

Women in Islam: Middle Eastern Studies at a Community College Library

Introduction

A local community college has several departments offering courses that coalesce in the topic of Women in Islam or Muslim Women: the Arabic and Persian Departments, the Women's Studies Department, and the Philosophy Department. This essay evaluates the library materials that support courses in these departments.

Offered are 5-unit courses in Elementary Arabic, Elementary and Intermediate Persian, a 4-unit course in Philosophy of Religion, and 4-unit courses in Women's Studies that focus on women and culture. Sociology of Women and Men includes investigation of how gender is shaped by politics and religion from cross-cultural and global perspectives. Psychology of Women surveys cultural factors influencing women's psychology.

The college's Board of Trustees Policy Manual states in that materials will be selected that best meet the teaching and learning mission of the college. Teaching faculty are responsible for selecting material in their subject areas. Library faculty are responsible for selecting reference and general materials (Article 6, Section 6170).

Comment: recheck

Comment: very interesting !!!!

Scope, coverage and depth

The library uses the Library of Congress classification system and subject headings. The Library of Congress (LC) classifications BP20 to BP223 treat Islam as a religion and philosophy. Compared to the preceding section on Judaism, the Islam section has twice as much material, approximately 166 titles.

Comment: excellent use of comparative analysis used throughout this section

Included in the BP section are general works on the religion of Islam, works on sects of Islam, 15 books on Sufism, one on Shi'a Islam, and 21 books on Black Muslims in America. Of the 15 books on Sufism, five are by Idries Shah, small volumes of retold stories, such as *The Elephant in the Dark*, that are considered classics.

The collection includes three copies of the *Qur'an*, two are side-by-side translations, the one published in 1946 is the oldest book in this subsection. In comparison, the Judaic collection includes four books on the Dead Sea Scrolls.

LC classification HQ treats the family, marriage and women, with HQ1111 continuous treating women. Thirty of approximately 750 books in this section are specifically on women in the Middle East, 15 on women's daily lives in various Arabic countries, many of them biographical, others scholarly research, field studies, and edited collections of scholarly articles.

Currency of information

The Islam collection compared to the Judaic has 23 books published since 2000, while the Judaic has five, these being anthologies or general works. It is clear that the library is developing its Islam collection. The BP section contains general works on Islam dating from the 1960 some of which would be considered classics. Balanced against these are recently published books that address the need for the West to reach a better understanding of Islam, such as Carl W. Ernst's (2003) *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*.

Comment: good observations

The HQ section also contains classics, many now out of print, field studies dating from the 70s and 80s, anthologies, and older scholarly works that are vital to a well developed collection. This collection represents the accumulated research in Middle Eastern women's studies and as such should not contain only current work. Research studies are still valid though they may no longer be accurate for today. If the information is dated, its scientific significance as good examples of research persists. A healthy amount of historical material signifies a complete collection.

Comment: good point

The average publication date in the BP section is the early 1990s. Subsections are older, for example the 15 books on Sufism are all from the 1970s and 1980s. The average date in HQ section is the later 90s. Because of recent political events in the Middle East, the Islam sections have been developed in the area of popular readership and show more books that are biographical first person accounts than in earlier eras. The online catalog shows that many recent additions that are scholarly texts are in electronic format.

Appropriateness for the curriculum

Many books that are appropriate for community college students are members of series, such as *Islam: A very short introduction* by Malise Ruthven, one of the *Very Short Introductions Series* by Oxford University Press. Karen Armstrong's *Islam: A Short History*, included in multiple copies, is in her series about religion intended for a popular audience, a suitable level for the average community college student.

Other books have intellectually demanding content: *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* by Asma Barlas, which explore the sexual/textual oppression in Muslim societies, is written at the graduate level. Interestingly, the text has been underlined, starred, and annotated with margin comments. Many similar books, though scholarly, are written in first person making them more readable for college students.

The field studies, though scholarly, are clearly written, the content easy to access for this population. *Beyond the Veil* by Fatima Mernissian, anthropological study of sex in the Muslim world, is fascinating and informative and provides a better reference point for students than personal stories such as *Between Two Worlds* by Zainab Salbi. Dr. Nawal El Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve*, a field study of female circumcision, is an excellent resource on this topic.

Comment: These can be excellent resources and tools

Books in both the BP and the HQ sections have gift plates in the front, given by the college's Associated Students (AS). While this indicates the association's desire to develop the collection in certain directions, it may also imply unnoticed gaps in the collection or differences in collection development styles. A college librarian confirmed that these books were bought through a donation from AS for books on diversity.

Comment: wonderful—great use of the grant money to improve understanding, particularly give the political climate

Circulation, usage and physical condition

Evidence of use throughout is clear from underlined and annotated text to withdrawal slips left in pages listing other books borrowed (all on the same topic) to pages folded back to date stamps in front pockets throughout the subsections from old books to newer ones. Most scholarly works are annotated in some fashion in ink or pencil, some more thoroughly than others. One book should be replaced because nearly a third of its pages are loose, though none are missing. While physical

condition is a concern, there is something reassuring about studying from a well-worn and annotated text. Much of this older collection was published by small, obscure houses. All but a few out of print books are available used at Amazon, some with collector's prices. In this case the library is following a policy of retaining its house copy no matter what condition.

Comment: interesting!

The newer books are physically more attractive with shiny photographs on the covers of politically powerful images, terrorists with faces swathed in white linens carrying rifles, women in the full body veil, the *burka*, carrying out household tasks with children in tow. This physical attractiveness flows over into the library's online catalog where citations for newer books include jacket images and list the chapter contents, inviting selection.

Monetary value estimate

The cost of replacing the 16 items listed in the Appendix is \$400. Prices were taken directly from book jackets whenever possible. Otherwise, prices given here are the full-price amount indicated at Amazon. Most were available new at reduced rates at Amazon and nearly all were available used at lower rates. The complexity of the subject and breadth of the materials required reviewing more than the ten books. Books are reviewed in the following categories: field studies, scholarly writing, collections, bibliographic writings, videorecordings, electronic books and newspapers.

Comment: Good discussion

Maintenance

The sections are well maintained, books in appropriate LC call number order, shelves not crowded and with room for expansion, evidence of a well weeded collection and good shelving practices. Individual books that need it have not been repaired. A college librarian verified that the Islamic and women's sections have not been weeded in recent years. While sitting on the floor in the stacks this writer experienced several people searching the shelves in nearby sections. Books from the women's section were left on study desks but not from the Muslim women subsection. The online catalog indicated some titles were on loan at present.

Popular readership

Without a library card, the video collection is inaccessible. The DVDs have been removed from their containers and a library card is required to get them. Once in hand, viewers can use the library computer labs, also requiring a card. Popular readership items, particularly those on "hot" topics like "Hostage: the Jill Carroll Story" and those with attractive photographic covers like *Rage at the Veil*, could be arranged as a topical display in a prominent place.

Comment: Good point

Recommendations

- Carefully monitor use of electronic books not only numbers of people logging in but also lengths of time logged in. If people log in briefly, are they really using the resource? Print volumes leave traces of people's use where e-volumes may not. The point is to find evidence that money spent for electronic books would not be better spent elsewhere.
- Collect scholarly titles pertaining to women and *jihad*. Jill Carroll briefly wrote about women's presence in *jihadi* organizations. If no scholarly research exists in this area, refrain from buying sensational, first person narratives except as newspaper or magazine articles.
- Collect materials on women and women's rights in non-terrorist states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, preferably recent research studies to support those done earlier.

Comment: EXCELLENT recommendations, especially about the need from more materials by and about women

- Replace the well-worn classics with better editions (available at Amazon for example), but keep these items in the collection.

Conclusion

The library is moving forward with its electronic books collection and this bears monitoring of usage records and user satisfaction. Some electronic books have print counterparts that are much cheaper, for example Rouse's *Engaged surrender: African American women and Islam* in the electronic version is \$50 but is \$19.95 in soft cover print. The library may be getting better deals than this with their provider, NetLibrary, a division of OCLC.

Comment: Excellent point

The library is moving in the direction of popular reader materials of gripping, sometimes sensational, content in its women in the Middle East collection. These materials would not be acceptable in research papers, just as articles from popular magazines are not substitutes for those from scholarly journals. If bought at list price, these are more expensive than scholarly works; compare *Rage Against the Veil* (\$32.00) and *Inside Iran* (\$29.95) to *Following Muhammad* (\$16.95) and *Qur'an and Women* (\$15.95). These materials are best left to public libraries to collect.

References

Hilsdon, A.M. and Rozario, S. (eds.). (2006, July-August). Islam, Gender and Human Rights. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 29(4), 331-432. retrieved October 3, 2006, from Elsevier Science Direct database.

Levine, C. (2006). *Islam and Muslim World Subject Guide*. Retrieved October 3, 2006, from the North Carolina State University Libraries Web site:
<http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/guides/islam/topics.html>

Comment: Useful resource

Board of Trustees. (1998). Article 6: Instruction and Curriculum. *Policy Manual*. Retrieved October 3, 2006, from the Foothill-De Anza Community College District Web site:
[http://www.fhda.edu/about_us/stories/storyReader\\$232](http://www.fhda.edu/about_us/stories/storyReader$232)
Also available in PDF format at: <http://fhdafiles.fhda.edu/downloads/aboutfhda/6170.pdf>

Appendix: Books and other media reviewed

Research studies:

al-Mughni, Haya. (1993). *Women in Kuwait: The policies of gender*. London: Saqi Books. 175 pp. \$24.50. HQ1734 .M84.

Makhlouf, Carla. (1979). *Changing veils: Women and modernization in North Yemen*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. 100 pp. Out of print \$9.95 used, \$25.00 collectible at Amazon. HQ1730.5 .Z8 S265.

El Saadawi, Nawal. (1980). *The hidden face of Eve: Women in the Arab world*. London: Zed Press. \$17.95. HQ1784 .S18.

Comment: I appreciate the thoroughness of your research

Scholarly works:

Barlas, Asma. (2002). *Believing women in Islam: Unreading patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an*. Austin: University of Texas Press. \$22.95. BP173.4 .B35.

Ernst, Carl W. (2003). *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the contemporary world*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 244 pp. \$16.95. BP161.3 .E76.

Mernissi, Fatima. (1975). *Beyond the veil: Male-female dynamics in a modern Muslim society, 1st edition*. New York: John Wiley & Sons. \$18.75. HQ1170 .M76. (1987). *Beyond the veil, 2nd edition*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. \$13.95. HQ1170 .M46.

Wadud, Amina. (1999). *Qur'an and women: Rereading the sacred text from a woman's perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 105 pp. \$15.95. BP134 .W6 W28.

Collections and anthologies:

Beck, Lois and Keddie, Nikki (eds). (1978). *Women in the Muslim world*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Out of print, \$1.50 to \$42.00 used at Amazon. HQ1170 .W59 1978.

Comment: Impressive assortment of materials and formats

Dudley, William (ed.) (2004). *Islam: Opposing viewpoints series*. New York: Thompson Gale. 185 pp. \$23.70. BP163 .I7327.

Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck and Esposito, John L. (eds). (1998). *Islam, gender and social change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. \$27.50. PB173.4 .I73.

Yamani, Mai (ed). (1996). *Feminism and Islam: Legal and literary perspectives*. New York: New York University Press. \$24.00. HQ1170 .F46.

Biographical stories:

Darabi, Parvin. (1999). *Rage against the veil: The courageous life and death of an Islamic dissident*. New York: Prometheus Books. \$32.00. HQ1735.2 .Z75 D37.

Howard, Jane. (2002). *Inside Iran: Women's lives*. Washington: Mage publishers. \$29.95. HQ1735.2 .H68.

Salbi, Zainab. (2005). *Between two worlds: Escape from tyranny: Growing up in the shadow of Saddam*. London: Penguin Books. \$26.00. HQ1735 .Z75 S3.

Videorecordings:

Panahi, Jafar. (2001). *Dayirah (The circle)*. 91 minutes. No price available. Farsi with English subtitles. PN1997 .D394.

Electronic book:

Rouse, Carol Moxley. (2004). *Engaged surrender: African American women and Islam*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 271 pp. \$50.00. BP173.4 .R68

Newspaper series:

Carroll, Jill. (2006). Hostage: the Jill Carroll Story. *Christian Science Monitor*. August 14-29.
Subscription is bundled with newspaper databases. Paper subscriptions are \$24 for 63 issues.

Kristin,

Per usual, you did a fantastic job on this assignment. It was very informative, and your excellent discussion of the key collection evaluation components was supported by statistical data and thorough research. I enjoyed reading the piece—thanks for sharing. 50 points.

Arglenda