

## CULTURE AND MEDIA

**Consuming Desires: Family Crisis and the State in the Middle East**, by Frances S. Hasso. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011. \$70 cloth; \$24.95 paper; \$24.95 E-book.

*Reviewed by Nadia Sonneveld*

In *Consuming Desires*, Frances Hasso offers an important and timely account of customary marriages in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the context of “family crisis” discourses as produced by state institutions. Highlighting the emergence of new sexual and marital practices, the book demonstrates how these phenomena intersect and contrast with state policies which aim to foster national development, among others by standardization and legislation in the field of personal status domains. While these policies are often defined as serving the well-being of the family and gender equality, one of Hasso’s main arguments throughout the book is that the expansion of state power over family affairs is making women further dependent on undemocratic and authoritarian states that have absorbed systems of (in)equality only if it serves state interests.

In Chapters 1 and 4, the reader is offered a detailed overview of personal status legislation in Egypt and the UAE. Referring repeatedly to studies on Ottoman court records, she contrasts the old system — where legal flexibility gave *qadis* more possibilities to profess a women-friendly attitude — with the modern one — where the legal system became rigid due to codification and new procedures. Nowadays, judges are trained to simply apply written rules, according to Hasso. But where *shari’a* courts were not necessarily an arena of legal flexibility and autonomy, judges in codified legal systems are not simply *bouche de la loi* as the book seems to imply. Hence, it is of great importance to compare both classical Islamic jurisprudence and modern *shari’a*-based legislation against actual rulings and court practices.

While Middle Eastern and North African states produce and reinforce “family

crisis” discourses in which phenomena such as higher rates of singlehood, exogamy, and secret marriages are attributed to economic factors, consumerism, and Westernization, Hasso rightly argues in Chapter 2 that these occurrences are related to and interact with changing indigenous practices and norms concerning sexuality, gender relations, and marriage. Hasso thus defines the customary marriages discussed in the book as relatively recent practices that “violate not only state registration but often witness, maintenance, housing, and other long-standing [social] expectations, such as agreement of the woman’s male guardian . . .” (p. 81). She says that what most distinguishes them from other unregistered marriages is that the former are kept secret, not only from state authorities but also from parents and other family members.

In this light, it is not entirely clear why Hasso discusses in the next section the phenomenon of so-called *misyar* marriages: polygamous relationships in which men are usually exempted from providing housing and sustenance to the second wife. While *misyar* marriages do not violate state registration, at least not in the United Arab Emirates, these registered marriages nevertheless have secrecy *vis-à-vis* the first wife as a key aspect. Moreover, while men often want to keep the second marriage secret from the first wife, women might opt for such a relationship precisely because they want to obtain the public status of a married woman.<sup>1</sup> In that sense, the book would have benefitted from including the narratives of women involved in “secret” marriages. It would have shed more light on the relationship between women’s reasons for concluding such marriages and new expectations and practices concerning gender in Egypt and the UAE.

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1. Cf. Oussama Arabi, “The Itinerary of a Fatwa: Ambulant Marriage (al-Zawaj al-Misyar), or Grass Roots Law-Making in Saudi Arabia of the 1990s,” in Oussama Arabi, ed., *Studies in Modern Islamic Law and Jurisprudence* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2001), pp. 147–167; Nadia Sonneveld, *Khul’ Divorce in Egypt: Public Debates, Judicial Practices and Everyday Life* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2011).

*Consuming Desires* draws much-needed attention to the reality of family life in the modern Middle East. By focusing on the issue of “secret” marriages, it offers a range of novel arguments that will move the reader away from such idealized notions as the stable and harmonious Middle Eastern and North African family. In addition, Hasso’s critical “governmentality” approach is all the more interesting in the present context, where undemocratic and authoritarian regimes in the region are greatly challenged by the public’s ongoing demands for freedom and equality.

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**Cultural Encounters in the Arab World: On Media, the Modern, and the Everyday**, by Tarik Sabry. London: I.B. Tauris, 2010. \$29.

*Reviewed by Sahar Khamis*

In this book Tarik Sabry takes the reader on an ethnographic journey of gazing and exploration through which the multiple meanings of being modern, or “modernness,” are reconstituted and reinvented through — apparently mundane — encounters in everyday life, or “everydayness,” in the Arab world. Before embarking on this journey, he makes it clear to his readers that its aim is “not a search for the certain, pure, absolute or any kind of origin/essence” (p. 2) and that it does not provide “a complete exposé, or even a coherent ‘summary’, of the ‘modern’ condition in the Arab world” (p. 7). Rather, he declares that it is a journey of searching into the process of “encountering” with all its complexities, paradoxes, and even contradictions, which subsequently, or simultaneously, give birth to equally complex, paradoxical, or even contradictory forms of “modernness.”

In discussing how the “disclosedness of *encountering* reveals itself as an *everyday* phenomenon” (p. 11), he problematizes this apparently simple and taken-for-granted process through a nuanced cultural

studies perspective and a rich ethnographic approach that examines its multifaceted manifestations across spatial, temporal, and cultural contexts. This ethnographic examination extends from gazing at the acts of “loveness” shared by couples on Qassr Nile bridge in Egypt, in an attempt to interpret how the “romanticisation of the bridge” (p. 72) and its “detraditionalisation” signify shifts in the socio-cultural landscape in contemporary Egypt, to participating in the experience of “queuing” outside the Italian and French embassies in Morocco, in an effort to understand how the queue, which is “a product of encounter with western modernity” (p. 76) became “a way of being: feeling mobile within a world of social, cultural and economic immobility” (p. 90) for desperate Moroccans.

The author’s ethnographic journey also extends to cover the experiences of young Moroccans from different social and economic strata in receiving and interpreting mediated messages through satellite viewing and television, with the hope of understanding how they can possibly “encounter the West through television? How does this encounter alter their structures of feeling about the world? And how does stratification in *habitus* and socio-economic strata affect young Moroccans self-reflexivity about being modern in the world?” (p. 21) In attempting to answer these questions, the author provides examples of conversations and discussions that have been exchanged among youth in Morocco representing variations not only across gender and socio-economic background, but also, most importantly, across religiosity and secularism, as well as traditionalism and modernity.

In exploring these daily encounters of the reconstructions of “being modern” in the Arab world, through both interpersonal and mediated experiences, the author looks at this phenomenon as an elusive, mobile, and dynamic process that constantly oscillates between the poles of tradition and modernity and authenticity and hybridization, as they reinvent themselves through complex spatial, temporal, and cultural settings.

The most valuable contributions of this journey, despite its exploratory nature that leaves the reader with more questions than

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