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What is This?
Up for Grabs: Writing Women in the Middle East

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The social upheavals which recently took place in a number of North African and Middle Eastern societies have shattered the myth of passive populations subjected to autocratic rule by leaders who draw their legitimacy from the support of Western geopolitical interests in a post-Cold War era focused on the management of global security and preemptive wars. These events should be an opportunity for social scientists, especially those studying women, to pause and think through the theoretical and methodological approaches we use on societies with distinct histories, cultures and sexual mores.

When the Iranian Revolution broke out in 1978, Foucault hailed it as an historic breakthrough ushering in a new era. His controversial stance, quickly abandoned, was dictated as much by his rejection of the Marxist conception of religion as by his reading of the role of religion in Western (especially French) history. He did not address the role of women in the Iranian revolution, nor did he suspect that women might be its victims when it became institutionalized. Foucault’s (well intentioned) “mistake” is a reminder that how we study a society before change erupts is as important as how we study it during or after change has occurred. Women have been at the forefront of the uprising in Libya, yet the Transitional Council has so far failed to give them their due; women (with and without veils) have also been active agents in the Tunisian as well as Egyptian revolutions. Yet, in Tunisia, an avowedly “Islamic” Party eclipsed its


“secular” rival in the latest elections. In Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood is on the rise. In the Gulf states, women have yet to enjoy full suffrage. In many countries in the region, with the exception of Tunisia, family law denies women rights inscribed in their constitution, where one exists.

The question raised by the popular nature of current events in the region, as well as their sweep and endurance is whether they usher in a new era for women. Or, will they be one of those historic but fleeting moments of hope followed by disappointments and more struggles as before. The specificity of these societies in their manifold expressions does not shield them from the power and contradictions of a fast-paced political and economic global system of exchange. Nor does it call for studying them as exceptional cases—an exceptionalism that had long led to their confinement to “area studies.”

The study of women in the region has advanced from an initial focus on “oppression” and cultural victimhood (when academic feminism in Western countries was in its infancy), to one that exults the complexity of women’s lives and their struggles for gender parity. However, the danger


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persists that academic trends may make the intractability of religion (we still do not really know what Islam is, or the depth of its affective meanings for women and men), the resilience of gender inequality, and prospects for change even more difficult to comprehend. One such trend, which shifts emphasis from the gendered structures of socio-economic and political inequality to sex, sexuality, desire, subjectification, subjectivation, and the like, may miss latent or concealed processes that require theoretical vigilance and an empirical alertness. 2 This trend yields insight into the psychology of self and cultural constructions of sexuality, but has also led to a functionalist stance that frequently transforms the reactivation of customary practices and gendered double standards into tools purportedly used by women for “empowerment” and “resistance.” 3

Jane Bristol-Rhys and Frances S. Hasso’s books reflect this theoretical mood, one by omission, the other by commission. They both take up the woman question in two different settings, and address the global as it impinges on the local, yet neither appears to have noted the precariousness of the states they invoke, whose legitimacy lies outside their borders. Both books grapple with social change driven internally (as in the United Arab Emirates) or both internally and externally as in Egypt. Both focus on the relationship between marriage, the family and the state. However, differences between the two authors outweigh the similarities. Bristol-Rhys claims no theory; she writes as an anthropologist who spent over eight years teaching at Abu Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, the capital city of the United Arab Emirates, a federation of seven city-states governed by ruling monarchs (emirs). Under British dominion as the “Trucial States” since the nineteenth century, Abu Dhabi entered the modern world with the discovery of offshore oil in the late 1950s and 1960s. Oil revenues fueled a “development” program that transformed the island into a striking heterotopia of artificial palm-shaped islands, skyscrapers, and sprawling air-conditioned malls. Citizens pay no taxes, enjoy subsidized education and housing, and can draw on a special fund to afford expensive weddings. However, changes in material life have only slightly affected gender relations which continue to be regulated by customary norms. Hence, even though some women work and hold cabinet positions, most lead lives of leisure behind high walls, driven around by chauffeurs, rarely walking to places except at night, dependent on maids for cooking and bringing up their children, and indulging in shopping as a pastime. Yet, even if critical of their sheltered lives, the women interviewed accept the price they must pay for them, and abide by the sexual codes designed by male relatives. Restrictions on young women’s movements compel them to resort to subterfuges facilitated by the cell phone to date men in secret.

This story, just like the one told by Hasso, is known and has made its way in the media. What distinguishes it in Bristol-Rhys’ book is her intent to document the impact of the oil economy on perceptions of self and nation. The influx of foreign labor in the UAE, which outnumbers the local population, exacerbates a complex feeling of loss attendant to an abrupt change in material life. It is compounded by a sense of one’s specialness attributed by the older generation of women to a divine blessing that rescued an impoverished tribal society from a life of hardship. The state’s response has been to package identity (to suit tourism policy) by turning the past into fossilized stereotypical trinkets, recreating life under the tent on command, and streamlining dress. This mixture of nostalgia for a past neglected in history books and the indulgence in an easy life, produce a garbled notion of identity stressing origin as a marker of...

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2 Forays into the sexual lives of people are best represented by Joseph Massad, Desiring Arabs (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 2007).

authenticity, and devising subtle ways of detecting authenticity from transgression.

The core of this search for an ethnically-nation identity in a society that perceives itself in danger of dilution/ extinction is women. Yet, Bristol-Rhys does not explore specific linkages between a state born out of a tribal and colonial formation, women, and geopolitics. Her focus, oil-driven development, is crucial to understand the peculiarities of Emirati life, yet she does not define “development,” but instead takes it as a given, and eschews discussion of the artificiality of the growth of wealth and the trappings of modern comforts without a transformation of socio-cultural values to sustain them. The method she employed in gathering information calls for a clarification of its moral implications: she appears to have taught classes designed for her research (how was this arranged?), used students as informants and conduits to the women she interviewed, and engaged in occasional complicity with young women intent on breaking the prevailing sexual code (that could have resulted in family disciplinary measures). Nevertheless, in spite of the linearity if the narrative, the book provides an inside view of wealthy Emirati women taken as a homogeneous group.

Unlike Bristol-Rhys, Frances S. Hasso in 
Consuming Desires adopts a theoretical perspective which informs the comparison of two very different states, one constituted in 1971 (the UAE), the other (Egypt) stretching back to antiquity. She revisits family law as a site of struggle between women, men, state and religious groups. She examines “the family crisis discourses” developed by various social groups, including women’s organizations, in the context of the global proliferations of sexual images conveyed by various media. Increasingly, young people have recourse to two types of customary marriage, one called “urf,” the other “misyar” similar to shi’i temporary marriage, which is preferred in UAE. Both types of marriage offer an expedient way of having a licit relationship that may be temporary in the case of misyar. She argues that the state takes the lead in managing the “crisis” to shore up its legitimacy by codifying shari’a law to better regulate sexual behavior and protect women from a number of abuses, including those stemming from customary marriage. Furthermore, the state’s juridical role increases its methods of “governmentality,” and through methods such as marriage counseling services, deepens its “biopower,” thus constituting “subjectivities” and channeling “desire.”

Hasso writes cogently about the global cultural and economic dynamics that frame the expansion or revival of these marriage customs. She also provides an updated discussion of the effects of family law changes that have taken place in Egypt, and fills gaps left in Bristol-Rhys’ description of Emirati women by examining the codification of their personal status. However, her uncritical use of Foucault’s concepts which she takes as normative, obscures her assessment of a fast-changing empirical reality, as well as the import of a number of her interviews. One central concept, “governmentality,” ignores the fact that the state’s amendments to the family code in Egypt were the results of pressure by civil society and donors rather than a concern for creating new subjectivities or engaging in some form of “pastoral power.” Suffering from a loss of economic sovereignty, political instability, and cultural challenges stemming from Islamist movements, states engage in a precarious policy balance as they alternately pass legislation to placate the Islamist opposition or make concessions to women’s groups, depending on the conjuncture.

Codification, a tool of rationalization of law, implies a selection of norms from a complex and diverse body of legal practices that is classical shari’a. The bone of contention between women and the state is the state’s selection of norms that restrict women’s bargaining power in marriage and divorce, and the exclusion of others that afford greater flexibility. The much touted Egyptian divorce law (Number One) is grounded in a form of divorce (khul’) inscribed in the shari’a. Women, inevitably perceived as the core of national-cultural identity, push for or against the selective use of shari’a. Entering into a customary form of marriage that has always been available (but scorned) may express a “desire” for sex as the author contends, but more important, it signals conformity to and re-legitimation of a socially conservative trend that includes re-velling.
Furthermore, current upheavals indicate that the state in Egypt has not shown any particularly effective technique of governmentality with prohibitive effects on social strife. In the end, the Egyptian state resorted to brute force to suppress dissent or political opposition prior to and in the aftermath of the recent revolutions. Finally, the generalization made in the book that the customary marriage practices prevalent in Egypt and the UAE also take place in the same manner in North Africa is unwarranted. In Algeria, for example, fatwa marriage, the equivalent "urfi" custom, is not secret; it was a predominant form of marriage during the colonial era, especially in rural areas, and is not preferred among young people. It remains to be seen whether ongoing changes occurring in the Middle East and North Africa will spur new reflection on how to best approach complex societies at the crossroads of a history they wish to remake.

Smart Books about Stupid (and Greedy) People

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The editors and authors of these volumes, like the protestors of Occupy Wall Street, share a willingness to acknowledge that the creators of the crisis that erupted in 2008 are not millions of citizens who used "their homes like ATM machines" (if you want to raise your hackles, Google that phrase and start reading the financial "advice" and political-opinion sites that come up), nor civil servants and elderly pensioners in Greece or in the United States. Instead these authors, with a rigor the protestors have yet to attain (hint NYU Press: bring some copies of these volumes to Zuccotti Park for both the protestors and the police), identify the actors who were really responsible for the developments that led to the massive transfers of wealth in recent years.

These three volumes contain a total of twenty-eight essays plus the valuable introduction by Craig Calhoun. Although written from a variety of theoretical perspectives and focused on different locales, time spans, and levels of analysis, the best essays converge in remarkable ways to offer a coherent explanation of the crisis. Nevertheless, there are shortcomings in even the best of the essays, and others offer (rather than explanations) mainly moralistic prescriptions of what should be done to undo the damage of the crisis and to limit the power of the malefactors who created it. Some essays present good and bad futures as matters of choice and are not helpful in identifying the political forces that might determine what outcomes are more likely to occur.

Calhoun's series introduction provides a wonderfully concise explanation of the crisis itself. (If you want to give students a forty-page overview of the crisis, this is it.) Calhoun, like Immanuel Wallerstein and