

***Gendering Culture in Greater Syria: Intellectuals and Ideology in the Late Ottoman Period.*  
Fruma Zachs and Sharon Halevi. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015.**

**Reviewed by Johanna L Peterson**

Students of the late Ottoman Empire in the Arab lands are familiar with the *Nahda*, a revival of Arabic language and literature that began in the early nineteenth century. In Greater Syria, this cultural and linguistic flowering can be seen in the growth of novel-writing and magazine, newspaper, and journal production as early as the 1830s. In Fruma Zachs' and Sharon Halevi's *Gendering Culture in Greater Syria*, the authors challenge the existing contention in studies on gender in the *Nahda* which suggest that it failed women. Through an examination of the novels, poems, magazines, and newspapers that were produced during the *Nahda*, Zachs and Halevi suggest that it was a time of intense debate over the question of gender as new conceptions of masculinity were created, and women's place in Greater Syrian society was actively discussed. They further suggest that the *Nahda* can be divided into two facets – the cultural, in which one sees the resurgence of linguistic, journalistic, and literary activity in the early nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth; and the political, seen in the emergence of ideas related to political identity and nationhood that developed in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In both, questions of gender were at the center. Thus, rather than the *Nahda* failing women and women's progress in the Middle East, it served as an early step in debates about republican motherhood seen during the mandate period, as well as questions of women's citizenship in the first years following independence.

After providing a basic outline of the evolution of the “woman question” in the press of Greater Syria from the mid-1800s to 1900, Zachs and Halevi turn to their examination of the ways in which notions of gender were discussed, debated, and negotiated in the literary productions of the *Nahda*. They begin by looking at *Asma* (1873), one of Salim al-Bustani's early novels. They examine it for its place in the development of the modern Arabic novel, as well as how its plot illustrated al-Bustani's thinking about social issues in the face of a rapidly modernizing society. At the center were women and their role in the creation of the modern Arab family. Zachs and Halevi next examine the emergence of a modern idea of masculinity in Greater Syria, a conceptualization that utilized the pre-Islamic notion of *murū'a* (manly virtue) in a very modern context. They use novels that ostensibly focus on the question of the “new woman” as a vehicle for discussing this shift to modern notions of masculinity and manly virtue.

Zachs and Halevi then turn to the discourse on domesticity that appeared on the pages of novels, journals, newspapers, and the like in Greater Syria in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this discussion, the authors use the term “glocalization” to define the ways in which global processes become incorporated into local practices, understanding, and structures. In examining this hybrid idea of domesticity, Zachs and Halevi first focus on the ideal woman as promoted in early lectures of cultural societies, and then on a thematic analysis of domestic advice columns found in several Beirut and Cairo-based newspapers. In looking at discourses on domestic health and hygiene, the spatial reorganization of the home, and Western fashion, the authors show that though women were encouraged to “expand their social horizons through a variety of communal and familial activities,” this expansion did not include “the crafting of independent identities or agendas” (p. 86).

While the discourse of much of the late nineteenth century on the “woman question” focused on women's role as mothers and wives and their successful management of the domestic sphere, beginning in the mid-1890s and continuing into the first decades of the twentieth century, one sees a shift, in both male and female-authored works, toward social and political commentaries. Here, one sees a transformation in the discourse of domesticity from a construct of the emerging middle classes to one that had increasingly nationalist and anti-colonialist purposes. Zachs and Halevi here suggest that the women who authored these novels serve as a link between the *Nahda*'s cultural and political facets. This analysis, in particular,

offers an important addition to the many studies that overlook the first couple decades of the twentieth century in looking at women's work and activism in Greater Syria. In examining late nineteenth century women novelists, Zachs and Halevi show how women used their novels to pose questions and critiques about the existing social, cultural, legal, economic, and political structures, especially in regard to those that affected women. To highlight the ways in which these questions and critiques were presented, and to get at their content, the authors look at debates related to women's right to paid work and political rights, as well as at those women who emerged as activists and political writers during this period. Zachs and Halevi conclude that this period was not a minor transitional phase, but was instead a time in which the feminist and intellectual agendas raised by women in conceptions of the nationalist projects of mandate Syria and Lebanon were begun.

The movement in the focus of women's writings from the domestic to the political sphere was accompanied by a shift in the discourse on the domestic sphere. The final chapter looks at this shift and its impact on the "woman question." Here, the authors examine the depiction of marriage and sexuality in turn-of-the century Arabic novels. They focus on the theoretical idea of "outlaw emotions," those feelings expressed in literature, art, etc., that subvert social and political norms and practices, making the works, in and of themselves, expressions of attempted subversion. Zachs and Halevi examine a set of novels, novellas, and short stories from the late *Nahda* period that sought to challenge existing social and sexual norms. The fact that these fictions were serialized in newspapers allowed readers to respond to and debate about these ideas. They suggest that, in "providing a discursive or 'rehearsal space' in which to voice and share 'outlaw emotions,'" the authors "laid the foundation for a subculture opposing the prevailing gender norms" (p. 128). Though this experiment was rather short-lived, coming to an abrupt halt with the imposition of the mandate, Zachs and Halevi suggest that the themes dealt with in these works were again taken up by women beginning in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

In their examination of the ways in which the "woman question" was approached, from the earliest days of the *Nahda* in the early nineteenth century through to the beginning of French mandate rule in Syria and Lebanon in 1920, Zachs and Halevi show the central role it played in emerging notions of Arab and middle class modernity. Indeed, discourses of domesticity, proto-nationalism, and political rights placed women at the center. Not only was Arab modernity tied to the creation of educated wives and mothers heading scientifically-organized middle class households, it also came to be linked to changing notions of masculinity in light of the "new woman," as well as, for those in the later years of the *Nahda*, women's full participation in political life.

Zachs and Halevi provide an engaging, thoughtful, and innovative examination of the *Nahda* period. Using novels, short stories, newspaper and periodical literature (which includes transcribed public lectures, scientific articles, household advice columns, and advertisements), biographies, memoirs, and personal correspondence, they provide a compelling analysis of discourses on women in the *Nahda*, the ways in which *Nahda* literature can be seen reflected in the works of the late mandate and early independence periods, and the benefits of interdisciplinarity in rethinking earlier assumptions. For students of Greater Syria in the late Ottoman Empire, this work provides a cultural and gendered analysis of a region and period often examined through the lens of political history. For those who examine the mandate, Zachs' and Halevi's analysis provides useful background for understanding the trends and changes in the women's press and women's activism over the course of the mandate period.

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