QUICK STUDIES



QUESTION AND PENSÉES

What Is "Private" in the Middle East?

Pensée 1: Private Reflections

FADWA EL GUINDI
Department of Social Sciences, University of Qatar, Doha, Qatar;
e-mail: elguindi@usc.edu
DOI: 10.1017.S0020743807070043

I consider it nontrivial that *IJMES* invites reflection on the question, "What is private in the Middle East?" without positioning "private" against "public." Conceptually, a private–public polarity refers to a division of space that has become reified into a heuristic paradigm used to describe gendered social and cultural activities.

In the 1970s the anthropology of women—which grew out of feminist concerns that sexist bias in anthropological studies of earlier decades resulted in neglect of women's roles, activities, and concerns in studies of society and culture—set out to compensate and correct this neglect by adopting the division of space and spheres into public and private and converting it into a paradigm for description and analysis. Although applied universally, it tended to be used mostly to describe Mediterranean European and Arabo-Islamic cultures. A link was made between the public–private and gender. A valuation was attached to the duality: the public domain was described as a highly valued sphere in which men were active, and the private sphere of women was used interchangeably with domestic sphere, a private domain of women less valued universally.

Circularity in this set of claims is obvious. Men's work is highly valued because it is public, and public work is valued because it is men's domain. In this framework men and their work are universally considered superior. This was ethnocentrically extended to describe men's universal superiority as stemming from their being perceived as closer to culture, whereas women are closer to nature. This whole line of argument and its underlying assumptions were strongly and successfully challenged on ethnographic and conceptual grounds.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743807070043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

However, women's studies and culture studies were not as critical of these assumptions and continued to apply the public–private duality to Arab and Muslim women.

The Arabo-Islamic East is the cultural region best suited to challenge the rigidity and universality of the gendered pair of spheres. Two spheres considered private in the Middle East are women and family. Here I find the notion of privacy closer to cultural understanding; it reflects better culture conceptualization than the rigidly imposed private–public polarity.

After a visit around the campus of Qatar University, where I currently hold a position, one questions not only the universality of the division but also its accuracy. It becomes evident that assumptions of domesticity, separation from the public, and inferior valuation of the private are distortions of the ethnographic reality. A private sphere of female students on campus is neither seen by women, men, faculty, or administrators as an imposition on women, nor is their private space, whether by dress or in the physical layout of the campus, seclusion from the public. In dress and appearance privacy is active in public.

In Qatar, female university students walk around campus in long, elegant black *abayas* and head covers, regally worn. Tails trailing behind them and chiffon scarves layered softly to cover their hair, women glide from building to building and from classroom to classroom at a measured pace, with straight postures, holding their heads high in dignity and with pride in their gender and identity. There is no sense of inferiority or secondary status. These are women who are both veiled and very self-assured in the public realm. It is worthwhile to add that at Qatar University, which is a mixed-gender public institution, the university president is a Qatari woman, the vice president is a Qatari woman, the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences is a woman, and many other deans, department and program chairs, and students majoring in professional fields are women.

In contrast to the polar paradigm of public–private, the notion of privacy is much more adequate conceptually and ethnographically to describe the cultural reality that focuses on the centrality of family and women. Instead of secluding, domesticating, or devaluing, privacy guards women's place and participation in public. In Qatar, as in other Arab and Islamic societies, there is a culture that cultivates and guards privacy in a way that family remains a core foundation of the culture, and women can simultaneously be most private and most public.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743807070043 Published online by Cambridge University Press