conditions they found in Canada were better than they had been in their homes and, correspondingly, the hope for better things for themselves and their children was an ever-present beacon. Many of these young women faced a prejudice against them from their new relatives. I remember it well myself. There was a feeling that good Canadian boys were being snatched by British women who were out to get themselves all the advantages of living in Canada, to say nothing of the soldier’s pay.

Jarratt believes that all these matches were motivated by falling in love. That, of course, doesn’t account for the mixture of motives present in any individual’s decision. Some of the women were certainly charmed by the idea of a Canadian future. One of them who calls herself “a Lancashire Lass” describes her home in England as being without even the most basic of amenities, though her family was a close and loving one. She was totally unprepared for a mother-in-law, with whom she had to live and who resented and abused her verbally from the day she arrived. When, finally, after enduring some years of abuse she broke down in her doctor’s office, the mother-in-law was removed and she, for the first time in Canada, was free and happy to be the homemaker she wished to be. Another bride suffered serious family reverses when her husband was diagnosed with a brain tumour and after a lengthy and agonizing illness, died. She was thrown on the meagre resources and accompanying humiliation of our welfare system as it stood then. Most of the couples, however, slowly made their way to a comfortable future and none of the corresponding brides admits total defeat and disappointment. On the contrary, they report on their

families with the greatest pride and satisfaction: “As brides we promised for Better, for Worse and as women we have a great part to play in the building of a new world.”

Clara Thomas is Professor Emerita, York University. With her husband Morley, she has retired to Stratbrov, Ontario.

STEFANI VAN WIJK

Night in the city

An empty road

Lit by streetlights

Shining each their own
circle

I run

Barefoot

as fast as I can.

I run faster

The wind will guide me,

I trust the ground

the wind

the space.

Stefani van Wijk loves to live her life as a series of adventures. She tries to spread thought and empowerment to all she connects with. We are one.