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## FILM REVIEW



### **The Light in Her Eyes**

Julia Meltzer and Laura Nix. New York: Cinema Guild, 2012.

87 minutes. ISBN 0-7815-1415-0.

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*The Light in Her Eyes* is a documentary that focuses on Syrian preacher Houda al-Habash, the founder of one of the first schools for girls to study Qur'an in Damascus, Syria. The film, which targets Western audiences, provides a rare close-up view of how women are engaging with the tradition of Qur'anic memorization and recitation in order to broach questions of feminism, Islam, and the "women's mosque movement," or *da'wa* movement, in the Middle East today. Julia Meltzer and Laura Nix skillfully depict the connection between the practice of Qur'anic memorization and the development of a pious Islamic female subjectivity. "We recite properly so that our understanding of the Qur'an and God will be clearer," explains a teacher, in order to "obey God in all the details of our lives." Through scenes depicting teachers patiently drilling their students, who repeat sections of verses over and over to achieve the right vowel length and appropriate consonant emphasis, *The Light in Her Eyes* underscores the intellectual and physical efforts that correct recitation demands of the subject. The film is at its strongest in showing how piety and prayer are woven into these distinctly modern lives, depicting the gleeful raucousness of teenage girls alongside their devout silence in night prayers and joyful tears at receiving their first hijab. The absence of a voiceover foregrounds these young women's own accounts of religiosity, an ethnographic approach that seems designed to lead viewers

to question their conceptions of feminism and secularism in light of the intertwining of agency and piety that the women in the film articulate.

Education, Al-Habash argues, is a form of worship; she insists her students pursue secular education in tandem with Qur'anic study. Al-Habash sets out to instill a culture of reading in her students because "anyone who reads expands her mind," a practice she connects to the opening verse of the revelation of the Qur'an: *'iqra* (read/recite). Al-Habash's advice to her students is juxtaposed with discussions in which the girls argue that customs limiting women's behavior have been incorrectly granted religious authority and impeded social "progress." One of the most striking testimonies is delivered by an unmarried former farm laborer who expresses pride for the new respect she has gained through education. Viewers may note some tension between al-Habash's call for knowledge and adherence to patriarchal norms in domestic life: Al-Habash seems aware that she may raise eyebrows when she explains that her vision of female Islamic education embraces two principles: that a woman's family comes first and that her husband's word is "sacred." A student who features prominently in the film expresses concern that her education will end when she marries young, according to her family's expectations. Nevertheless, through scenes touching on divorce and women's right to work, the film suggests that al-Habash's project will have significant implications for the ways knowledge, scriptural interpretation, and authority play out on a micro-level in these women's lives.

But while the film's ethnographic approach successfully conveys the complexity of individual piety, it leaves much to be desired on the sociopolitical plane. This movement seems to operate in something of a vacuum. We have little context for al-Habash's work, whether in terms of other Islamic women's movements like the Qubaysiyat or the changing status of women signaled by, for example, Grand Mufti Ahmad Baddredin Hassoun's 2008 announcement of a program to train female muftis. Publicity for this documentary has connected it to the uprising that erupted on March 15, 2011, shortly after filming ended, and the viewer is invited to understand that al-Habash and Syria's "increasingly religious society" are at odds with the "secular" Assad regime. However, this view is problematic, both in lending support to sectarian narratives of the uprising and in failing to address the regime's ambiguous but significant partnership with Sunni institutions and ulema like Hassoun, a

subject outlined by Thomas Pierret in his book, *Baas et Islam en Syrie: la dynastie Assad face aux oulémas* (University Presses of France, 2011).

While this political history might, in fairness, have overwhelmed *The Light in Her Eyes*, there is less justification for the film's heavy-handed representation of Islamic cultural and social norms. The film stumbles into caricature when it interrupts scenes of joyful girls with ominous, misogynistic "conservative Muslim clerics," some of the most notorious voices in the region. Rather, in Syria, satellite broadcasts from Saudi Arabia should be juxtaposed with local, moderate voices, such as those of Jawdat Said, dubbed the Arab Ghandi, and 'Abd al-Akram al-Saqqa, a staunch advocate for women's education. While an extreme image of conservative Islam may be what al-Habash sees herself as working to change, the film's outright acceptance of this narrative leads it to cast her school as a sympathetic underdog for Western audiences while leaving Islam, writ large and male, as stereotyped as ever.

Overall, Meltzer and Nix's admirable documentary work in *The Light in Her Eyes* brings welcome nuance to representations of Muslim women and contemporary Islamic piety movements. But the film will shed little light on the ongoing Syrian uprising, unless it is to depict, as the filmmakers modestly note, a period of stability that is slipping further away. The wealthy classes represented by al-Habash, who has fled to the Gulf with her family, are a world away from the disenfranchised communities who first ignited the uprising. It would therefore be dubious at best to directly connect al-Habash's work and the still nebulous engagements with Islam among Syrian opposition groups today. Despite these reservations, however, it should be said that the most powerful moments of this film are also its closest connection to the spirit of the uprising: the words of profound hope for the future expressed by so many young women whose fates we never learn.