Recent research suggests that one of the more probable causes of menstrual discomfort is excessive prostoglandin activity (a substance derived from fatty acids within the body). While there are many different theories, the authors review: what drugs are considered safe and effective; why women experience premenstrual tension; the causes of excessive menstrual flow and reasons for failure to menstruate; what to expect as menopause approaches; what some of the causes of infertility are; safety in tampon use; and include a selected bibliography for further reading. The authors urge women to seek a doctor's advice in these matters, but they also advocate responsible self-direction in dealing with common "women's problems".

I found the sections on premenstrual tension, special problems among adolescents, toxic shock syndrome and menopause especially useful and informative. This is a well-researched, generally readable book full of information.

Macha MacKay
Acadia University

Women in Islam. Naila Minai. *New York: Seaview Books, 1981. Pp. 283.*

Islamic societies, if they are considered in the West at all, are generally viewed in the mode of Alexander Haig or Hollywood. Edward Said remarked in *Covering Islam* that: "There is an unquestioned assumption that Islam can be characterized by a handful of recklessly general clichés." One does not have to look very hard to find such patent misconception: The Insight Page of a weekend newspaper or a T.V. guide will often suffice. The West displays a particular myopia in its perception of Muslim women—visions of the Arabian Nights—but it is no cliché to say that women in Islamic societies have fought and are still fighting a hard battle to gain equality with men.

Women in Islam by Naila Minai is a book designed to familiarize a western reader with the lives of women in Islamic societies. In it she illustrates the role Muslim women have had and continue to have in shaping the societies in which they live, rather than showing how an Emily Pankhurst or a Gloria Steinem may have influenced their thinking. Although the problems which effect Muslim women are more severe than our own, they nevertheless reflect a situation which is universal; for example, a judicial precedent was set recently in southern Ontario when a man received two years less a day for beating his wife to death.

Minai's book is a general survey, and not as comprehensive as Lois Beck and Nikkie Keddie's *Women in the Muslim World,* but as Minai herself states: "This book is not meant to be an exhaustive study of Middle Eastern women, but rather a personal view by a Muslim woman who has spent her life commuting between the East and the West."

She devotes the first of the three parts of her work to the history of women in Islam, and in contrast to the almond-eyed girls so often portrayed in Islamic literature, the women Minai describes in the early years of the Islamic state were of heroic proportions. Al Khansa, for instance, was a celebrated poetess, who accompanied her sons into battle, and through her verses exhorted men and women to fight for Islam, while one of Muhammed's first converts, Umm Umarah, reluctantly had to give up fighting after she lost a hand in battle.

Minai points out that in the embryonic years of Islam, women's rights were considered for the first time among the people of the Arabian peninsula, and although they were formulated in such a way that today may seem triffling or

even laughable, they were at that time innovative to the point of being revolutionary. For example, a barbaric practice common in the Arabian peninsula of burrying unwanted infant girls alive was mercifully repudiated as a crime against God and humanity by Muhammed. In the *Qur'an,* the protection of a woman's property against abuse by her husband was stipulated. Today, however, the *suras* of the *Qur'an* which state that the value of a woman as a witness is half that of a man, or that a woman is entitled to half as much inheritance as a man, are a thorn in the side of Muslim feminists. Minai argues that these compromises were the result of a need to form a cohesive cult—unfortunately dissidents had to be satisfied.

The greatest advancements Muslin women have made toward emancipation have been in times of social upheaval such as that which occured in the early years of the Islamic state, where old values were questioned in the face of change. By partaking in resistance movements in Turkey, Tunisia, and Algeria, women have shown that they have a role in society other than that of child-bearer. Against a backdrop of advancement in the position of women through social and political upheaval, the current revolution in Iran is placed in an interesting perspective. Are Iranian women being thrown back into the Middle Ages, as some western analysts gleefully say, or can their value in the effort to overthrow the Shah be ultimately overlooked? Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian doctor and author of many works on women in the Arab world, states in her preface to the English edition of *The Hidden Face of Eve,* that the reappearance of the veil in Iran and the current reactionary climate there, as yet provide no real indication as to how women in that country will determine their future. In her final chapter, which addresses the issue of Islamic revival in the Middle East, Minai echoes Saadawi's words in an interview with an Iranian woman who decided to return to her country after the downfall of the Shah. "Only time will tell how the religiously liberal Peri and her more fundamentalist sisters will influence their country's destiny."

The putting on of the veil for some has had broader political implications. It has become a symbol of the rejection of a haphazard application of western political, economic and cultural policy to their society. For a few it demonstrates also a rejection of western feminist ideals which have caused much innovation but a great deal of confusion and disillusionment as well. Minai, however, has little sympathy for those women who use "Islam" as an excuse for denying that they have any role in society other than a domestic one.

> Like American women crusading against the Equal Rights Amendment, many Islamic women appear to be willing victims in the cause of revivalism. By protesting militantly on the streets, Egyptian women affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood or other groups blocked the passing of liberal divorce laws for five years. A disconcerting number of these opponents were literate.

Middle Eastern feminists in the late 19th and for the greater part of the 20th century have often looked to the West for inspiration, and with various degrees of success have attempted to fit western ideas into an Islamic framework.

Mustafa Kemal Ataturk may be familiar in the West as the founder of the modern Turkish Republic, but he is rarely recognized as a committed feminist. The groundwork for the equality of men and women before the law was laid in republican Turkey's first constitution in 1924, and Ataturk promoted equal educational opportunities for women and encouraged them to persue careers previously barred to them, which had included everything from law to the

live stage. Minai relates an amusing anecdote concerning Ataturk and the first woman lawyer in Turkey, Sureyya Agaoglu:

> The daughter of feminist writer Ahmet Agaoglu, she could handle all of her problems except one: where to have lunch. There was only one restaurant in the newly created capital city of Ankara, which had always been a men's club and did not look kindly on Sureyya's intrusion. No one threw her out, but all eyes turned toward her whenever she came in, forcing her to swallow her food in the washbasin area . . . When Ataturk heard of her plight, he accompanied her to the restaurant . . . It became fashionable thereafter for men to invite their wives to lunch in that restaurant.

One of the most outspoken male feminists of the nineteenth century was the Egyptian judge and scholar Oasim Amin, from whose writings Minai selects a wonderful piece of reversed logic: "If men fear that women might succumb to their masculine attractions, why did they not institute veils for themselves?" Minai devotes almost as much time to male feminists as she does to women like Huda Shawari, an Egyptian aristocrat prominent in the twenties, who in a dramatic gesture threw her veil into the sea when she returned from a conference on women held in Europe. Minai has chosen to illustrate the writings and policies of these men, as she argues that without active male support in a rigidly patriarchal society, the cause of women's emancipation cannot advance significantly.

Among the many aspect of the lives of Muslim women that Minai deals with, including fascinating accounts of birthing methods and post-natal care of the mother and child, she discusses the sensitive issue of genital mutilation in young girls, euphemistically know as female circumcision. Although this reviewer was discouraged from discussing this issue by liberal as well as conservative Muslim women, I feel it cannot be overlooked.

Minai's main source of information is the *World Health Organization's Khartoum Conference Report of 1979,* and since there is no other readily available source of data which is so comprehensive, its findings have to be accepted for the time being. The statistics are horrifying. Some 30 million women are effected in over thirty countries, most of them in Africa, although Minai reports that cases have been noted in both Yemens, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Syria. The operation ranges from the partial removal of the clitoris to the near complete elimination of the outer genitals, and it is practiced by non-Muslims and Muslims alike. It is therefore not a peculiarly Islamic phemomenon.

At the United Nations sponsored conference on women in Copenhagen in 1980, many delegates from the Middle East and Africa refused to discuss the issue on the basis that it was being exploited for its sensationalistic value, and other matters such as women in the work force were being ignored. Their main objection, however, was that it cast women in underdeveloped countries, and Islamic women in particular, in an undue barbaric light.

Minai relies heavily on anecdote and her personal experiences to carry the narrative, which is both the book's strength and its weakness. It is a broad panorama of Muslim women, covering over a thousand years and many facets of their lives, but it merely wets the appetite and one wants to know more. *Women In Islam,* however, is well documented. The footnotes are voluminous and the references to Middle Eastern literature, feminist, fictional and poetic are broad in scope. They also appear to be an outlet for bitterness toward a society whose attitude toward women—respect yet subjugation—is even more painfully am-

biguous than our own. The book would have eventually carried the tone of an invective if these acerbic tableaux had found their way into the body of the narrative. Fortunately they did not, as their anger and sarcasm would have obscurred the mundane realities and heroic achievements of women in the Islamic world.

Jan Martin
Toronto

ERRATUM

Vol. 7, No. 1, Fall 1981

The editors apologize for the error in the title of the book review *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary,* Jean McMahon Humez (ed.), Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981.