

**HERMENEUTICS AND HONOR:**

*Negotiating Female "Public" Space in Islamic/ate Societies*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **THE HERMENEUTICS OF GENDERED SPACE AND DISCOURSE**

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The study of gender as an academic discipline is a fairly recent development in the humanities and social sciences. Pioneering works that have focused on gender have considerably affected academic discourse on how we interpret the paradigms of social, economic, and ultimately power relations between men and women, in both modern and pre-modern societies. The study of the roles of women and related issues of gender in Islamic/ate societies is an even more recent phenomenon and one that spans several disciplines. Its growing importance and relevance to our times is attested by the current explosion of publications on this theme and the spirited debate that often accompanies this topic.

The Committee for the Study of Women and Gender in the Middle East and Islamic Societies at Harvard University has been particularly fortunate in contributing to this scholarly discourse by providing a forum for distinguished scholars for the dissemination and discussion of their works. This monograph is a collection of some of the papers that were presented under the auspices of this committee between 1993-96 (with the one exception of a specially invited paper) which address the broad topic of women's participation in the public sphere and their efforts to connect what has traditionally been connoted by the term "private"

(construed as the feminine realm) to the "public" (construed as the masculine realm). The predominant academic discourse in the West about these binarily contrasted spheres, especially in the Middle Eastern and Islamic/ate context, has been somewhat skewed, rooted as it has been in Western self-referential understanding of these terms and ahistorical scholarship (Nelson 1974; Rohrlich-Leavitt 1975). Social and feminist historians have recently begun to emphasize that the notions of private and public must be historicized by linking them to the hierarchies of power and social relations in which they are embedded (Rosaldo 1980). They argue that the public/private dichotomy is a meaningless one unless studied in reference to "the specificities of gender, culture, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and historical time" (Helly and Reverby 1992:6). In Middle Eastern history, Peirce (1992, 1993) has shown that the inner sanctum of the imperial harem, in the Ottoman milieu of the 16th century, was in fact the real locus of both male and female political power. Public inaccessibility was an indicator of both male and female high social status and, therefore, "conventional notions of public and private are not congruent with gender" (Peirce 1993:45). Judith Tucker (1985:102-31) in her study of women in 19th century Egypt points out that lower class urban and rural peasant women were involved to a considerable extent in the social and economic institutions basic to their society in that century. In Margot Badran's translation of the memoirs of the Egyptian

feminist Huda al-Sha<sup>ʿ</sup>rawi (d. 1947), we find women of the elite class in the first quarter of the 20th century, while the harem system still prevailed, occupied with philanthropic activities, attending lectures in (segregated) public space, and participating in the male-led nationalist movement (Shaarawi 1987). Mary Ann Fay (1996, 1997) in her recent research into the lives of elite women in 18th century Cairo found them actively engaged in administering their households and property held independently of their husbands. Such studies subvert the private/public binary and popular perceptions of the harem, especially as lodged in the Western consciousness (Tapper 1979; Ahmed 1982; Alloula 1986; Kabbani 1986) and fostered in certain quarters of academe by a peculiar anthropology of the Orient, especially of the Muslim Orient (Carrier 1992; Asad 1986)<sup>1</sup> -- spawned by that dialectal process termed Orientalism by Edward Said (1978). A majority of the papers in this collection challenge the notion of rigidly demarcated and mutually impenetrable territories of male vs. female inhabitancy. Rather, they serve to show that the private and public bipolarity has often been anything but and that, indeed, the two may be plotted along a continuum yielding far more points of contact with the other in varying historical and social circumstances. Such an insight impels us to re-examine the notion of one grand paradigm of gender relations and gender exclusivity in cultures dominated by what are generally perceived to be Islamic/ate

values.

A word or two about the use of the various terms Muslim, Islamic, Islamicate, and Islamist in this introduction seems appropriate here. Muslim and Islamic are used interchangeably for societies that have a large Muslim population and whose value systems are derived from a commonly shared Islamic tradition (whether Sunni or Shi'ite) before the period of European colonization or of the influence of Western political ideologies (whether Western capitalism or Marxism). I am using Islamicate, to resuscitate Marshall Hodgson's term (1974:1:58-59), for the subsequent "modern" period (roughly from the 19th century on) to describe societies which maintain and/or have consciously adopted at least the public symbols of adherence to traditional Islamic beliefs and practices. Such societies or considerable segments within such societies may regard Islam as a civilizational-ideological construct on a par with and complementary to the constructs of Western secular culture and feel themselves free to borrow haphazardly from both systems. They do not, however, found the greater part of their legal system on an Islamic basis nor attribute their state formation to the realization of religious objectives (with very few notable exceptions). Islam in such countries is more a shared "idiom," (Mardin 1989:3-7) and a cluster of "signals," such as collective celebrations and festivals, individual and communal rituals

(Arkoun 1994:62), assumed to be characteristic of Islamic/ate societies. Most countries of the world today with a majority of Muslim inhabitants would be considered examples of modern Islamicate societies. The imperative for maintaining this distinction between "Islamic" and "Islamicate" arises from the fact that there is no counterpart on the "Islamic" side to the epithet "Western" as used to describe societies of modern Europe and North America today. "Western" in reference to these regions evokes *inter alia* their shared Judeo-Christian heritage, whose primacy, however, has become greatly attenuated and superseded by politico-cultural values that are essentially areligious. A parallel use of "Eastern" for countries traditionally regarded as Islamic is, of course, not possible since the term "Eastern" encompasses broadly divergent social, cultural, and religious systems, the Islamic one being only one of them. Although not a term that has gained wide currency, Islamicate, for all the insightful reasons Hodgson enumerated, seemed to be currently the appropriate available term to designate such countries, where allegiance to Islam is cast in emotive and broadly cultural, experiential terms rather than legal and theological.

Islamist is reserved for certain political activist groups within Islamicate societies (for our purposes; such groups can of course exist in societies with minority Muslim populations) whose primary wish is to govern and be governed

only by Islamic principles as they define them. On this account, these groups are described as subscribing to "political Islam" (see, for example, Beinin and Stork 1997). Some of these activists advocate total adherence to the *Shari`a* (religious or "canon" law) as formulated in the pre-modern period and see in Islam a monolithic religio-political construct to countervail competing Western ideologies. As a consequence, they have been labeled "Muslim" or "Islamic fundamentalists" by some (see, for example, Esposito 1977), a nomenclature that is not without its problems (Beinin and Stork 1997; Ghadbian 1997). Such activists may be of the view that the Islamic East and the secular West are irreversibly set on a collision course, evoking the specter of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" (Huntington 1993, 1996).<sup>2</sup> Others maintain that there is a distinction between "Muslim fundamentalists" as described above and "Islamists," the latter term being reserved for political activists who are also engaged in "modernist" interpretations of Islamic scripture and the *Shari`a* (Zubaida 1997; Krämer 1997). "Modernist" in our usage may be understood to refer to a "tendency to emphasize the flexibility of Islam in the public sphere and to use this flexibility to interpret Islam in terms congruent with, or at least in very positive dialogue with, one or more Western ideologies" (Shepard 1987:311). The lines of distinction between "fundamentalist" and "Islamist" remains somewhat blurred; certainly, in present usage, the two terms

are used quite interchangeably without reflection.<sup>3</sup> I should point out that the contributors to this monograph do not necessarily use my terminology or may use similar terminology but in a different sense, with which I have not tampered since these terms are still evolving and being used with considerable imprecision.<sup>4</sup>

The unifying theme of the papers contained in this volume is women's traversal of public space and the process of negotiation of their gendered identities that this entails. Many of the papers detail women's exploration of avenues that enable self-empowerment. Empowerment here for our purpose connotes the carving out of public space by the women for themselves, sometimes paradoxically by not even leaving the home, through the medium of which they are able to derive benefits for themselves and impose their presence on society at large. Identity empowerment theory in feminist scholarship emphasizes "that all women can make some constructive changes to enhance and improve their situations, however restricted those situations" (Hall 1992:2), in particular, by consciously linking the private and public aspects of their lives (Bernard 1981). Too often, the "power" in empowerment has been equated with physical visibility and prowess which automatically privileges the traditionally masculine realm of the outside world as the real locus of meaningful activity (Smith 1990; Harding 1991). In the traditional Islamic milieu, the general occultation of women from public view (more so for



upper- and middle-class rather than for working-class women) has not necessarily nullified effective participation in public venues and the extraction of benefits from public institutions. Rather, a lack of knowledge of the avenues that exist/ed for exacting social redress and an inability to exploit these avenues on the part of women have often led to their disenfranchisement. In her recent study of Yemeni society, Sheila Carapico has observed that women's roles and rights were contingent more on "specific features of status, class, and the politics and economics of development" (1996:96) than on immutable religious and social values. Such observations have been replicated in the study of women's lives in other parts of the Middle East in both the pre-modern and modern periods; as, for example, in Iran (Friedl 1991), in Turkey (Marcus 1992a, 1992b), and in Iraq (Rizk Khouri 1996, 1997). Empowerment theory suggests "that women's behavior and quality of life can be changed by increasing their awareness of the strength of social influences and of the interplay between intended and unintended consequences of women's decisions and actions" (Hall 1992:2). Women everywhere, after all, possess some degree of influence or informal power; how this power is exercised and to what extent is as much a result of a woman's internal development as it is of the external factors that impinge on her life (Leacock 1986; Rosen 1984). For women of means and education in Islamic/ate societies, the exercise of power, formal or informal,

and negotiation of public space have frequently been less of an ordeal than for women who do not enjoy the same advantages. The papers in our collection show time and again that social class, economic status, and educational attainment are variables that profoundly dilute the traditional dichotomy between the public and private spheres.

The public/private discourse in the Islamic setting inevitably raises the issues of veiling and feminine modesty and the consequences they create for the definition of both individual and collective honor. Interestingly, both the phenomena of veiling (and its attendant practice of seclusion) and unveiling in Islamic/ate societies have, by social historians and Muslim modernists, been attributed to alien influence; Byzantine and Persian for the former, modern Western European for the latter. This attribution pits Muslim modernists against Islamist activists in a distinctive "discourse of the veil," in which the former inveighs against the veil's foreign provenance on the basis of the first attribution while the latter upholds its essentially Islamic character on the basis of the second attribution. The Arabic word *hijab* is generally understood to refer to the practice of veiling or to the veil itself (which in itself can assume various forms). In a recent study of the word itself, Stowasser (1997) has shown it to be a complex term that has implied different usages in different stages of its evolution and application. The term taken exclusively to refer

to concealing attire today (divorced from the notion of seclusion) represents the last stage of its semantic development. From the non-Muslim and especially modern Western viewpoint, female coveredness has often impressionistically served as a barometer for gauging female subjugation; a casual exposure to Western print and broadcast media coverage of the Middle East tends to confirm this impression. Veiling as a consequence becomes equated with powerlessness and dependency while its absence is associated with independent feminine agency (Ahmed 1992:142-68). Some Muslim modernists and feminists, especially of the late 19th century and early 20th century, have accepted this equation as well. Muslim reformists like Muhammad °Abduh (d. 1905) who had served as the rector of al-Azhar University in Cairo and Qasim Amin (d. 1908), a prominent Egyptian lawyer, blamed the practice of veiling for having contributed to the "backwardness" of Muslim women and their general disenfranchisement (Ahmed 1992; Badran 1991:204-5). This rough and ready correlation between veiling and powerlessness has been challenged by the attempts of social historians to restore women to the historical mainstream. Recent and not-so-recent scholarly studies make it difficult to reconcile the above equation with the life of, for example, A'isha bint Abi Bakr, the wife of the Prophet, (a commonly evoked symbol of early Muslim feminism), who we may assume was always veiled, but who displayed an aggressive public

persona in 7th century Madina (Abbot 1942a; Spellberg 1994). How, we may ask, would this pat formula apply to women who, especially in the formative and early medieval periods of Islamic history, have gone into battle, imparted religious knowledge to men and women, endowed charitable institutions, offered political advice to rulers and ruled themselves, presided over literary salons, among other activities (for example, Abbott 1942b, 1942c, 1946; Ahmed 1992; Siddiqi 1993:117-23; Berkey 1992:161-81; Mernissi 1993; Walther 1993:103-53; Hambly 1998)? How would we then explain the power of certain dynastic women in 16th century Ottoman Turkey who, despite their residence in the harem, exercised considerable influence in the court politics of their time (Peirce 1993)? What are we to make of 20th century educated Muslim women who charge into public professions, clothed from head to toe (Makhlouf 1979; Macleod 1990; Zuhur 1992; Hessini 1994)? Clearly, the variegated nature of Muslim societies over time and place and the complexities of the lives of Muslim women do not allow for such a meretricious equation.

In modern Islamist circles, the adoption of veiling by women acquires a distinctive semiotic connotation whereby it is equated with moral-cultural-political authenticity and superiority for both the woman and her family, especially her male relatives, in the face of Western encroachment (El Guindi 1981; Rugh 1984, 1986;

Bennigsen 1985; Badran 1994b:203).<sup>5</sup> In the Islamicate milieu of the late 20th century, the conscious adoption of the veil by Islamist women as a marker of their professed ideology is sometimes coupled with greater political activism on their part and ironically, therefore, with greater public visibility. Nilufer Göle, in her recent study of Muslim women activists in Turkey, has recently underscored this seeming paradox when she states, "The new social visibility of Islamist women, who are outspoken, militant, and educated, brings about a shift in the semiotics of veiling, which has long evoked the traditional, subservient domestic roles of Muslim women" (1996:21). As Juan Cole has remarked, veiling by educated women today in the urban centers of the Middle East and other parts of the Islamicate world, may be "the farthest thing from `traditional'" (1994:27).

The writings of recent feminists thus rightly warn of the dangers of engaging in a reductive, gender-based essentialism that portrays gender -- and its concomitants -- as a globally constant phenomenon. McNay (1992:64) has remarked that due to a "... failure to carry through a differentiated analysis of different cultural and historical contexts, areas of women's experience are either not understood in their full complexity, are devalued or remain obscured altogether" (see also Showstack Sassoon 1987:19). Responsible scholarship that offers us a dispassionate, nuanced look at the various ways in which women (regardless of their attire) appropriate

public space and assert their presence through social and political channels, not always formal, available to them in widely varying political and historical contexts, opens up whole new vistas for understanding -- and valorizing -- women's ad hoc attempts at self-empowerment.<sup>6</sup>

Honor, which figures prominently in the title to this collection, is another concept that is laden with culturally specific semantic connotations. To an overwhelming extent, honor in Islamic societies, for both men and women, is rooted in the sexual behavior of women in common with other traditional, especially Mediterranean, societies. Sexual impropriety may imply not only illicit sexual relations but violation of an elaborate code that prescribes circumspect and decorous social relations between the sexes. The term honor is the most common English word used in translation of the corresponding terms *sharaf*, *ʿird*, *ʿizzat*, and *namus* (originally Arabic terms borrowed into other Islamic languages as well) current in various Islamic/ate societies. Anthropologists have attempted to study the multifaceted implications of honor (and, its concomitant, shame) in relation to Mediterranean, including Arab, societies (for example, Peristiany 1966; Schneider 1971; Wikan 1984; Abu-Lughod 1986; Gilmore 1987; Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers 1991; Stewart 1994). The interpretations they offer of this slippery yet powerful notion often overlap with the meanings, pregnant with the immediacy of women's

personal experiences, that become apparent in the essays presented here. Abu-Lughod (1990:47) has commented in her study of Bedouin society in this century that "most people's ordinary public responses are framed in terms of the code of honor and modesty" and that "violations of the code must be understood as ways of resisting the system and challenging the authority of those who represent and benefit from it." These essays, more than any abstract theorization, convey eloquently the diverse inflections of this ubiquitous code in its various cultural contexts and women's attempts to accommodate, challenge, and negotiate with it in their quest for self-empowerment.

The first essay in this collection by Anan Ameri discusses efforts by contemporary Palestinian women to gain more effective political representation under the recently formed Palestinian National Authority headed by Yasir Arafat. She gives us a detailed look at the history of the grassroots movement that grew up among Palestinian women in conjunction with more conventional women's groups in the formative period of the Palestinian resistance movement against the Israeli occupation. In the post-Oslo environment, the conventional women's groups have been subsumed under the more powerful and better organized men's groups, including both Fatah and Hamas who often had their own agendas for the women. Ameri's article highlights in particular the difficulties faced by women who seek to

articulate their needs in the post-colonial phase of state formation in the Third World where "the State is potentially a mechanism either for social change or social control in women's lives" (Alvarez 1990:273; see also Chhachhi 1991; Rai 1996). Although the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) is not a state in the usual sense of the word, it has assumed a similar regulatory function in its capacity to define the public role of women.

State formation in the Third World, however, is markedly different from the Western experience. These differences in the formation of the state and of civil society are evoked in Gunnar Myrdal's (1968; 1970) classic formulation of the "strong" state vs. the "weak" state. In general, strong states tend to be characterized by a healthy infrastructural system that permits state policies to be effectively implemented and allows for the central coordination of civil activities. The weak state is bedeviled by an ineffectual, often corrupt, bureaucracy unable to implement its policies effectively because of a disjunction of interests between the state and the civil polity (Mann 1984; Myrdal 1970). According to this paradigm, most Third World states are to be characterized as weak. Endowed with a weak infrastructural power, as Rai (1996:33) points out, "the implementation of [state-sponsored] directives can become hostage to random factors outside the control of the state" which impedes its ability to effect social and economic transformation. The role of



the global economy is also an important consideration that affects women and development (Moghadam 1996, 1998). Some (for example, Rosa 1987; Saadawi 1980; Marsot 1996) regard global capitalism and modernization as adversely affecting state formation in the Third World, leading to the exacerbation of social crises within weak states, including a further degradation of women's positions in such societies. Many of these factors appear to be all too painfully applicable in the current Palestinian situation. Sara Roy (1994, 1995a, 1995b) has documented the serious social and economic malaise that has afflicted Gazan society in the aftermath of the September, 1993 Oslo accord between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel, a phenomenon she has termed "de-development." Roy (1995b:13) particularly points to the weakening of critical support structures such as schools, the extended family, and political institutions under limited self-rule leading to a "... decline in collective and participatory behavior [as] are seen in the lack of community consensus and withering away of community action."

In her survey, Ameri shows the impact of many of the above factors on the current process of creating a Palestinian civil society and on the women's movement in particular. She documents the changing nature of women's organizations, particularly the General Union of Palestinian Women, which in their formative period were more concerned with rallying political support for the PLO under

Israeli occupation than with explicitly feminist objectives. By 1978, the Women's Work Committees had been formed with leftist support, which represented a broader spectrum of women and had a more consciously feminist agenda. During the Intifada of the late eighties, these women's groups gained heightened local prestige and international visibility because of their active role in combating Israeli repression, which gave them added confidence in themselves (see also Holt 1996). In the post-Oslo context, the situation has changed dramatically; the marginalization of the left, the indifference of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) towards women's issues, and the growth of Islamist movements that looked askance at, particularly, secular feminism, have fractured and demoralized these women's committees. The general trend has been away from grassroots activities and towards institutionalization. As Ameri describes it, the women's movement as a consequence "seems to have boiled down to a few internationally funded, city-based, well-furnished, and well-equipped offices." Women at the grassroots level feel betrayed by the leadership of the Palestinian National Authority and by the women's groups coopted by the PNA who drafted the Women's Charter without consultation with them. As a consequence, these women feel that the Charter does not adequately address their concerns and interests. This has allowed religious fundamentalists to gain ground at the grassroots level by providing basic social

services, which the institutionalized groups cannot or will not do, consequently earning the loyalty of marginalized groups, including certain women. While secular women have regarded this development with dismay (remembering Hamas's efforts in the past to impose veiling on women), even they concede the appeal of Islamist groups who do provide essential services -- in lieu of rhetoric -- to women.

The move towards institutionalization has been perceived by some as being dictated by the interests of the international donor community which seeks to depoliticize women and integrate Palestinian society within the global economy. These foreign donors mandate "gender training," among other things, as part of the agenda of non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), to the mystification of some grassroots activists who view such activities as unrelated to the actual empowerment of women. Caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place, the future of women's grassroots organizations remain at best tenuous since they lack the paraphernalia and financial support of more conventional organizations. The attempts of women to arrogate to themselves the right to articulate their own concerns in a public forum unmediated by establishment (and, therefore, largely masculine) sanction have evoked not sympathy but local and international suspicion.

Shahla Haeri's article on the connection between the physical rape of individual

women in Pakistan and the political rape of a prominent female political personality, Benazir Bhutto, who had also served as that country's prime minister, is both provocative and illuminating. It is disturbing to note that a country which can elect a woman to its highest office, when such a phenomenon is hardly a common occurrence elsewhere in the world, can also witness incidents of rape that are acts of political and/or tribal vendetta. Rape in this instance earmarks the violated woman as a medium for getting back at politically active male relatives -- what Haeri describes as "a modern improvisation on the theme of `feudal honor rape.'" Under Benazir Bhutto, this scenario acquired an additional gruesome twist. Haeri suggests that because the political leader in this case was a woman who was otherwise unassailable, male politicians from rival political camps got "even" with her by terrorizing less powerful female proxies who directly stood in for their more powerful equivalent. A woman raped is a woman totally debased and shamed by her male assailant. When the assaulted woman stands in for a woman more powerful and that powerful woman herself may represent a whole nation, then it is the rape of a whole nation, Haeri avers. This is so, because the honor of *both* men and women hermeneutically inhere in the woman; she is regarded even as the very personification of honor. Her loss of honor leads to the accrual of collective shame that cuts across gender lines. These gruesome events demonstrate that, unlike the

male politician, the female politician considered to have stepped out of line invites reprisals constructed in gendered, sexual terms. In spite of having acquired the trappings of public, therefore, masculine power, she is still perceived as being trapped in her private, therefore, feminine persona; the politically wayward woman is the equivalent of a morally wayward woman, to be punished in a sexually atavistic manner.

Haeri further depicts how women who do choose (rarely) to step forward to point an accusing finger at their rapists are usually ostracized by Pakistani society, by their own families, and tribes. To make matters worse, the Hudood Ordinances of Pakistan which deal with rape and its penalty, places the onus of proof on the raped woman, making her susceptible to charges of fornication/adultery (*zina*) should she categorically fail to establish the guilt of the man.<sup>7</sup> Such a "fallen" woman may then be subject to punitive measures, including honor killing, levied by the men in her family and tribe in order to recover their lost collective honor. As a result, very few women who have been raped choose to speak up and visit its drastic consequences on themselves or their families. In recent times, women's and human rights groups have increasingly begun to speak out against the plight of raped women and have offered moral and emotional support to such women who have sought legal retribution in

limited cases. One may cautiously see in this a glimmer of hope for the foreseeable future.

Julie Peteet's paper offers us another look at Palestinian women, whose identity as political actors is still inextricably bound to their biological functions and sexual roles, creating what she calls a "discourse of somatization." This discourse is concerned with gender and sexuality at one end; class and nationalism on the other. The uneasy alliance between nationalism and feminism, already brought into relief by Ameri, is similarly underscored by Peteet. Nationalism, at best, has an ambivalent relationship to feminism; as an oppositional movement, nationalism tends to be supportive of feminist objectives. Should nationalist movements come to power, more frequently than not, they prove to be the *bete noire* of feminism, adopting an adversarial stance vis-à-vis feminist movements and viewing the latter as subversive of their overall aims. The latter situation, as shown by both Ameri and Peteet, now prevail in the PNA-controlled areas. With men effectively in control of the discourse of somatization, women's identities as citizens and political actors, both in the pre- and post-Oslo phase, have been subsumed by their familial and social roles, emanating from their biological functions and their relationships to men. This is clearly illustrated by the fact that Palestinian citizenship is strictly defined in patrilineal terms; a Palestinian woman cannot transmit Palestinian

nationality to her children in the event of her marriage to a non-Palestinian man.

The situation is further complicated by the Islamist coloring that Palestinian nationalism has acquired. This development has had a strong impact on the lives of women, particularly over the issue of veiling. The semiotics of veiling prevalent in Islamist circles is a development that has occurred in the aftermath of European colonialism and with the construction of modern Western society as the "other" in the Islamist consciousness (Tavakoli-Targhi 1994). The adoption (or non-adoption) of veiling has acquired such political (and moral) valency that the entire ideological confrontation between the Muslim East and the (post-)Christian West, appears, at least impressionistically, to become reduced to this one practice.<sup>8</sup> Foucault has commented on the body serving as the site of "micro-physics of power" (1979:28) through which the larger social struggles over power are refracted. Islamist ideologues have been fully prepared to exploit this strategy.<sup>9</sup> As Peteet points out, Hamas in its Islamization of Palestinian nationalism called upon women to veil themselves for then they would be contributing to the Palestinian resistance in the most morally effective manner. The private comportment of women was thus reformulated as an act of public resistance, symbolizing the seizure of the higher moral ground against the Israelis. Here we find the private merging with the public in a spectacular fashion where veiling forefronts not feminine modesty but defiance

(traditionally prized in men only) of a repressive authority. Women who resisted the efforts of Islamist men to appropriate their bodies as the loci of nationalist resistance could then legitimately be seen as betraying the national cause. Framing nationalism within an Islamist discourse of morality allowed Hamas activists to gain unprecedented leverage over women's private and public conduct and to rescript their own suppression of women's civil rights as a justified part of a program of moral resistance to a greater political repression by an occupying force.<sup>10</sup>

The failure of the nationalists to intervene in this situation on behalf of the women has led to disillusionment with nationalism. Peteet ends by pointing out that in the post-Oslo phase of nation-building, Palestinian women are increasingly appealing to democratic and human rights, rather than specifically feminist rights, to challenge Islamist and nationalist definitions of gender-based, patriarchal notions of women's private conduct and public agency. By reappropriating the discourse of somatization and reformulating it within the framework of secular and democratic values, they are seeking to break down the bifurcation of private and public spheres. The private is public after all, they insist; in a democratic, pluralistic society, the woman in her role as an independent public citizen should gain control of her private life as well -- through state intervention if necessary.

The similarity of women's experiences in Islamic/ate societies seeking to assert



their identities during the process of formation of civil society and modernization becomes apparent in the article by Nayereh Tohidi who treats of many of the same social phenomena described by Peteet and Ameri, for example, but in relation to the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan. Tohidi makes the telling point that no one paradigm, whether it be of "Islamic determinism" current among Western Orientalists or of "economic reductionism" popular among Marxist-Leninist ideologues, captures or adequately explains the diversity of women's experiences and gender issues in post-independence Azeri society. Women's organizations under Soviet sponsorship suffered from the same disjunction described elsewhere between state-imposed policies and the actual needs of women in the real world. Although these state-sponsored organizations were high on rhetoric and short on deliverance, Tohidi points out that a small number of educated, politically active women were able to wrest some benefits for themselves and for the women's movement in general from these organizations. Tohidi's analysis shows that women's ad hoc clubs established by Azeri women themselves, outside of state-sponsored circles, were the most successful in representing women, for they were "consonant with their own demands and aspirations, an extension of the Jadid goals, rather than a set of alien or imported colonial ideas." These ad hoc clubs were often just the local sewing circles and even women's bath houses, proving once

again the fluidity with which the private can become transmuted into the public. The issue of veiling vs. unveiling remained a minor one at this stage, although potentially charged with political implications.

The resurgence of traditional Islamic and nationalist values in pre- and post-Soviet Azerbaijan has complicated the issues of gender relations and women's presence in the public sphere. On the one hand, Tohidi points out, conservative Muslim clerics opposed secular modernization, including the women's movement, while on the other, Azeri Muslim modernists, who launched the Jadid movement in the 19th century, adopted women's issues as part of their reformist and modernizing movement. The Jadidists promoted female education among other measures to improve the position of women. Like-minded intellectuals founded journals like *Ishiq* that advocated women's rights and quoted Qur'anic verses and *hadiths* (statements attributed to the Prophet Muhammad) in support of their position. Here we find a typical hermeneutic tension between religious conservatives and modernists; the former claims to find in Islam a mandate for women's subjugation to men while the latter postulates that Islam has provided a blueprint for women's liberation. Tohidi points out that ambivalence towards women's rights lingers on today because the issue of women's emancipation is further complicated by its association in some quarters with Soviet cultural imperialism.

Post-independence Azerbaijan is today characterized by political fragility and economic uncertainty. As has occurred repeatedly throughout history in different times and places, a nation that is seeking to find its way and is unsure of its identity generally holds women's desires for professional and public fulfilment hostage to its own quest for security.<sup>11</sup> That this mind-set is replicated in today's Azerbaijan is, therefore, not surprising. The stress on family cohesiveness bolsters its sagging morale; the pervasive code of honor (*namus*) maintains social order. Women, as the culture-bearers and moral exemplars of the nation, represent the last defense against internal corrosion of its family and ethno-cultural values and encroachment upon them from without. Tohidi, however, finds in the versatility of Azeri society, with its fluid interpretation of Islamic norms and of national, cultural, and gender issues, the potential for future amelioration in the status of women. Virginia Danielson's article takes us away to the somewhat different realm of music and cultural activity. One important point to emerge from her presentation is that this realm was sort of a gender-neutral zone where the private and the public could interface with almost casual ease. Part of the reason for this appears to be, as Danielson points out, is that this realm, in the early stages of its evolution, was often peopled by the female performer's family, friends, and neighbors, who as extensions of her private world, mediated and facilitated her public role. This transitional "cultural zone," if I may

call it that, facilitated the acceptance of such performance on the part of women and the extension of such activity beyond its original sphere.

Danielson charts the development of commercial entertainment establishments in Egypt in the 19th century under the patronage of the Khedives, reflecting European influence. The commercialization of "the cultural zone" had significant repercussions on public perceptions of the female entertainer. The entertainment industry was now seen as alien, inherently iniquitous, and, therefore, threatening to the moral fabric of society. Women performers were not required to retreat altogether from public entertainment but rather had to prove that in spite of their heightened public presence, they still subscribed to traditional norms of moral behavior and respectability. Danielson indicates the creative ways in which the performers responded to the situation without sacrificing professionalism. One principal and very public manner of indicating conformity with society's expectations was to adopt modest attire. In Islamic/ate societies, modest garb on professional women helps blur the lines of demarcation between the private and public, allowing them to inhabit both spaces simultaneously (for example, Hessini 1994). In lieu of supportive family members who "buffered" the female performer from the intrusiveness of the public zone, modest clothing allows the woman to retain the privateness of her identity in the realm of public performance, investing

her activity with a legitimacy that it would otherwise lack in the collective perception. The photographs that accompany this article graphically convey the artful, imaginative ways in which these professional women engaged with public expectations of honorable behavior and respectable attire while negotiating their inroads into public space.

Leslie Peirce's article transports us back in time to the 16th century courts of Ottoman Turkey to engage us in legal discourse concerning the status of women. In this period, two broad categories of women were identified in Ottoman society, the *muheddere* ("respectable") and by default non-*muheddere* women. As Peirce emphasizes, these were also terms that connoted class affiliation, the former term referring to "elite" women, the latter to "common" women; as primarily socio-economic terms, they were thus also applied to non-Muslim women. In the original Arabic from which the term is borrowed, *muhaddar* refers to what is sedentary and, therefore, civilized, reflecting an early cultural bias that was to develop in the Islamic world in favor of the urban, organized mode of existence over the itinerant life-style of the Bedouin, often regarded as beyond the "reach" of civilization. This world-view, in the urban context, would also come to recognize differences in social status based primarily on lineage and occupation. That such a world-view found eventual codification in law is not surprising; law is, after all, not

merely "abstracted discourse" about social realities but is in itself shaped by those very realities (Hallaq 1997:162). Ottoman court records thus tend to reveal elitist interpretations of the law by the imperial muftis, even in the shari'ca courts, reflecting an amalgam of *curfi* (customary) and normative law. In one instance, Ibn Kemal, the famed jurist, is recorded as saying that he would exempt a *seyyid* (a descendant of the Prophet) from incurring punishment if he were to curse an ordinary person; if the latter, however, were to respond in kind, he would have to suffer the consequences of his deed. This kind of legal reasoning is based on the recognition of a system of "vertical" honor or "positive" honor, as termed by anthropologists, which has been defined by Stewart (1994:59) as "the right to special respect enjoyed by those who are superior, whether by virtue of their abilities, their rank, their services to the community, their sex, their kin relationship, their office, or anything." Curiously, this notion of vertical or positive honor breaks down in sexual matters. Peirce points out how the elite class, and, especially elite women, could incur a higher penalty than the lower classes in matters of sexual indiscretion, for the ensuing social fallout would be greater in a case involving a *muheddere* woman, both for the woman herself and her closest male relatives.

In his study of an Islamic law court in modern-day Morocco, Lawrence Rosen (1989:44) remarked "how cultural assumption, legal approach, and substantive law

are all deeply entwined." His observations led him to conclude that he was dealing with a legal system "whose constant emphasis is not on a series of antecedent concepts but on evaluating the consequences of people's actions," (1989:45) a remark that seems equally apposite in relation to the 16th century Ottoman court. Classical Islamic legal theory evidences a strong concern for promoting the public good or interest (in Arabic *maslaha*) that manifests itself on the ground as showing more of a regard for the spirit of the law rather than its text (Hallaq 1997:89). The punishment should fit the crime as perceived in terms of public utility; the sexual impropriety of a high-born woman is far more disruptive of social harmony than that of a woman from the lower echelons of a society and thus must be punished accordingly. The rationale behind the Ottoman mufti's pronouncements in our specific case is, therefore, best discerned through a cultural analysis of the intricate nexus of class and gender relationships that defined Ottoman society and maintained social equilibrium. The calculus of consequence evoked by the mufti is found to be eminently sensible when viewed against the backdrop of cultural assumptions of honor and the complex, myriad ways in which these assumptions, referenced by class and gender, impacted upon people. As Peirce herself had remarked earlier (1993:8), Ottoman society of the 16th and 17th centuries tended to resolve itself more along the lines of privileged vs. the common, the sacred vs. the

profane rather than public vs. private with all their attendant connotations. When law is understood as largely embedded in culture, even to *be* culture itself, it comes as no surprise that these cultural delineations of social reality find ample legal articulation.

Our final paper is by Margot Badran which discusses "Islamic feminism(s)" and the multiplicity of identities and discourses such a term currently implies. Badran provides an extensive review of what feminism has meant in the 19th and 20th centuries in Islamic/ate countries in their encounter with modernity, with women, primarily from the upper and middle classes, seeking to challenge masculinist constructions of modernity. Whereas masculine attempts to engage with modernity were regularly (but not always) seen as politically legitimate, women's attempts to gender the discourse of modernity were more commonly viewed as subversively linked to an imperialist West that sought to undermine essential Islamic values, especially concerning the family and the private sphere. Egypt, as Badran points out, was in the vanguard of such feminist movements at the turn of the century in which women insisted on claiming agency for themselves in defining their rights and did so *within* the larger Islamic framework (also Tucker 1985; Badran 1989a, 1993). Badran stresses that Islam has provided the subtext for much of the feminist discourse generated in the last and present centuries in the Middle East, much more



than is currently acknowledged; the notable exception would be "state-sponsored" feminism in Kemalist Turkey which consciously strove to divest it of Islamic content. Lack of sufficient historicization and of critical deconstruction of concepts having to do with gender, she says, have led to mislabeling and erroneous depictions of feminist movements in the Islamic/ate context, both by indigenous and Western commentators. Badran heavily underscores the role that women's "revisioning of Islam", as she terms it, through the hermeneutic of *ijtihad*, that is, through critical rereading of Scripture and canon law, has played and continues to play in the shaping of a distinctive Islamic feminism. There is at present a growing body of literature that illustrates how Muslim feminists have sought and continue to seek support for self-empowerment in Islamic prescriptions, deliberately challenging those who maintain that Islam and human rights for women are conceptually at odds with one another. These feminists have tended to affirm that androcentric interpretations of various Qur'anic verses by male exegetes and the propagation of certain spurious *hadiths* with misogynist content have mandated the formation of patriarchal societies and an inferior role for women in such societies (Ahmed 1992; Mernissi 1991a, 1991b). They tend to emphasize interpretive readings of the Qur'an premised upon the notions of equality and justice which they insist it upholds for both men and women; thus, allowing for an understanding of male and female social

roles as complementary and egalitarian rather than hierarchical and unequal (Muslim Women's League n.d.; Sisters in Islam 1991; Badawi 1995; Muslim Women's Georgetown Project 1995; al-Hibri 1997, 1998; Najmabadi 1998:65-72). They point out that the Qur'an uses gender-inclusive language addressing believing men and women equally (Wadud-Muhsin 1992; Ahmed 1992) and it relates accounts of virtuous women as exempla for all humankind (Wadud-Muhsin 1992:29-42; Stowasser 1994:67-81). Muslim feminists and modernists tend to stress that the position of Muslim women was much more egalitarian in the early years of Islam before the final codification of the Shari'a by the 10th century by male legists who sought to circumscribe women's public activities in the interests of maintaining patriarchal social order (Esposito 1982; Ahmed 1992; Afshar 1996; al-Hibri 1997). A new term "womanist Islamic thought" has recently been used to refer to this school of thinking engendered by this type of hermeneutic initiative on the part of Muslim feminists and modernists (al-Hibri 1998:542).

Badran astutely shows us how Muslim women activists, both in the world of Islam and in diaspora, are progressively and successfully gendering Islamist discourse by appealing, therefore, to the scriptural basis for gender egalitarianism.<sup>12</sup> In many ways, the feminist movement in the Middle East has come full circle. Whereas the earliest feminist movement in Egypt formulated its discourse in Islamic

terms, subsequent feminist movements sometimes consciously strove to remain secular in tandem with men's secular nationalist movements with which they were allied. Secular, however, did not necessarily imply the wholesale rejection of religious values but rather the recognition of religious difference while upholding equal political citizenship for all. Thus the feminist movement sought to broaden its platform and its constituency to include non-Muslim women as well, such as the Coptic Christians in Egypt. Such a development paralleled the men's secular nationalist movement which, in quest of similar objectives, sought to divest the public, political realm of overt religious content and relegate religion to the private, domestic sphere. But whereas men could compartmentalize their lives easily into distinctive private and public zones, women could not. Their lives were still heavily circumscribed by patriarchally interpreted religious laws operative in the private sphere that restricted their access to the public sphere. This awareness has created a wide-spread recognition among both secular and Muslim feminists that religious reform must be part of their agendas.

In the late 20th century, Badran continues, the predominant feminist discourse is once again inevitably being constructed within an Islamic paradigm, with women insisting on the right to reinterpret and recast this paradigm. Although such an enterprise is associated primarily with Islamist women, secular feminists are also

engaging with religion in their political activities. A dramatic indicator of this newly coalescing alliance is the new support of secular feminists in Turkey for the right of Islamist women to openly sport head-scarves as crucial signifiers of their Islamist identity. According to Badran, Islamic feminism, in Turkey as in Iran, Egypt, and elsewhere, is steadily blurring "the borders between [secular] feminisms and gender-progressive Islamisms." This has enabled Muslim feminists to win a new legitimacy for themselves, and consequently greater political and ideological credibility for Islamic feminism. A gendered Islamist discourse of this nature is helping to bridge the gap between secular and religious feminists on the one hand and male and female Islamists on the other, creating a "middle space," an "independent site between secular feminism and masculinist Islamism" where these groups can meaningfully come together. Such an undertaking is full of danger, Badran remarks, but also full of enormous opportunity; the new alliance that such groups are capable of forging in this middle space could rewrite history, as she predicts, in the 21st century.

Even in this relatively small collection of essays, we discover the multiplicity of voices that lend tenor and timbre to the discourse about gender and space in Islamic/ate societies. These voices harbingers genuine transformation of gendered social and national identities in such societies. One of the most prominent Muslim

feminist voices (some would argue **the** most prominent voice) of this century belongs to Huda Shaarawi, founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union in the 1920's. In her memoirs (Shaarawi 1987), there is one telling episode that nicely encapsulates the process of challenging and redefining gendered discourses and boundaries and its potential for social transformation. In the early stages of her feminist activity, Huda at one point agonized over what to name the women's organization she had helped found; she, like others, recoiled from the use of the word *nadi* ("club") with its dangerous associations with men's very public activities in a realm physically off-limits to the harem-dweller. In 1925, Huda not only named her association the Club of the Women's Union but by the early 1930s, she had also moved the headquarters of the Egyptian Feminist Union right into the heart of Cairo (Sha arawi 1987:132-33). It was a dramatic gesture of proud self-assurance, signalling the coming of age of the women's movement in Egypt, its arrival at the very center from the margins. The trajectory of this movement demonstrates tellingly that the private cannot be neatly delimited from the public in the dialectics of gender role configuration and transformation. Although their means may differ, women everywhere are increasingly intent on conjoining the two spheres.

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#### 1NOTES

. Asad is particularly critical of the approaches of Western anthropologists like Ernest Gellner and Clifford Geertz who, in their respective works *Muslim Society* (1981) and *Islam Observed* (1968),

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resort to a "certain schematization of Islam" which "as a drama or religiosity expressing power is obtained by omitting indigenous discourses, and by turning all Islamic behavior into *readable gesture*" (emphasis in text; Asad 1986:9). He suggests that we may arrive at a more authentic anthropology of Islam by seeking "to understand the historical conditions that enable the production and maintenance of specific discursive traditions, or their transformation -- and the efforts of practitioners to achieve coherence" (Ibid. 17).

2 For a trenchant critique of this thesis by a modern historian of the Middle East, see Mottahedeh 1995.

3 Ghadbian 1997:7 suggests that "'Islamist' ('Islamiyyun') is what people belonging to Islamic movements call themselves, while 'fundamentalist' is what their opponents derisively call them in a foreign tongue."

4 See Shepard 1987 for an excellent discussion of this problem of nomenclature, particularly p. 327, n. 2, which also provides a useful review of the literature on this issue upto 1987.

5 The flip side of this argument is that Muslim feminism is then attributed to Western and, therefore, imperialist provenance; see, for example, Ahmed 1984; Badran 1991.

6 For a study of ad hoc women's groups, see March and Taqqu 1986. See also Tucker 1983 in which she shows that women's informal political and economic activities have tended to be undervalued by mainstream society, and Rizk Khouri (1996) for her discussion of women's attempts to circumvent and recreate gendered boundaries and spaces.

7 For a detailed look at rape laws in Pakistan, see Quraishi 1997. I am grateful to Prof. Azizah al-Hibri of the University of Richmond School of Law for bringing this reference to my attention.

8 This is a view that is endemic in both Islamist and Western polemical discourse. For a discussion of how this ideological war has been waged centered around Muslim family mores and especially the status of the Muslim woman, see, for example, Mernissi 1984; Boudhiba 1985; Ahmed 1992:144-68; Göle 1996. Yvonne Haddad has referred to the veil as "the Silk Curtain" that demarcates the Muslim East from the West in a talk sponsored by the Committee for the Study of Women and Gender in the Middle East and Islamic Societies, Center for Middle East Studies, Harvard University in March, 1996.

9 A recent New York Times article by Elaine Sciolino (1998) highlights this battle of civilizations as encoded in female attire. According to this article, a Christian female missionary during a visit to Iran resolutely refused to trade in her hat which, to her, symbolized her Christianness and her Western heritage, for an Islamic head-scarf. In turn, the Iranian authorities insisted that she discard her otherwise modest hat for a head-scarf, the only appropriate non-Western and authentically Muslim head-covering acceptable to them.

10 In other parts of the Islamic world, Islamist activism has been associated with mandatory veiling for women and curbing of their public activities, as for example, has occurred in Iran after

the Islamic Revolution of 1978, and more recently, in Algeria and Afghanistan. However, this situation cannot be generalized to all parts of the Islamic world; the relationship between subscription to political Islam and suppression of women's civil rights is not an absolute, linear one. Tessler and Jesse (1996) in their recent study of Islamist activities in Egypt, Kuwait, and Palestine, found that in Kuwait and Egypt in particular, men who supported Islamist movements did not display more conservative attitudes regarding women's status than men who did not support Islamist movements. Thus, they conclude, "there is no inevitability about the connection between attitudes toward political Islam and attitudes toward women, meaning that support for Islamist organizations does not necessarily come from those who hold conservative views about the status of women" (Ibid.:215).

11 For this phenomenon, see Jayawardena, 1988; Hélie-Lucas 1994.

12 A stunning example of recent feminist hermeneutic initiative is offered by Najmabadi 1998:66. The Iranian journal *Zanan* in an article has challenged the conventional interpretation of a specific Qur'anic verse in the chapter on Women (Surat al-Nisa' 4:34), the first part of which is commonly translated as "Men are in charge of (*qawwamun* <sup>ala</sup>) women because God has preferred the one over the other (or some of them over others) and on account of what they spend of their wealth." Instead of understanding the Arabic verb *qawwama* as being derived from the root *qym* which would yield the meaning of guardianship, the authors of the article argue that the verb is instead derived from the root *qwm* which would imply standing up in support of someone, a radically different exegesis that undermines the very basis of a patriarchally constituted family. For other traditional and modernist interpretations of this verse, see Stowasser 1998; al-Hibri 1997. For *Zanan's* activities, see also Mir-Hosseini 1996a, 1996b. For discussions of how modern feminist discourse relies upon scripturalist interpretation to legitimize women's access to higher education, see, for example, Omid 1994; Barazangi 1997.

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