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INTRODUCTION

Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East Through Voice and Experience

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How can one study the relationship between gender and society without marginalizing the experience of women? How is such a study possible, particularly in the context of the Middle Eastern Studies, which has a long tradition of such marginalization embedded in its scholarship? These were the two main questions we asked when putting together this volume. Third-World discourse, particularly in its recent subaltern form, focuses on the colonial and neocolonial hegemony of the West over the translation and interpretation of the Third-World. Feminist discourse similarly emphasizes the patriarchal hegemony over our current explanations of gender relations. How can we liberate ourselves from this dual hegemony? We argue that voice and experience can be utilized as the two conceptual parameters to recapture the agency of the hegemonized. Voice advantages the text of the subject over that of the interpreter; experience assigns primacy to the way the subject and the interpreter actively and consciously give meaning and mediate their social realities.

Yet the current literature also alerts us to the ambiguities embedded within the concepts of voice and experience, especially in delineating their epistemological boundaries. We therefore selected three dimensions that have been most frequently used to convey "Middle Eastern" social realities: tradition, identity, and power. Explorations of the different aspects of tradition, identity, and power, we assumed, would bring us closer to the voices and experiences embedded within. We sought out authors who employed interdisciplinary perspectives in reconstructing the matrix of voices and experiences, both of their subjects and themselves. We are all keenly aware that the scholar always serves in a

mediating role; the processes of selecting, editing, translating, and collating texts are no longer assumed to be transparent. Each author inscribes their own experiences onto those of the subjects.¹ That interchange is further mediated by the paradigms of the author's discipline.

We also thought it important to create a dialogue between scholars who study women in the Middle East and scholars in other disciplines. Creating a dialogue is a necessary step toward more fully integrating the field of Women's Studies. We therefore asked a historian, an anthropologist, and a literary scholar to comment on the essays in the volume. These three scholars are uniquely equipped to examine the essays' implications for the fields in which they are placed. The richly textured articles and the commentaries fully convey the complex gender-society relationship in the Middle East.

Drawing the Theoretical Framework Around Gender, Voice and Experience

We base our definition of gender on the one offered by Joan Scott as "the social organization of sexual difference."¹ She argues that the interpretive mechanism behind social organization is where sexual difference acquires a socially or culturally constructed meaning. While this meaning situates itself in societal processes, it diffuses into power relations. In addition, it guides the identity formation of the subjective male and female. We agree that the construction of gender contains within it significant elements that, when juxtaposed against societal processes, informs us about the nature of tradition, identity formation and power relations inherent in the society. Within feminist theory, however, there is still a debate over the mode in which to approach gender and society. Joan Scott and other poststructuralist theorists tell us to study meaning-laden texts and to then deconstruct them to arrive at the contours of the power relations which inform and define the gender division.² The critics of poststructuralism and feminist standpoint theorists, such as Dorothy Smith, urge us to look beyond the textual surface at the social experience of the real, not textually created, people.³ After a brief review of the main theoretical issues in this debate, to unfold the social construction and reproduction of gender in the Middle East, we concur with Dorothy Smith and Sandra Harding that we need to bring in the standpoint of women by relying on their experience and everyday practice. At the same time, we note the conceptual difficulties in defining the boundaries

of the term "gender" by focusing on tradition, identity, and power as the three main dimensions of experience.

Our theoretical emphasis on voice and experience is based on the feminist standpoint theorists' critiques of the social sciences and the theorists' attempts to "produce less partial, less distorted beliefs through acknowledging their historicity and social construction."⁴ Dorothy Smith comments on the contemporary woman's "bifurcated consciousness between home and work"⁵ to demonstrate the explanatory power of social relations over behavior or institutions. She differs from poststructuralists by going beyond "the textual surface of discourse"⁶ to the actualities of women's lives. In doing so, she advocates the method of experience which "returns us always to the subject active in remembering, in finding out how to speak from the actualities of her life, bringing forward what was into a speaking for which she is the only authority."⁷ We therefore embed our analysis in women's realities.

Dorothy Smith also does not overlook the coercive power contained in the "relations of ruling," specifically in bureaucracies, administration, management, professional organizations, and the media. This organization of power is known as "patriarchy," a term identifying both the personal and the public relations of power. But how to counter this patriarchy? Unlike the poststructuralists, Smith presents an alternative: she proposes to focus on the everyday world as a problematic, "where the everyday world is taken to be the various and different matrices of experience—the place from within which the consciousness of the knower begins."⁸ Such a stand addresses the issue of subjectivity and unifies the perspectives of the researcher and her subject; it also unites the experiences of all women, Western or Third World, without privileging one over the other. Yet the experiences of Western and Third World women assume different shapes because of large-scale social processes. Dorothy Smith's willingness to go back to these structures and institutions (yet this time from the standpoint of women's experience) unites the textual with the real. She quotes⁹ Marx and Engels's description of social relations to justify this move; she notes how Marx and Engels argue in the *German Ideology* that "individuals always proceeded, and always proceed, from themselves. Their relations are the relations of their real life process. How does it happen that their relations assume an independent existence over them? And that the forces of their own life become superior to them?" Smith tells us that only by combining the personal with the societal can we understand how, and more

importantly, *why* this happens. Only then we can free ourselves. By bringing together the everyday level (as feminist theory suggests) and the underlying relations (as Marx and Engels propose), Smith captures the allegedly elusive agency of the oppressed, the hegemonized.

Yet it is hard to capture this experience. The work that first alerts us to the problems embedded in the concept of experience is E. P. Thompson's account of the formation of the British working class.¹⁰ Reacting to deductive and deterministic concepts of class formation, E.P. Thompson argued that the British working class emerged as a product of the complex and contradictory experience of the workers, and that the class could not be understood apart from that experience. At the same time, he encountered the problem of differentiating the actual events from the way people construed them.¹¹ The actual experience and its mediation through the narrative were hard to separate without references to the structures or dimensions (such as tradition, identity, and power) that constrained experience. Both Joan Scott and Kathleen Jones further criticize the concept of experience¹² in terms of gender analysis. Scott argues that the concept "weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference. . . [since it] takes as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalizes their difference."¹³ Rather than giving agency to women, experience can end up reproducing and legitimating the ideological systems that constrain women. Jones adds that "by privileging women's experiences as the unproblematic foundation of authoritative readings of women's lives, we do not automatically challenge the masterfulness of a discourse. Rather, we substitute one sovereign regime of truth for another."¹⁴ Hence, experience does not automatically give agency to women. In addition, experience contains within it the experiences of both the scholar and his/her subject—a mix that is epistemologically hard to separate.

Even so, experience is very powerful as a concept. How then to use the concept of experience without suffering from its limitations? Joan Scott suggests that we bring "historicity" to experience.¹⁵ In this volume, we argue that we need to contextualize experience spatially (in our case, to the Middle East) and epistemologically (to the dimensions of tradition, identity, and power). Why do we give prevalence to these three dimensions over others, however? We argue that these dimensions contain the epistemological tensions in the study of the Third-World. Tradition, identity, and power are either used hegemonically by the West, or critically by the Third-World; both positions stifle the agency of the actors involved. Hence we can only reconstruct gender and society in the

Middle East by problematizing these dimensions and reconceptualizing experience through them.

Tradition

Studies on the Third World often contain Orientalist elements that treat social processes in cultures and societies other than itself as static or, at best, as derivative. Such studies place a particularly strong emphasis on tradition to demonstrate this immutability.¹⁶ Raymond Williams reveals the forces that necessitate tradition: tradition legitimates hegemony and reproduces power. Tradition, as an active, coopting agent, is the most powerful means of societal incorporation.¹⁷ Hence we can conjecture that in order to justify its own hegemony, the Western gaze needed to portray tradition in the Middle East as an immutable force.

How can we detect and eradicate this negative portrayal of tradition embedded in the Western gaze? Gayatri Spivak explains that Western knowledge privileges the Western observer or the Western-trained native at the expense of her subject. She states that "the theoretical problems only relate to the person who knows. The person who *knows* has all of the problems of selfhood. The person who is *known* somehow seems not to have a problematic self."¹⁸ Also, the West "reactively homogenizes the Third-World . . . their literatures . . . thus subalternizing Third-World material."¹⁹ It is this untexturedness of the subject that reifies and legitimates the conceptualization of tradition as an immutable force. Only by conveying the complexities of Third-World women's subjectivities, and by problematizing the depiction of tradition as constricting can we start to reverse Western hegemony. Such an endeavor is not easy, however.

Even the well-meaning attempts of feminists to study Third-World women have reproduced Western hegemony. For example, the production of the "Third-World Woman" as a singular monolithic subject in some Western feminist texts has recreated the colonial discourse based on inequality.²⁰ In addition, Western feminist discourse assumes Third-World women as a coherent, already constituted group. This assumption defines Third-World women as subjects outside of social relations, instead of looking at the way women are constituted through them. Such an approach to Third-World women erases "all marginal and resistant modes of experiences."²¹ By doing so, one runs the risk of reproducing male oppression, rather than eliminating it. Aihwa Ong concurs with Mohanty in her criticism as she points out that "when feminists look

overseas, they frequently establish *their* authority on the backs of non-Western women, determining for them the meanings and goals of their lives. If from the feminist perspective there can be no shared experience with persons who stand for the Other, the claim to a common kinship with non-Western women is at best, tenuous, at worst, nonexistent."²²

What is to be done? How can one escape the double-bind when one finds herself located between the First and Third Worlds, and between her own reality and that of her subject? Ong believes that feminists should keep their vigilance on behalf of their oppressed First and Third World sisters "because of their privileged positions as members of hegemonic powers."²³ Therefore, she advocates that feminists exploit the hegemonic elements embedded in their Western position on behalf of the Third World. Mohanty is more explicit in her recommendations when she suggests context-specific differentiated analysis to overcome this double-bind in studying the Third World.²⁴ It is Gayatri Spivak who goes beyond identity politics of the Third World to advise that "let us at least situate [our practice] at the moment, let us be more vigilant about our own practice and use it as much as we can rather than make the totally counter-productive gesture if repudiating it."²⁵ Indeed, we can only assess how our position within society influences our perspective on gender. Such an assessment of "position" can only become analytically rigorous if we bring in the underlying social relations of material existence, however. These relations reveal the coercive power behind the gender categories, and we can reach them by analyzing women's experiences. Hence, this volume emphasizes experience, both of the researcher and her subject. Once the negative portrayal of tradition is eliminated within this experience (as our authors do in this volume), tradition in Middle Eastern gender relations emerges as a vibrant force that can be both constricting and liberating.

Identity

The dual experience of the researcher and her subject problematizes the dimension of identity. The tension within the concept of identity lies in its homogenization of the identity of the researcher with her subject, and of the subject with that of the community within which she is embedded. Carolyn Steedman notes, for example, how the contemporary assessments of women's self-worth are closely connected to the capacity to produce and retain an identity. She emphasizes that "a modern identity, constructed through the process of identification, is at once a claim for

absolute sameness, a coincidence and matching with the desired object, group, or person (perhaps a historical identity located on the historical past) and, at the same time, in the enclosed circuit of meaning, it is a process of individuation, the modern making of individuality and a unique personality."²⁶ It is this tension between the social definition and the individual meaning of identity that makes its analysis so difficult. In addition, one can question the wisdom of assigning primacy to identity and to the politics that surround it. As Stuart Hall aptly notes "looking at new conceptions of identity requires us also to look at re-definitions of the forms of politics which follow from that: the politics of difference, the politics of self-reflexivity, a politics that is open to contingency but still able to act. The politics of infinite dispersal is the politics of no action at all; and one can get into that from [the] best of all possible motives."²⁷ Identity, like tradition, can thus be used to immobilize and stifle the agency of the oppressed—rather than to liberate them. We consequently need to problematize the concept of identity to reveal its liberating potential.

At the same time, how constructive is it for feminists to assign primacy to their gender identity? Many scholars concur that such boundaries are disadvantageous to the feminist cause in the long run. If one exclusively focuses on gender identity, one would stifle gender rather than liberate it. As with tradition, Mary Louise Adams suggests that in a system of oppression, the focus on identity can deflect political vision as it prevents one from forming an image of the self in relation to others.²⁸ Laura Downs agrees that emphasis on identity implies an "assertion of the inaccessibility of one's experience,"²⁹ and adds that this, at best, is a fragmenting approach. Chandra Mohanty points out that focusing solely on gender identity and "completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities"³⁰ reinforces the binary divisions between men and women. The problem becomes even more complicated in non-Western contexts, where gender identity contains a mosaic of indigenous elements as well as those imposed by Western ideas and institutions. Unlike the West, Third-World gender identity includes strong nationalist and anticolonial elements.³¹ We therefore approach and problematize identity as a general concept, without limiting it to the gender experience.

Methodologically, then, how do we study identity that becomes an even more complex term in the non-Western context?³² It is not sufficient to make excursions into the construction of discourses and social practices of identity, such an approach systematically avoids questions of causation and change. In using this approach, everything becomes a

representation of itself; however, the origins, causes, and consequences of power disappear. As Laura Downs notes, "the fragmentation of both subject and knowledge, and the concomitant collapse of social relations into textual ones, diverts our attention from the operation of power in the social sphere, fixing our gaze upon its metaphorical manifestations in the text."³³ By focusing exclusively on discursive power, we fail to analyze the other component of power, the coercive. As David Scobey argues, we need to once more unite "that which constitutes with that which determines."³⁴ As poststructuralism blurs the distinction between textual and social relations, it leaves no room for change or for other paths to women's subjectivity. In studying the connection between gender and power, we therefore take care to emphasize the Middle Eastern women's presence and vibrancy in literature, metaphors, and wars, as they construct and alter their space within society.

Power

Simone de Beauvoir noted early in the women's movement that the personal was the political; the most intimate, the most private social relations—and ones therefore most hidden from public scrutiny—contained elements that subjugated women.³⁵ One could argue that it was this statement, potentially subjecting all social relations to criticism, that revolutionized the study of gender. The analyses of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu then mapped the undertheorized domain of the private, and, by implication, the feminine. Foucault's emphasis on the "technologies of power" revealed the knowledge and practice intimately associated in the creation of social relations based on domination.³⁶ His definition of power³⁷ captured the significance of relations, processes, supports, and strategies that obfuscate hegemony. Pierre Bourdieu underlined another source of power within which women's participation was much more readily visible. He went beyond the economic and political power to define "symbolic" power located within language, religion, education, art, and ideology. As a mode of analysis, symbolic power underlined relations and advocated a "relational mode of thinking,"³⁸ rather than a publicly defined institutional mode that disadvantaged women.

It is this problematization and redefinition of "social" power by Bourdieu and Foucault that opens a participatory space for the experiences of *all* the oppressed, including women. By redefining power we escape the immutability of tradition and the convolution of identity to arrive at a more "real" experience. Only then can we see patterns

of resistance, vibrancy, activity in the domains of the long imagined immutability of the Middle East and its gender relations.

Situating the Volume among the Multiplicity of Voices in the Field

In developing our approach to the field, we have benefited from the rapidly increasing number of studies on gender in the Middle East. The origins of these studies can be traced to the 1970s and to the women's movement, which drew attention to the marginalization of women within most academic fields. The field of Middle Eastern studies was no exception. Until recently, many scholars considered a discussion of sexuality and morality within the context of Islam adequate to describe *and* explain women's lives in the Middle East. Time was frozen in such discussions; changes in women's circumstances over generations, through the decades, even over centuries, were often overlooked. According to these accounts, the situation of women in the Middle East remained immutable, even as their societies were beginning to be transformed. With the rise of the women's movement, scholars became increasingly aware of the importance of studying Middle Eastern women. In their attempts to present a more integrated view of Middle Eastern society, some scholars began to seek out the voices of the women and to acknowledge their role in constructing their own experiences. How did this transformation occur?

In 1977, Elizabeth Fernea and Basima Qattan Bezirgan published *Middle Eastern Women Speak*, a volume on women in the Middle East.³⁹ Fernea and Bezirgan underlined the absence of substantive studies on Middle Eastern women, pointing out that neither the ethnographers nor the Orientalists had offered adequate approaches. The problem of textuality was central to the study of Middle Eastern women, for one of the main claims for writing women out of major studies of the region's society and history was the paucity of textual sources. At this stage, then, the main task was to lay this myth to rest. In order to do so, Fernea and Bezirgan turned to Middle Eastern women. They presented the volume as a forum in which "Middle Eastern women speak for themselves . . . [through] autobiographical and biographical statements by and about Middle Eastern women."⁴⁰ In 1985, Elizabeth Fernea edited another collection which featured Middle Eastern women speaking for themselves. *Women and Family in the Middle East: New Voices of Change*⁴¹ was a "progress report" about the status of women. Fernea

emphasized the multiplicity of the voices she heard—the voices of “anxiety, optimism, fear, hope, bitterness” as women continued to “ask questions and conscientiously struggle to improve not only their situation but that of their societies as a whole.”⁴² Another pioneering study on Middle Eastern women was a collection of essays edited by Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie, *Women in the Muslim World*⁴³ which addressed another major issue. The study of women in the Third World, wrote Keddie and Beck, was “sparked largely, in the West at least, by movements here for the liberation of women.”⁴⁴ The volume examined women’s issues in a variety of contexts using a range of methodologies. Together, these early exploratory works legitimized the field of gender studies in the Middle East.

In 1990, Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke edited an anthology entitled *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*.⁴⁵ This seminal work shows that Middle Eastern women have been debating issues of gender equality and the role of women in society for at least a century. In this regard, the volume helps to set aside the misconception that feminist thinking is a recent development in the Middle East. In their introduction, Badran and Cooke noted, “our everyday experience in the Arab world, our contacts and debates with Arab women, and with men, as well as our studies have informed our feminist thinking in ways that transcend purely academic interests. . . . These were voices that had shaped our own thinking and had often given us pause in debates on feminist theory going on in the West.”⁴⁶ Like Beck and Keddie a decade earlier, Badran and Cooke openly acknowledged the influence of the feminist movement in the West on their study. Like Fernea and Bezirgan, they wanted their book to be a medium for the Middle Eastern women’s voices. However, Badran and Cooke’s efforts also reflected the influence of post-modernist criticism on women’s studies. They openly acknowledged their own role in framing those voices. Furthermore, Badran and Cooke recognized the influence of their subjects on their thinking; that interaction had helped shape their scholarship.

The attempts to incorporate the voices of Middle Eastern women in the academic milieu have led to an interest in the genre of autobiography. Some of these women have chosen to write their autobiographies as a means of setting the record straight, of leaving behind traces of their personal history, and of empowering themselves through words. Sattareh Farman-Farmania, the founder of the Tehran School of Social Work and the daughter of a prince of the Qajar dynasty, wrote in the introduction

to her autobiography: “From the day I was born I have always loved action more than words. But now only words are left.”⁴⁷ One of the most famous autobiographies by an Iranian woman, *Khatirai-i Taj os-Saltanah*, the memoirs of a daughter of Nasir al-Din Shah, has received the attention of scholars who are interested in its unique perspective of life inside the Qajar aristocracy.⁴⁸ Taj os-Saltanah’s is a female voice, a voice from the *andarun*.⁴⁹ When her teacher encouraged her to read the history of other peoples rather than reflect on her own, Taj os-Saltanah replied, “Is it not the best preoccupation in the world to review one’s personal history?”⁵⁰

Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist also offers a rare glimpse into nineteenth century harem life.⁵¹ Like Taj os-Saltanah, Huda Shaarawi received her education in the harem; in her youth, books became her connection to the world beyond. Living in a time of nationalist upheaval, Shaarawi became involved in political life, and worked for national and women’s causes. Returning from an international feminist meeting in Rome in 1923, she disembarked from her train in the Cairo station and became the first Egyptian woman to unveil publicly. Margot Badran’s English translation of Shaarawi’s memoirs has become a basic text for the study of Middle Eastern women’s history.

Autobiographies of Middle Eastern women are clearly an important source for studying the social fabric of the area. Still, for some women, a reticence to expose one’s personal life for public consumption remains. For others, the powerful symbolism of breaking the silence, of blurring the lines between public and private, and of writing oneself into history serve as strong motivations for writing their autobiographies.⁵² In the first novel published by an Iranian woman, *Savushun*,⁵³ the novelist Simin Daneshvar explored the cultural representation of women; through the character of Miss Fotuhi, she examined the process of self-representation through writing one’s own story. Farzaneh Milani explains:

Wanting voice and visibility, she unveils herself publicly before the compulsory unveiling act of 1936 and writes her life story. This desire to give voice to her body and give body to her voice ultimately leads to her madness. Her nakedness, in both a literal and a literary sense—her appropriation of her body and her pen—becomes her crime. She is thrown into a mental asylum where both her body and her pen are kept under seal, censored and suppressed. Self-representation turns into self-destruction, gestation into decay, song into silence.⁵⁴

Middle Eastern women have turned to writing as a means to participate in society when attempts have been made to mute their public voice. Literary scholars have translated and studied some of these writings and made them available to Western audiences. The short stories of as-Saqaf, ash-Shamlan, and at-Tuwayjiri appear in an anthology of Saudi Arabian short stories, *Assassination of Light*.⁵⁵ These stories are a potent means of self-expression from women living in a highly segregated society; they offer scholars of the Middle East a unique opportunity to incorporate a particular perspective on Saudi life. The stories of Alifa Rifaat, an Egyptian writer who expresses her strength and identity within the paradigms of her Arab culture and Islamic faith, offer another perspective on Middle Eastern society.⁵⁶ Minoo Southgate's collection of Persian short stories includes the works of two important writers, Simin Daneshvar and Mahshid Amirshahi, women whose activism spans decades. Both women write of seemingly ordinary day-to-day events that turn out to be anything but simple. Forugh Farrokhzad's poetry has been widely translated, and studies of her work have been important in showing the complexities of women's issues in prerevolutionary Iran.⁵⁷ Some authors, like Nahid Rachlin and Shusha Guppy, have chosen to write their novels in English; their fiction emerges from the experience of exile. The exile needs to remember her past and examine her present foreignness. The pen becomes her cure.⁵⁸

At times of war too, Middle Eastern women have taken pen in hand. The frontiers of suffering can change when we incorporate the female voice into our studies of war. Sometimes, women are the voice of the Mother, bold and defiant in the face of the enemy, offering up their sons for the greater cause. Other times, they are the voice of Reason; they poke a determined finger at the inflated chest of war and ask why killing has become so easy. When all seems shattered (as during the Lebanese Civil War), women offer their poems of hope, comfort, and endurance.⁵⁹

While literary scholars have made great strides in the study of Middle Eastern women, the field of history has been less able or willing to bring gender in. For too long, the paucity of sources was used as an excuse. Ground-breaking research, however, has begun to set the record straight. Indeed, the archives have proven to be replete with texts for the study of women. Financial records, divorce papers, inheritance registers, birth certificates, and marriage documents have been used to reconstruct the role of women in history. Some scholars have begun to incorporate the place of women and gender relations into the social history of the Middle East. Abraham Marcus's work on eighteenth century Aleppo is a notable

example.⁶⁰ Some scholars have turned to Islamic texts as a source for examining women's lives. John Esposito has examined the gendered implications of Islamic law. Recent works by Leila Ahmed and Fedwa Malti-Douglas have drawn from Arabo-Islamic texts to show the divergence in the discourses on women in the Islamic Middle East.⁶¹ While enhancing our knowledge of women's history, such studies show the diversity in the Islamic experience. Works by Deniz Kandiyoti and Kumari Jayawardena have shown that the rise of nationalism and the state are intrinsically connected to issues of gender.⁶² Indeed, Billie Melman reveals that the colonial enterprise looks quite different when examined through the female gaze.⁶³ Her study of English women travelers to the Middle East in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries suggests that European women's writings on the Middle East often included self-examination and avoided the cultural smugness which marked the writings of mainstream male European Orientalists. Together, these historians have shown that "bringing gender in" is not only possible but essential. A growing interest in the history of women has encouraged some scholars to dig more deeply into the archives, to reexamine our definition of what constitutes a historical text and to redefine the boundaries of history.

Among the academic disciplines, anthropology has perhaps most fully addressed the concept of voice and the experience of women. The ethnographer lives among her subjects, intermingles with them without the barriers of text; she records and interprets the voices she has heard, the experiences she has witnessed. Some anthropologists have begun to look more closely at their mediatory role and at their own positions in the midst of the examined societies. As Lila Abu-Lughod wrote of her study of the Awwad Ali, "Being a female made it difficult for me to assume a non-situated perspective on the society, or rather to mistake a situated perspective for an 'objective' one." This self-awareness had an impact beyond the field of anthropology, however. For as Abu-Lughod contended, "since every member of a society experiences life from a particular vantage point, it could be argued that a picture of society that claims generality is a fiction. While my presentation of Bedouin society is partial, no presentation could be complete."⁶⁴

Anthropologists have also helped to bring to the fore the question of the interrelationship of the known and the knower. For over twenty years, Erika Friedl has been visiting an Iranian village she calls Deh Koh. In her latest study of the village, she wrote a series of stories, "stories of village women, not about them."⁶⁵ In her book, Friedl talked

of her five years living in Deh Koh, "I have not become a Deh Koh woman . . . but at least I have ceased to be conspicuous there." Friedl also reflects upon the impact which Deh Koh may have made on her own approach to ethnography. The essays in this volume show that often there is an important interaction taking place between the researcher and the subject, between the knower and the known.

Organization of the Volume

This volume focuses on the ways in which gender is being reconstructed in the Middle Eastern context. We have used a tripartite organizational structure that moves from a reconsideration of tradition to identity formation and culminates in the renegotiation of power relations. We have examined gender issues, in order to reveal how Middle Eastern women attain voice and reconstruct their experiences. All the authors creatively employ multiple narratives to reach those experiences. Each section of the volume highlights one dimension of the contemporary experience and voice of Middle Eastern women is reconstructed. We refer to this process as "reconstruction," to give back to the women the agency for giving meaning to their environments. The Middle Eastern women themselves reinterpret their experiences within the parameters of their societies. Some of our essayists have long specialized on the study of women in the Middle East. Others are focusing on issues of gender for the first time. All of the essays demonstrate the importance of incorporating gender into our study of the Middle East. The collection is designed to create dialogue, within disciplines and across areas of study. To that end, we have asked three scholars to comment on the implications of the essays. Each commentator traces patterns among the works and discusses them from the perspectives of their own field.

Part One problematizes the relationship between tradition and gender. Women in the Middle East have often been portrayed as mute followers of tradition. Despite frequent criticism of such portrayals, alternate representations have not gone beyond descriptions—previous scholars have not studied the reasons and patterns of women's use of tradition. They also have not taken into account women's agency in the creation of tradition. The three authors of Part One examine the lives of women in Iran, Morocco, and Turkey. They show that aspects of "tradition" can be employed by women as a means of empowerment. In some cases, traditional mores can be reconstructed and reinterpreted to give voice to women. In this sense, the authors reexamine the assumption that tradi-

tion-bound societies leave little room for female participation in society.

Part Two centers on Middle Eastern women's reconstruction of "identity" in Iran, Turkey, Israel, and Palestine. Once more, the authors critique stereotypes of Middle Eastern women and propose new methods to challenge preconceptions. The authors debunk notions of the quiet, passive Middle Eastern woman. They examine the complex variables that contribute to the engendering of identities in various Middle Eastern contexts. In addition, the intersubjectivity of identity formation is discussed. Some of the authors reflect on their own perspectives, the gaze with which they view the societies they examine.

Part Three problematizes the relationship between gender and power in Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, and Morocco. The authors in this section look at the diffusion of this socially constructed, complex relationship. They pay close attention to the ways women and men contest the boundaries of their transformative capacities. Power lies at the core of gender inequality; in Middle Eastern society (as in any society), power is contested between family members, within members of a community, and between nations. Prisms of power reflect and deflect gender issues within society. In the Middle East, the boundaries of power are perpetually negotiated. This section examines the gendered implications of these pervasive renegotiation of power.

Together, the essays show that in all of the fields that comprise Middle Eastern Studies, whether history, anthropology, political science, literary studies, or linguistics, the examination of women and gender roles is feasible and significant. Our essayists use a variety of approaches, but all of them have found ways to integrate the voices and experiences of Middle Eastern women into their studies. They have done so with a keen awareness of their own place in framing and presenting those voices and experiences. Together, the essays reconsider the image of the passive Middle Eastern woman, bound to a static and powerless existence; at the same time, the authors suggest venues for future studies that better reflect the diversity of the human experience in the Middle East.

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thus forming a chain or a system, or, on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design and institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of law, and in the various social hegemonies." (92)

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RECONSTRUCTING GENDER
IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Tradition, Identity, and Power

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Shiva Balaghi, Editors



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Acknowledgments

"Opening an inquiry from the standpoint of women means accepting our ineluctable embeddedness in the same world as is the object of our inquiry" Dorothy Smith (1987: 127) reminds us. Indeed, as this volume also attests, our work is always informed by our experiences. Our collaborative efforts in studying gender issues in the Middle East began in 1989 when one of us, Müge Göçek, was teaching a course at the University of Michigan called "Women and Islam: A Sociological Perspective" and the other, Shiva Balaghi, was a student in that class. The enrollment of the class was rather evenly divided between those who focused on gender issues and those who studied the Middle East. As the semester progressed, some of the basic problematics of studying women in the Middle Eastern context began to emerge. Issues such as the universality of women's rights versus cultural relativism were debated.

After the semester was over, the two of us decided to try to continue the debates among a larger audience. With a grant from the Women's Studies Program, we organized a biweekly discussion group. This interdisciplinary group of faculty and graduate students focused on a different discipline or genre each session. So a student specializing in Turkish and Arabic comparative literature discussed the images of prostitutes in Turkish novels. An anthropologist discussed the work of Lila Abu-Lughod within the context of feminist anthropology. Another student working on women and labor in Bangladesh talked about the importance of looking at gender and Islam from the perspective of South Asia as well. Hence we shared ideas, works in progress, and debated different approaches to studying gender and society in the Middle East.

Energized by the lively nature of the discussion group, we decided to edit a volume on the topic that would further explore the particular issues that kept surfacing in our debates. As part of that project, we organized the conference "Gender and Society in the Middle East" in September 1991 which was sponsored by several different departments and programs at the University of Michigan. Most of the papers of that conference appear in this volume. A few of the essays in the collection were commissioned after the conference took place.