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Arab Regional Women's Studies Workshop



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RECONCEPTUALIZING RESEARCH AND POLICY

INTERNATIONAL GENDER DISCOURSES: PRIVATE COMPARATIVE RESEARCH AGENDAS AND METHODOLOGIES - THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE UNITED STATES

SONDRA HALE

Introduction: The Research Agendas of International Feminist Discourses--Undergirding for Women's/ Gender Studies

The development of women's studies, although closely associated with the "Western" academy and to the so-called "second-wave women's movement" in the United States and comparable movements in Canada and Europe, is based on modernist notions of emancipation and progress toward an end.¹ Although some of the research agendas of Middle Eastern Women's/Gender Studies programs and centers may appear to be, and are thought to be, very different in research agendas and methodologies, I argue that there are striking similarities, as well as and the possibilities for some shared goals. The differences may reflect our choices about the starting points for our enterprises and the differential centering of such concepts as "women," "genders," and "feminism(s)" as critical perspectives and as strategies of representation.

First, it is often argued by education policy-makers and curriculum builders that the concentration in the Middle East should be on "gender studies," and not "women's studies," and that research agendas in the Middle

¹ For the most part, throughout this paper I use various terms for the combination of North America (i.e., the United States and Canada) and Western Europe. There are, of course, differences in their various women's movements and in the development of women's studies as a field. In general, the field of women's studies is very young. For example, in the United States, the National Women's Studies Association was founded in 1977 and held its first conference in 1979. For a useful "early" history see Boxer (1982).

East and elsewhere in the "South" (used in place of "Third World" here), should be practical and tied to policy. One might argue that the emphasis on development projects, rural economics, income-generating projects for women, and family economies in a setting like women's studies at Ahfad University for Women in Omdurman, Sudan, is very different from almost all women's studies programs in the United States. Yet, it is the very modernist component that gives them a similarity: i.e., the stress on developing women's power in a linear way, ideally, from low to high, toward equality (or emancipation, depending on the political ideology). For certain, there are differences: e.g., the Western feminist agenda of subverting the frame, unsettling the concepts, or blurring the borders versus the emphasis of Middle Eastern societies on making space for women within the frame. For our purposes here, I am over-generalizing, totalizing all of North America and Western Europe, on the one hand, and Middle Eastern or even Arab culture, on the other.

We could argue, also, that some of the subjects rarely dealt with by Middle Eastern scholars in the academy may be the bread and butter of Women's Studies/Gender Studies in the U.S., e.g., sexuality, at least as it has been defined by the "West." Perhaps more importantly, Western programs are said to be woman-centered; whereas in some areas of the Middle East, studies are said to be society/community-oriented. This woman-centeredness requires an emphasis on process over product, and although praxis, the link with politics, has faltered, process in the form of liberatory pedagogy (where the student reigns) has not. However, in the Middle East, such a personalized, emotional, subjective, and nonauthoritarian classroom may be seen as antithetical to the kind of respect that a new program seeks. Besides, respect for women's/gender studies is often hard to achieve anywhere.

Women's studies in North American academies are thought by many to have become increasingly abstract and separated from community (although that was not our origin); whereas Middle Eastern gender studies are said to be more derived from community needs, including not only the needs of women, but of men and families as well.

Even when conceptualized abstractly, in U.S. academies, the primary themes are still, prevalently, **oppression, equality, and liberation** (e.g., DuBois et al, 1985). In the Middle East these are often seen as divisive and adversarial themes, and the tendency may be toward

complementarity, reciprocity, restitution, and compensation in one form or another. In such an environment it may be more effective to ask, for each gendered variable, whose interests are being served.

Although women's studies in the U.S. began with contested stories about two related issues--whether or not women everywhere have always been oppressed and the origins (e.g., in class or patriarchy?) and causes (e.g., economic or psychosexual) of that oppression--these discussions are now secondary. Another early contested set of ideas was about strategies--often simplified to reform versus revolution. Below are some of the other familiar debates in the United States.

First is the **sameness/difference** debate. That is, are women the same as men (or should they try to be)? Or, are they/we different? If we follow the argument that women and men are different, then we have tried to analyze why that difference has always cost women.

A second prevalent theme in our programs is that **women have internalized their oppression**, which is said to explain why it is often women who reinforce oppressive traditions through social reproduction, inculcating children with the morals of the community.

A third common theme is that **sex and gender are different concepts**: sex being the biological designation and gender the social. Gender is said to be a social construct. In theory, then, one is born as a biological sex, but collaborates in and is complicit in the construction of one's individual gender designation, as well as in the invention of the societal markers of "man" or "woman." One may or may not have several options for participating in these social forces, or resisting them. Among the options, of course, is to construct a gender different from one's biological sex.

We might argue that the fourth theme is related to the above and is really the **nature/nurture** themes in disguise. This theme opens the door for **deconstruction**, a major methodology of feminist studies in the United States. A critique of U.S. programs and feminist scholarship in general is that, in our zealous embracing of constructivist (nurture) approaches, we may have lost biology entirely and need to refocus and regroup our studies (e.g., Yanagisako and Collier 1987; Moore 1994: 12-13); conversely, in the Middle East one finds more tenacity with regard to nature and biology, i.e., the "natural differences between men and women."

The role of "culture" is, perhaps, less privileged in North American women's studies, or just less visible or manifest than in the Middle East. Part of the explanation for this is too complex to develop here, but it relates, in part, to the construction of cultural difference by the "West" of the "Middle East" and in the Middle East. In my own work, one of the ways that I fuse Middle Eastern and Euro-American material is in my approach to the relationship of gender and culture. I argue that men position women within culture to serve their own purposes. It is not that men and women do not share the same culture, but that men can be more flexible within their respective cultures as long as women are standing guard, the sentries of the hearth, the keepers of the culture. What women do with that cultural power is my primary research agenda. I am asking how women subvert aspects of their assigned tasks, resist being frozen in their roles, and are agents of their own destiny. It is an agenda that is informed more by Middle Eastern than by Euro-American data (Hale 1996).

As for **methodologies**, there are, once again, similarities and differences. Much of women's studies in the U.S. has attempted to wrench itself away from the positivistic, "scientific" studies that have flourished in modernism, where Method reigns, where the subject and researcher are distanced from each other, where data take precedence over ideas and process, where subjectivity and emotion have little role, where empirical observation is a canon, where data become "facts," and facts are presented as "truth," and where Truth is a unitary concept (yet truths are to be tested). My observation is that such empiricism is still very important in the women's studies curriculum of Ahfad University for Women and in many other institutions in the Middle East. Can it be otherwise with their dependence on the funding of particular international agencies?

Western feminist theory is oftentimes said to be tottering between modernism and postmodernism (e.g., Owens 1983; Sayre 1989; Nicholson 1990); the latter is a strange bird that partially emerged from the vacuum left by "the failure of modernism." Poststructural studies attempt not only to decenter the subject, but, in its postcolonial forms, to decenter the West (Williams and Chrisman 1994; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1995). This venture has presented us with a methodological contradiction because one of the credos of postcolonial thought is that "the West is everywhere, within the West and outside; in structure and in minds" (Nandy 1983:xi). An appeal of postmodernist strategies to a Middle Eastern gender studies

program may be the paradigm's refusal of dichotomies, but also its rejection of a progress-oriented, subject-driven Western science.²

The purpose of this essay is to contribute to an assessment of the *raison d'être* and appropriate research themes and methodologies of a women's/gender studies program, at American University in Cairo. Part of my own agenda is to open up a negotiable space for the mutual embracing, synthesizing, syncretizing, and interrogating of feminist themes, whether or not we call them "feminist." (It is just a working term, a critical perspective.)

Some Major Research Questions in the Middle East As These Relate to Gender

In this brief essay I try to set the stage for a Middle Eastern women's research agenda that is woman-centered, but not individualistic, and that is subject-oriented (in the modernist sense), while blurring some of the distinctions, differences, and dichotomies that have been partially constructed from the outside. I propose that we provide a context for looking at women as political actors, not as passive recipients or victims of negative social forces, but actors within the framework of political economy. I frame the questions below with a very skeletal overview of the gendered political economy of the Middle East, and discuss some development issues as they relate to women and key ideas and debates about gender construction in the Middle East. These will not be new to readers, but I posit them for a reassessment of their thematic and methodological utility in the foundation of Middle East gender studies. The methods suggested by the research questions derive from marxist political economy, but are tempered, nuanced, unsettled by research themes from socialist feminism and postmodernism.

At the end, I present some ideas about other methods appropriate to an Arab or Middle Eastern women's studies program or a regional gender studies program, such as feminist oral histories, personal narratives, autobiographies, and the like, and some pedagogical strategies for teaching a woman-centered classroom, but one that is socially located in an arena where

² Some of the ideas in this essay about postmodernism and poststructuralism are informed by Rosenau (1992) and Lovibond (1989).

the idea of "gender" studies may initially be more palatable than "women's" studies to the resisters.

It may be provocative to begin a research agenda section by raising the question of how we gender the Middle East in our gender studies programs when the term "Middle East" itself needs to be problematized. I propose, however, that the very Eurocentrism that created the term and lends it its ambiguity ironically makes negotiation possible and gives fluidity to the field. In fact, it opens the door for gender studies in the Middle East to build into the curriculum critical concepts, resources, and general social processes or forces, and to indicate why the Middle East is important to gender studies. If we point out some of the 20th century disruptions or ruptures, by focusing on land, labor, and capital, it should lead us straight to women and gender arrangements. Yet, gender all too often gets dropped out of these political economic analyses. Middle Eastern Women's Studies is a perfect opportunity to address these flaws in the field of international gender studies.

Somehow those of us who work in the area of international gender studies have had the notion foisted upon us that in order to empower women, in order to be practical, in order to answer to the needs of the community, we are left with the study of women and development as the first priority. Anything else, we are told, is a luxury. Yet, when we engage in these studies and projects, scholars and indigenous governments alike often fall prey to international agencies who dictate the approaches. These projects have usually entailed getting women into the wage-earning workforce; involving them in other "income-generating" projects, especially commodity production; and/or "teaching" them "appropriate technologies." Partially this essay is an implicit challenge to those approaches by asking whose interests are really being served.

Rich and varied sociocultural, political, and economic histories make Sudan data in many ways typical of the Middle East, especially North Africa (i.e., Egypt). These data yield particularly powerful interpretations of political economic themes. Like much of the Middle East and Muslim North Africa, there have been many colonialisms, each one serving well the groups in power and/or international capitalism; many waves of migration and **invasions; numerous sets of missionaries from various religions or sects;** the establishment of theocracies; many periods of intense assimilation of **one group to another; episodes of genocide; constant situations of land alienation and dislocation; forced labor and forced relocation; the**

development of major irrigation or agricultural schemes--ranging from plantation-type relations of production, with slaves or corvee labor, to tenant farming; the imposition of military rule in various forms; and economic visitations, from communities of foreign traders to contemporary multinationals and other non-governmental organizations (NGO's). Women figure in all of these transformations.

If one follows the path of my argument, however, one needs to add an important caveat: women are not passive recipients/victims in these processes. All too often we analyze development as a process without people. The people are an afterthought in the sense that they are at the end of the process, the ones "impacted on." This is especially true when we talk about women. In order to subvert this conventional process, I propose that we start with women.

As if these transformations/ruptures were not enough, in this last part of the 20th Century, Sudanese have begun to feel the effects of a new force, one which is partially a culmination of previous processes, and one which women have both negatively contributed to and have experienced negatively: the deterioration of the environment and, concomitantly, what some have referred to as the "downward spiral" for women (e.g., Baxter 1981). I would suggest that what has been overlooked is that women, as easily as being victims, have also collaborated/caused these processes and have the potential for arresting them. That is because, as the major household managers and as the primary agriculturalists, women are positioned to effect change at crucial points and have been doing just that.

In previous work, drawing on mainly Arab northern Sudanese women as actors, I have attempted to document changes in the productive and reproductive roles of rural and urban women concomitant to economic developments within post-colonial Egypt and Sudan (i.e., 20th century Anglo-Egyptian colonialism). The growth of capital-intensive economic schemes, uneven regional development, radical changes in labor migration, the rise of multinational corporations, the rise and fall of the fortunes of particular ethnic groups and concomitant power realignments have all precipitated political/economic crises. Women have been both actors and recipients of these mostly negative processes (Hale 1996).

Islam, in its various political ("fundamentalist," "Islamist"), orthodox, or mystical (Sufi, Mahdist, etc.) forms is but an occasional intervening variable, for many scholars and politicians, a *deus ex machina*, as it were,

when economic crisis seems to necessitate the attempt to manipulate gender arrangements by the state or competing ruling groups.

Women of all classes have been agents of change, both urban and rural alike. But there is not space here to develop this strand of the argument, nor to differentiate among these classes and economic groups. One does not need to concentrate on the urban and rural poor, mainly peasants and dispossessed peasants. I suggest that a study of women and labor and the gender division of labor may offer a negotiable space to bridge some of the conceptualizations in Euro-American and Middle Eastern gender studies.

Framing And Deconstructing The Subject: The Politics Of Gender In The Middle East

There are particular goals that heralded the pioneering of women's studies in the United States. Among them were to point out the absence of women (in history and in the present); underscore male centeredness and bias; correct or appropriate the vilification and demonization of women; make women visible in the past and present; address the mistakes; fill in the gaps; turn everything on its head; appropriate the taboos and negative representations and imbue them with power; present new, sometimes heroic images of women (i.e., valorize women); give women voice as the narrators of their own lives and curators of their culture; present a continuity with the past while giving women's culture a place in the present; and find the Truth (e.g., a unified subject, woman). Many of these earlier goals are relatively secondary now. Some teachers and activists have worked all along for the broader agenda of creating a social revolution (which included subverting the androcentrism on which universities were built and exposing the gendered production of all knowledge).

However, those of us who teach Middle East gender studies in the States have been extra busy. While honoring many of the above goals, some of us have beleagueredly attempted to deconstruct Western representations of Middle Eastern women. That is, we have had the task of deconstructing the "Other" within the "Other" and subverting the colonial frame. There is a question about how much energy teachers in the Middle East may want to devote to these strategies, or how much they can afford to ignore the colonial frame and move on.

The politics within the Middle East, the position of the Middle East in world politics, and even the dynamics between U.S. and Middle Eastern scholars make Middle East gender studies a very difficult subject matter to teach, and compound obstacles extant to the establishment of women's studies. Moreover, the Middle East is staggeringly diverse in mode of economy, culture, ethnicity, race, language, class, ideology, and religion. The intersection of gender, class, race, ethnicity, culture, and sexuality, for example, is a dynamic that confounds U.S. scholarship. With regard to the Middle East, the additional task is always to examine ways in which indigenous religions, economies, and cultures have interacted with British, French, U.S. (and many other) imperialisms.

This returns us to the colonial frame: Laura Nader presents a methodology for examining the Western colonial frame as it subordinates its own women through a critique of the women of the "Other." Using Gramsci (1971) and Said (1978), she argues:

Critique of the other may be an instrument of control when the comparison asserts a positional superiority. The questions are twofold: 1) how does critique of the other operate as a key to the process by which civilizations and nation-states control their women and the women of other cultures; 2) how are the dynamics of male dogma controlled by notions that women's place vis-a-vis men improves with the development of civilization, or the contrary view--that the higher the civilization, the increased ascendancy of men. These two questions will combine to address the dynamics of male dogma operating in contemporary and interacting world systems: how could images of women in other cultures act as a control to women in one's own society? (Nader 1989: 324)

There are a number of themes that have allowed Westerners to frame both Western and Middle Eastern women, contributing to the subordination of both categories of women. We see these aspects of hegemonic discourse that so reveal "positional superiority" (Gramsci 1971) in many of the prevalent variables and themes of Middle Eastern gender studies, e.g., the epistemological privileging of Islam Hale 1989).

Among the various dichotomies that have allowed Westerners to frame the Middle East within a colonial discourse is the **honor and shame** construct (e.g., Peristiany 1966). Interpretations of gender relations were frequently framed in terms of the passive ideals of chastity, virginity, and femininity for women; whereas for men there were the more active concepts

of valor, machismo, revenge, manliness, and brotherhood. In many ways the dichotomy of honor and shame interfaces with Islam, sexuality, gender, and subordination. Such established and glib frameworks have made it daunting to analyze the machinizations of gender dynamics. People are set into two separate frames; one frame is the referent for the other.

For most regions of the world we have seen the dominance or privileging of particular variables that the West has used to comment on the women of the "Other." This is especially true of modernist approaches, but postmodernist approaches have resulted in muddying the waters, unsettling our assumptions, interrupting many of our notions, and the like. Likewise, the reliance on cultural specificities, passed off as "custom," the "vernacular," and "indigenous culture," results in the same thing: the privileging of particular variables that hinder gender research. In Middle East studies there are at least two. One is practically a cliché, and the other, used in association with the Middle East and Islam, is spurious. I am referring to the **veil** and to **female circumcision**, the latter currently the darling of Western colonial discourse and of Western funding agencies.

There are few, if any, other regions of the world where one element in the culture still symbolizes so much to scholars and observers as does the veil in the Muslim Middle East. It is used as a symbol, and often conflated with "woman," by nationalist apologists and by Middle Eastern and Western feminists alike. It conjures up the exotic, the erotic, the process of seclusion, the *hareem*, marginalization, modesty, honor and shame, social distance, gender segregation, adding up to the assumption of the subordination of women. More recently, it has been used to symbolize resistance and political agency (and I include myself in that category [Hale 1996; Zuhur 1992; MacLeod 1991]). This is striking when one is reminded that, before the great success of the Islamist challenge, a very small percentage of Middle Eastern women wore some form of veiling.

Does the veil have a place in a Middle East women's studies program? Should it be noticeably absent? Marginalized? Transformed? Treated as a weapon of resistance? (Am I only becoming part of the problem by even mentioning the veil in this essay?)

Another set of cultural practices which some researchers use to symbolize the status of women in the Middle East is genital surgeries. In their zeal, Westerners have mistakenly (or perhaps intentionally), associated this custom with Islam, thereby generalizing for the entire Middle East.

This inextricably links Islam with issues of sexuality, the subordination of women, violence against women, abuse of children, and notions of "barbarity." The privileging of female circumcision in the discourse on the Middle East and Africa has resulted in a genital definition of women, a repugnant form of essentializing women.

How can one figure out how to build into the curriculum the idea that this so-called debate says more about the West than about the Middle East or Africa? That is, how does a gender studies project do that without becoming part of the problem?

Women As Political Actors

Among the most important methodological strategies of feminist scholarship, as distinct from androcentric, mainstream scholarship, has been to start from a different place, consider the unseen, and broaden the definition of established concepts. These come together in the study of women and politics, and give us direction in curriculum development. For example, we have slowly begun to examine our subject matter with reference to different levels and types of political activity--not merely or primarily at the level of the cliched "private" domain, with women exerting only informal political power through men. Rather women are involved in the same kinds of political activity as men, not restricted to power gained only through gossip or political songs. Therefore, we have begun with the assumption that women are political actors. Designing courses, from this starting point rubs against the grain of the convention of teaching through institutions assumed to act on women.

Suad Joseph, in one of the breakthrough articles of the 1980s period, analyzed the differing ways that women have been mobilized in the Middle East and showed how this has been interpreted by women themselves, by men, and by the state. She maintained that "Women become a subject of mobilization, targets of political action programs, a mass to be welded into citizens or political followers" (1986: pp. 3-4). We now might ask if the nature of women's political participation differs when it is initiated by the state or state feminism (as in Hatem's work on Egypt, 1987; or Kandiyoti on Turkey, 1991; or Joseph on Iraq), by nationalist movements (Peteet's work on Palestinians), by Communist parties (my Sudan work, 1993, 1996) or by spontaneous revolt (as we see in Tucker's work on Egypt, 1986; or

Hegland's studies of Iran, 1986). Joseph, Tucker, Peteet, and Hegland analyze women in the contest for citizenry, as political actors, and as the nexus of the relationship among gender relations, nationalism, feminism, class, and state.

In our new scholarship, we do not always start from established sites of resistance: e.g., nation, state, party, interest groups. For example, my own work on Sudan (1986, 1987, and 1996), explores the potential for the uses of "traditional" culture to mobilize women against their oppression as women. I explore the *zaar* (commonly referred to as a "spirit-possession cult" or ritual) as a "prefigurative political form." In my analysis the protest ceremony is given political and social meanings, not just ritualistic, symbolic, or psychoanalytical meanings (e.g. Kennedy 1967). I interpret the *zaar* as a potentially political gathering which is an occasion for group therapy and for consciousness-raising, self-help, healing through collective action, and emotional solidarity. "It is experiential, subjective, egalitarian, and affective. The *zaar* is a mode of ending the self-subordination of women by forcing men, if only temporarily, to submit to women's demands" (1987:123-124; also 1986 and 1996). Such a political interpretation of women's everyday networks, rituals, and "traditional" cultural activities enables us, if we must start with institutions, to start with women's institutions. It remains to be seen if the *zaar* will ever be taught in Middle Eastern curricula as insurrectionary.

A third starting point is with the individual woman. Recent academic and fictional literature present the individual woman not only as political actor in the Middle East, but as leader or hero. Some of our most striking examples are Egyptian: e.g., Nelson's work on Doria Shafik (1996) and Badran and others' work on Huda El-Sharaawi (e.g., Badran 1987).

These above approaches to studies of Middle Eastern women as political actors are definitely within a modernist frame, an emancipatory ideal, i.e., the liberation of one woman who is working on behalf of all women, women's rights movements, or women's participation in nationalist or liberation movements or revolutions. Poststructuralism has disrupted these approaches and has nuanced gender relations, making the relationships far more complex and less linear/progressive, less teleological. Below I return to the idea of different starting points.

There have been many active debates about the construction of gender in the Middle East. These have often asked what should be privileged and

where to start. One of the more discussed debates was instigated by Mai Ghousseub's article "Feminism--or the Eternal Masculine--in the Arab World" in *New Left Review* (1987), followed by a response by Hammami and Rieker (1988), and accompanied by her response to them (1988). Hammami and Rieker evaluated the politics of knowledge in Middle Eastern Women's Studies, referring to most of the studies as "essentialist" and "Orientalist." They critique studies such as my own (e.g., Hale 1986) for concentrating on arenas of struggle for women that most replicate Western experience, e.g., women's struggles within leftist movements. In contrast, some theorists start with the subaltern, an arena I just referred to as "prefigurative political forms." Starting with the subaltern is a research strategy that subverts the unilinear woman-as-the-agent-of-her-own-liberation approach.

I argue that what we decide to privilege is related to the relationship of gender to the state and the international relationships of state ideologies of gender arrangements, which are, of course, related to political economy and development issues.

These epistemological questions are part of the ideological frame for the *New Left Review* debate, which offer a great deal of material on how to frame a gender studies program in the sense of the pros and cons of particular perspectives. For example, conceptually, how do we center women without romanticizing or removing them from the gender context? How can a gender studies program in the Middle East intersect patriarchy and material conditions in a way that does not lose women as actors and does not epistemologically privilege only the oppressed?

Of course the adversaries of the above debate tried to frame the discourse in their own terms, and they are all especially concerned with the prevalence of 1980s literature on women and Islam. Ghousseub, for example, proposes that there are two approaches to the study of women and Islam: (1) one addresses the specific role of Islam in Arab society; and (2) the other sees Islam as a religion like any other but one whose importance has been exaggerated in Western perception. She represents herself as the former and Hammami and Rieker as the latter (1988: 109).

Hammami and Rieker argue that Ghousseub is an essentialist of the Middle East, Islam, and women. The debate, therefore, centers on what is or should be privileged. Should it be Islam? Or, should, as Hammami and Rieker argue, "subaltern" groups be centered? And although Hammami and

Rieker critique "epistemological privileging of the oppressed", Ghousseub accuses them of just that, and labels it "Third-Worldism." Hammami and Rieker counter by charging that Ghousseub is privileging the West. Using Derida and a postmodernist approach, the former duo argue for a decentering of the West and using "subalternity" as a starting point, i.e., they privilege subaltern groups.

One of the problems reflected in any urban academic program located in a society with a large peasant population is how to focus on peasants when most of the students are urban. Who is the community and what is the reference point? In the *New Left Review* exchange there is an implied debate within a rural (peasantry)/urban dichotomy, which takes a special form in Middle Eastern studies because of Islam's association with things urban, but where so much of the populous is rural. If the peasantry is the point of reference (as it is for Hammami and Rieker), the implication is that that tends to decenter Islam, or at least not privilege Islam. The debate, then, not only questions which struggles are most significant, but where they take place. These questions have implications for how we construct our knowledge (including our programs and courses).

It is here where we have come full circle in terms of addressing land, labor, and capital, the 20th century disruptions, and the sites of resistance and change. Again, the implications for curriculum are immense. I can imagine innovative programs that revolve around women and space: rural, urban, contained, expansive; laws on ownership and use of land, gender division of labor, and control of capital in that space.

Methodologies Through Time and Space

Sandra Harding (1987) asks, "Is There a Feminist Method?" My response is that it is really only what we invent for ourselves, and that we should never be method-driven. That is, we should not privilege method nor be hegemonic in our application. Although process and theory/structure may be fused, method cannot stand alone, should not determine theory, and should not determine subject matter. Methods should be merely tools to serve us, our research agendas, our epistemological standpoint, and our communities, and they should have embedded within them a deep set of ethics. Methods can emerge, in both Euro-American and Middle Eastern women's/gender studies research agendas, from the everyday lives of women: their work and

activities in the home, community, neighborhood, women's centers, research centers, and in state politics. And they can emerge from our attempts to gender history, society, culture, and the human psyche.

Bearing in mind that one of the goals of this paper is to open up space for negotiating ideas and structures of women's studies in the Middle East and the United States, I have, nonetheless, selected a few methodological strategies for discussion. No one set of methodologies more successfully negotiates relations among feminist studies in the West and in the Middle East than does **oral history**. I am using this term to encompass a range of personal narratives that can convey a history, a story, a life-story, or simply reflect or muse on one's history and society from one's own positionality and social location. It is arguably the most popular and successful method--from interviews to autobiographies--in feminist studies in the United States, bridging and fusing the humanities and social sciences. If the Nour Press Workshop on "Arab Women's Oral Histories" (Cairo, February, 1997), is any indication, these methods link Middle Eastern and Euro-American gender studies, with Middle Eastern approaches poised to dominate and/or empower because of longer and more highly developed story-telling.³

In many ways, strategies for collecting women's personal narratives can be parallel to the processes used in the feminist classroom, i.e., "feminist process" or pedagogy. This method is based on centering the subject/narrator in an interview or a student in a classroom. The facilitator/mediator/teacher/-interviewer negotiates the space to establish an atmosphere to enhance self-empowerment--through finding/giving voice and speaking from their/our own experiences. Putting the researcher and the researched on the same critical plane is akin to decentering or deauthoritarianizing the professor. The agenda is only partially set by the interviewer/professor; the interviewee/student plays a major role in determining the agenda, and the like.

In Western feminist studies in the humanities, and in some areas of the social sciences, the use of empiricism and other positivistic methods is only

³ In contradiction, however, is the claim by some Arab Muslim women that talking about themselves is foreign, perhaps even antithetical, to the culture. Sudan's Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim, for example, has been urged to write her memoirs. She responded to my request by claiming that it was hard for her to talk about herself, that it would have to be the role of others.

supplementary. For example, one might use a modest survey or do a statistical analysis only as a supplement to collecting the oral histories of a group. In turn, the sciences can gain from undermining male hegemony with feminist processes.

What has become increasingly clear in feminist studies in the United States is that the choice is now to use a variety of methods, unified as methodology only by its feminisms. In a useful book on feminist methods in social research, Shulamit Reinharz (1992) deals with feminist interviews, ethnography, survey research, statistical research formats, experimental research, cross-cultural research, oral history, content analysis, case studies, action research, and the use of multiple methods in one research design. These are, however, the more conventional feminist methods. Reinharz and others have underscored additional methods that have been generated as the subject matter demands it. Feminist research is innovative in and of itself: in the groups we may choose to study, in the behaviors we choose to observe, and in honoring new forms of data (e.g., women's subjective social experience). But there are many more innovations that might be considered and modified by a women's/gender studies program in the Middle East: creating group diaries, consciousness-raising exercises, drama and role-playing, dance and movement, genealogy and network tracing, structured conceptualization (collecting ideas and mapping them), photography (including having women take photos of themselves, each other, and their environment), studying unplanned personal experience (e.g., finding out accidentally that you are part of the group you are studying), identification (e.g., of the author with the person she is writing a biography of), using intuition or writing associatively, conversation or dialogue (experimenting with the nonauthorial voice), and the multiple-person stream-of-consciousness narrative.

Although some of the above methods may not be appropriate or useful for particular regions or types of research questions, there are a number of other research methods/strategies that we might consider to be "cross-over" techniques: (1) We may benefit from interrogating all concepts, theories, assumptions, methods, and social locations and representations, etc.; (2) Likewise, we can engage in deconstructing all of the above, with special reference, however, to language; an analysis of colonial language as power (e.g., Foucault 1970, 1977; Spurr 1993); (3) We can seek innovative ways to apply Marxist and nonmarxist materialist analyses, including the

classes(es) of researcher and researched; (4) We might use reappropriation (this could include juxtaposing "unmixable" processes, rescuing taboos, and resuscitating "atavistic" forms); (5) We can try new ways of dealing with history and imagination through the uses of memory and consciousness--collective and individual; (6) We might consider feminist or other interventions into conventional scholarship (these may take the form of some of the above tactics); (7) We can engage in subversion--of texts, theories, methods, our own authority or that of the writers of texts, conventional ideas about what constitutes knowledge, and modernists notions of such concepts as emancipation; and (8) We might research and teach through multiple standpoints simultaneously.

Pedagogies

One might speak of teaching within a women's/gender Studies program with many of the same techniques I discussed above. Bell Hooks (pseud.), African American feminist scholar, refers to her teaching agenda as *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994). Inspired by the great Latin American pedagogist, Paulo Freire, Bell Hooks discusses engaged pedagogy, a revolution of values, theory as liberatory practice, building a teaching community, and ecstasy. The Preamble of the Constitution (see below) of the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) is not very different from the late Freire's ideas about teaching. He says that we should "...begin always anew, to make, to reconstruct, and to not spoil, to refuse to bureaucratize the mind, to understand and to live life as a process--live to become..." (Hooks 1994:frontispiece). Some speak not only of "becoming," but of becoming "whole." It is a legal term in North American jurisprudence, "making a person whole," and some of us Western feminists have appropriated it. The concept is, however, akin to "autonomy," thought by some not to be appropriate in a Middle Eastern context. The "Preamble" of the NWSA Constitution is one version of wholeness:

Women's Studies owes its existence to the movement for the liberation of women...The uniqueness of Women's Studies has been and remains

its refusal to accept sterile divisions between academy and community, between the growth of the mind and the health of the body, between intellect and passion, between the individual and society...Women's Studies...is equipping women not only to enter society as whole and productive human beings, but to transform the world into one that will be free of all oppressions.

When teaching critical art theories, I have used the strategy of "making women whole" to address issues of the fragmentation of the female body, the objectification of the nude, the male gaze, voyeurism, and the "education of desire" (Foucault 1985; Stoler 1995). What are the forms of the "education of desire" in Middle Eastern discourse (see, for example, Said 1978; Mernissi 1975, 1982, 1991, 1993; Sabbah 1984; Alloula 1986; Malti-Douglas 1991). The West has always fixated on the forbidden, the closed door, the secret, and then attributed these to "Oriental" cultures. Are such concepts as "desire" useless in a Middle Eastern gender studies program?

Interrogating/Structuring/Organizing Our Knowledge

Considering the politics of knowledge, the desire to produce our own knowledge, and the politics of our academic institutions, a major question is how to structure our knowledge within the institutions/academies. This is not only a question of how our own programs' courses are organized, at the undergraduate and graduate levels, but how we relate to the rest of the academy and to the community and state. How would an undergraduate gender studies program be structured differently from a graduate program? A teaching program versus a research program? A "grassroots" one versus an elite one? Should women's/gender studies dominate and control all knowledge production in the academy that relates to women and gender?

Women and feminists began to organize knowledge by asking questions in terms of women, and not in terms of a particular, established, conventional framework, i.e. the disciplines. Thus, we began to move beyond the compartmentalisation of knowledge. We reconceptualized the existence of women and began to encode knowledge in a radically new way. However, then we were faced with decisions about our stance toward the rest of the institution, which can usually be seen as an arm of the state or some interest group. There exist ongoing debates about putting energy into developing a discipline versus the transdisciplinary approach. Should we

have autonomy or be integrated? Would we be more effective if we concentrated on subverting and transforming the traditional disciplines? Sometimes, within the institution, the development of a very strong women's studies program, may result in gender subject matter being ignored within the traditional disciplines. The subject of women might be seen as "taken care of" by the program. The pressure is then off the traditional disciplines to incorporate materials on women. Furthermore, ownership by the program of all knowledge production related to women and gender might also lead to problems of ghettoization and isolation.

This brings us to one of the implicit questions above: If we see serving the community/society as a goal, does that mean we are structuring our knowledge to comply with state interests, even if these are said to be in the interests of state feminism?

Another salient issue in the relationship of women's/gender studies to the production of knowledge, within the institution, is related to the attitude of the program toward women versus gender being the starting point, the organizing principle, or the critical perspective. Below I offer a myriad of alternative starting points and potential critical perspectives around which to organize a program, which could forestall the women versus gender conundrum.

With the notion of decentering the West or subverting the colonial frame in mind, Middle East women's/gender studies programs could be organized around the following: e.g., instead of centering women, center gender; make central the collective body instead of body; center family instead of women; community instead of family; land/labor/capital instead of women (assuming these are gendered); start with "unknown" women instead of notable ones; assume the integration of women instead of the alterity (or the reverse); treat women as subjects, not objects; women as colonizer, instead of colonized (i.e., gendering colonialism); or, instead of women, family, community, start with the self.

Particular clusters of ideas may be used to organize knowledge in a program, e.g., family law or personal status laws as these are manifested in literature/fiction; applied to labor and land; relevant to gender arrangements/relations; applied to women.

A program can also start with or be organized around a series of questions, starting with the production of knowledge itself. Whose interests are at stake? The curriculum can interrogate the production of knowledge

itself and research that is perpetuated through particular knowledge traditions, as both Euro-American and Middle Eastern scholars have done (e.g., Mernissi 1975, 1982, 1991, 1993; Sabbah 1984; Harding 1987, 1991; Altorki and El-Solh 1988; and Morsy 1988) and variations on the "situatedness of knowledges" (e.g., Haraway 1988; Harding 1991; Abu-Lughod 1991, 1992; Collins 1991; and others).

What will be the reigning ethic in a Middle Eastern gender/women's studies program? The reigning theory or paradigm? With all of the contradictions about modernism in contemporary Middle Eastern societies, will modernism, by necessity, prevail? By responding to the problematics of a "unified subject," other dilemmas may emerge, i.e., the amoral and static nature of cultural relativism that is both a by-product of and cause of the search for cultural specificities ("pluralism") and a validation of the vernacular. Ironically, cultural relativism is associated with the liberal, enlightenment thought of modernism, whereas pluralism and uses of the vernacular are trademarks of postmodernism.

As for the question of the production of knowledge and its organization into theories, will theory be developed in the same way in a Middle East gender studies enterprise? Should theory be dominant in such a program? In reference to the above interrogation of the amoral ethic of the pluralism of postmodernism, are universalizing theories and totalizing typologies appropriate? A number of these may be rejected, out of hand, as too "Western." However, if Middle Eastern scholars/activists are not imminently going to try to shake off some of the time-worn concepts and metaphors associated with the West, there remain some necessary modifications and transformations. For example, a concept such as "patriarchy" may require redefinition, expansion, contraction, syncretization, or conflation with another concept, etc. Some others are "democracy," "emancipation," "oppression," "equality," "liberty," "difference," "gender," and the like. Even if these are seen as "Western," can they still be appropriated?

In the West, as elsewhere, certain metaphors are used to direct the ways we organize knowledge in space. I would argue that some metaphors are translatable to the Middle East; others may not be. Let's consider the metaphors of "difference" and "gender." Henrietta Moore argues that difference is a relational concept and that "...gender itself does not exist outside its material and symbolic intersections with other forms of

difference" (1994:26-27). This raises the question, of course, about privileging "gender and sexual difference unduly just because we are so uncertain about what else it is, if anything, that we share" (Moore 1994:27).

A final issue that resounds in North American academies is related to what is considered knowledge and how we determine a curriculum. Just as we ask the question about ownership of subject matter within the academy, we might ask if gender studies people in the academy own all gender knowledge and, if not, then how do we infuse community knowledge into our curricula and the reverse?

Conclusion

What directions can women's/gender studies take in the Middle East? What "moments" can be skipped? Writing on gender discourse in Iranian studies, Joanna de Groot characterizes Euro-American gender studies as having had "three moments": (1) recuperative (making women visible), (2) redefinitional (new accounts of the institutions and conditions of women's lives) and (3) transformative (a project "in which the actual frameworks of social, historical, and cultural analysis are being challenged and altered" (1996: 30). Is it feasible to opt for the last one? Even if this is a transformational moment, Middle Easterners may want to pause to reclaim indigenous feminisms and patriarchies before moving on.

This is a story in full swing. Increasingly women all over have been constructing their own pasts and presents: intervening, interrupting, reinterpreting, negotiating, unsettling, rupturing, and subverting all previous forms of knowledge production. What may matter is the form, the agenda, the degree of agency, the presence of mediators and negotiators, the interaction of subject/author (or the deconstruction of the authorial voice), presentation and representation, the subjective context of identity politics, resistance to colonial frameworks, and the material conditions of the lives of women and men within the international capitalist political economy. Can Middle Eastern gender studies activists shake off the colonial frame, turning it back on the West by provoking Westerners to return to the drawing board to see what the veil, for example, says about the West, and then move on?

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