

Gendered Space and Middle East Studies

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doi:10.1017/S0020743813001359

Aspects of space and place shape daily life, social structures, politics, and intimate relations among people. In the late 1980s and 1990s, anthropologists, geographers, and sociologists—influenced by the writings of Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre¹ on the meaning of social space—started to highlight the spatial in their analysis of social phenomena.² These scholars focused on the production of urban space and asserted that space is dynamic and often shaped by the needs of its users as well as by those who design it. With the exception of Setha Low's work on Latin America, these writings were mostly centered on the United States.

Influenced by this theoretical framework, scholars conducting research on the cities of the Middle East and North Africa have delved into issues of space and place. These studies have analyzed public and private spaces, and questioned the dichotomy between the two, from the old suqs to the recent gated communities. Analyzing the spatial was not completely new in Middle East studies; earlier Orientalist writings had presented the region as unique in the way that social space was divided and lived. These writings (mostly authored by European male scholars) viewed social space as rigidly divided between men and women.³ Because of male scholars' preoccupation with women's "prohibited spaces," which they could not observe or access, they failed to see the ways in which social spaces were divided by other markers, such as class, the kind of activities taking place in them, or rural, urban, and nomadic differences. The Arab elites' urban gendered spaces became the main framework of analysis of Arab and Islamic societies. Spaces where men and women coexisted—for example, open spaces in rural agricultural areas where women worked alongside men or the mixed spaces of nomadic communities where gender segregation was not practiced—were left unmentioned.⁴

Building on the critique of Orientalist writings, a new strand of scholarly work on issues of gendered space has emerged in the past twenty years, much of it written by women scholars from the region.⁵ These writings join emerging theories of the production of social space with feminist applications of space theory⁶ while responding to the myopic stereotypical representation of Muslim women in earlier Orientalist writings. Through participant observation and engagement with people using private spaces, women scholars have closely described and analyzed the private sphere of women, challenging the trope that Muslim women are the victims of a patriarchal system and instead presenting them as capable agents who have some control of their own space.⁷ These writings have centered on agency in the private sphere and on the lives of women in the public domain. The work of Saba Mahmood on women and mosques in Egypt, Deborah Kapchan on women performers in the marketplace in Morocco, and Lara Deeb on the women of Hizbullah in Lebanon are examples of the recent emphasis on women's engagement and presence in the public sphere.⁸ Although these anthropological studies focus on women who have managed to carve a place for themselves outside the private space of the house, they have centered on the lives and experiences of a specific tier:

underprivileged and/or religious women. There is still a need for research that addresses the experiences of women who are secular, visible, enfranchised, and present in the public sphere.

Space has been drastically rearranged in major Arab cities in the aftermath of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the recent uprisings known as the Arab Spring. Within these social movements, urban space has emerged as a central theme, manifesting issues of gender along the way. In Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, thousands to million of citizens have gathered and camped in public squares to protest collectively and demand regime change. The revived public square as a stage for political action has politicized the associations and meaning of familiar locations and altered the symbolic significance of city landmarks.

Women have been active participants in recent political protests and public assemblies in the streets. In Tunisia and Egypt, young middle-class women were visible in the public sphere during the 2011 uprisings; it is believed that a young college-educated woman initiated the call for public protest in Cairo.⁹ The recent currents of scholarship on gender and space offer a promising starting point for thinking about women's surge into contemporary public national activism, about the reactionary response of violence and repression against them by official security forces and self-appointed gender police, and about the subsequent outcry by women and men against gender repression.

NOTES

¹ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 26 (1986): 22–27; Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991).

²For anthropological and geographical writings that theorize space, see David Harvey, "Between Space and Time: Reflections on the Geographical Imagination," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 80 (1990): 418–34; Setha Low, "Embodied Space(s): Anthropological Theories of Body, Space and Culture," *Space and Culture* 6 (2003): 9–18; idem, "Spatializing Culture: The Social Production and Social Construction of Public Space in Costa Rica," *American Ethnologist* 23 (1996): 861–79; Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); and Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 1989).

³For excellent critiques of Orientalist writings, see Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); and Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myth of the Orient* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1986).

⁴For scholarly works presenting cases where women are in control of their own spaces and/or access both public and private spaces, see Lila Abu-Lughod, "Dialects of Women's Empowerment: The International Circuitry of the *Arab Human Development Report 2005*," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41 (2009): 83–103; idem, "Orientalism and Middle East Feminist Studies," *Feminist Studies* 27 (2001): 101–13; Asma Afsaruddin, *Hermeneutics and Honor: Negotiating Female "Public" Space in Islamic/ate Societies* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Center for Middle East Studies, 1999); Leila Ahmed, "Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem," *Feminist Studies* 8 (1982): 521–24; idem, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992); Rhoda Kanaaneh, *Birthing the Nation: Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2002); Shahnaz Khan, "Muslim Women: Negotiations in the Third Space," *Signs* 23 (1998): 463–94; and Andre Raymond, "Islamic City, Arab City: Orientalist Myths and Recent Views," *British Journal of Middle East Studies* 21 (1994): 3–18.

⁵For example, see Mona Abaza, "Shopping Malls, Consumer Culture and the Reshaping of Public Space in Egypt," *Theory, Culture & Society* 18, no. 5 (2011): 97–122; Farha Ghannam, *Remaking the Modern in a Global Cairo: Space, Relocation, and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2002); Ayse Oncu and Petra Weyland, *Space, Culture and Power: New Identities in Globalizing Cities*

(London: Zed Books, 1997); and Anna J. Secor, "Toward a Feminist Counter-geopolitics: Gender, Space and Islamist Politics in Istanbul," *Space & Polity* 5 (2011): 191–211.

⁶Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Linda McDowell, "Space, Place and Gender Relations: Part II. Identity, Difference, Feminist Geometries and Geographies," *Progress in Human Geography* 17 (1993): 305–18.

⁷Ghazi Falah and Colin Flint, "Geopolitical Spaces: The Dialectic of Public and Private Space in the Palestine-Israel Conflict," *The Arab World Geographer* 7 (2004): 117–34; Farha Ghannam, *Remaking the Modern: Space, Relocation and the Politics of Identity in a Global Cairo* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2002); Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, "Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?," *Third World Quarterly* 25 (2004): 521–36; Suad Joseph, "The Public/Private: The Imagined Boundary in the Imagined Nation/State/Community: The Lebanese Case," *Feminist Review* 57 (1997): 73–92; Julie Peteet, *Landscape of Hope and Despair: Palestinian Refugee Camps* (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Elizabeth Thompson, "Public and Private in Middle Eastern Women's History," *Journal of Women's History* 15 (2003): 52–69.

⁸Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006); Deborah Kapchan, *Gender on the Market: Moroccan Women and the Revoicing of Tradition* (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); Fatima Sadiqi and Moha Ennaji, "The Feminization of Public Space: Women's Activism, the Family Law, and Social Change in Morocco," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 2 (2006): 86–114.

⁹Macelo Lopez De Souza and Barbara Lipietz, "The 'Arab Spring' and the City: Hopes, Contradictions and Spatiality," *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action* 15 (2011): 618–24; Sherine Hafez, "No Longer a Bargain: Women, Masculinity, and the Egyptian Uprising," *American Ethnologist* 39 (2012): 37–42; idem, *An Islam of Her Own: Reconsidering Religion and Secularism in Women's Islamic Movements* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Sherine Hamdy, "Strength and Vulnerability after Egypt's Arab Spring Uprising," *American Ethnologist* 39 (2012): 43–48; Charles Hirschkind, "Beyond Secular and Religious: An Intellectual Genealogy of Tahrir Square," *American Ethnologist* 39 (2012): 49–53; Jessica Winegar, "The Privilege of Revolution: Gender, Class, Space, and Affect in Cairo," *American Ethnologist* 39 (2012): 67–70.