

Women and the Politics of Gender in the Middle East

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Introduction

Debates over the status of Middle Eastern women figure centrally in current events and contemporary political struggles. Whether as an example of everything which is wrong with Middle Eastern societies today, as a model of resistance to Western domination, or as victims of violence, the figure of “the Middle Eastern Woman” (invariably conflated with “the Muslim woman”) has served as a potent symbol within various political programs and as a site of political and cultural intervention. Despite the current prominence of the subject, however, the focus on women and their social, political and economic roles in the area which has come to be known as the Middle East is nothing new. Historically gender has always figured centrally in how various movements, communities and political polities have defined and reproduced themselves. This class asks, “how have the politics of gender in the Middle East shaped (and been shaped) by wider local, national and transnational forces over time and across geographic contexts?” “What implications have those politics had for the lives of women in the region?” “Who claims the authority to speak for and represent women in the Middle East and on what grounds?” Special attention will be given to the ways in which the position of Middle Eastern women has been debated within imperial, nationalist and Islamist political programs and the role that women themselves have played in shaping those debates.

Objectives

On the completion of this course students should be able to:

1. Demonstrate a knowledge of the projects and political processes which have most shaped Middle Eastern women’s lives.
2. Explain how the politics of gender in the Middle East shaped (and been shaped) by wider local, national and transnational forces over time and across geographic contexts.
3. Analyze how gender has figured in various written and visual texts (including foundational Islamic religious texts, law, art, fiction, autobiography and prescriptive treatises).
4. Compare and contrast discourses on women with women’s actual experiences.
5. Evaluate the possibilities various projects have had for women, both in terms of political activism and in everyday life.

6. Think critically about the production of knowledge about Middle Eastern women and what sorts of purposes and interests that knowledge serves.

Required Texts (Available at the Engineers Bookstore)

Leila Ahmed: *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*

Amina Wudud: *The Qu'ran and Women*

Fatima Mernissi: *Dreams of Trespass*

Latifa Zayyat: *The Open Door*

Afsar Nafissi: *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

Supplementary materials:

Other required readings (designated by an *) are available on WebCT

Grading

Participation and Attendance: 20%

Group presentations: 10%

Book Reports: On *Dreams of Trespass*, *The Open Door* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran*: 30%

In Class Midterm: 20%

Take home final: 20%

Policy on Lateness and Attendance

You are allowed three unexcused absences. For all other absences you must provide a written, official excuse, such as a note from a doctor in the case of illness or an obituary, funeral notice or death certificate in the case of a death in the family. For every unexcused absence after the third you will lose half of a letter grade from your participation. You are also responsible for coming to class on time. If you come to class after I've taken attendance, you will be counted absent. If you know you may have to be late for a particular class, let me know ahead of time. If you know you have circumstances which will regularly make you a few minutes late, come and see me and we can work something out

Honor Code

Students in this class will be expected to abide by the Georgia Tech Honor Code and avoid any instance of academic misconduct, including but not limited to the substitution of material that is wholly or substantially identical to that created or published by another individual or individuals; false claims of performance or work submitted by the student; possessing, using, or exchanging *improperly* acquired written or verbal information in preparation for, or in writing, an exam or paper. If you have any questions, please consult with me and read the Honor Code, which is available at:

www.deanofstudents.gatech.edu/Policy/code.in.sections.htm#AHC .

Group Presentations

Group presentations are designed to let you have a bit of fun and indulge your creativity while at the same time synthesizing and applying core terms and ideas. Presentations will take place at the end of each "unit," (there are seven of them) excluding the first (you get a freebie on that one while you get settled into the course). I will hand out specific guidelines

including suggestions for each group; they are suggestions only, you should feel free to make this an opportunity to delve into an issue which interests you but which we did not have the opportunity to cover in class or to present the existing material in a new way. Note: you are **exempt** from doing the response paper for the unit which you are presenting on.

Papers

You are required to write three book reports for this class, one on *Dreams of Trespass*, one on *The Open Door* and one on *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. They should be five to seven pages, double spaced using 12 point font. I will give you a separate handout providing more details of how to think about the assignments closer to their due dates. In addition, you are required to write six response papers. At the end of every unit you will be responsible for writing a one page, (double spaced) response paper addressing questions which I will distribute to you [the topics for your response papers will also be available on WebCt under the heading of "assignments and handouts"] In general, while I expect you to adhere to some basic standards of grammar, spelling and presentation, these papers are more intended to give you an opportunity to reflect critically on the issues raised in lecture and in the course readings than they are to be formal writing assignments. They will be graded on a pass/fail (satisfactory/unsatisfactory) basis and will count towards your participation grade.

Participation and Classroom Conduct

Participation is a significant part of your grade in this class. You are expected to come to class prepared to contribute actively to classroom discussions and activities. This will not only enhance your own learning experience but the experience of your fellow students. Good participation entails not only speaking and sharing your thoughts on a regular basis, but also being considerate and respecting the views of others. To earn high points in the participation part of the final grade, students will have demonstrated their awareness of the different functions of classroom comments by:

1. varying their discussion strategies,
2. considering what they say before they say it,
3. taking intellectual risks, and
4. always respecting the feelings of peers by not interrupting classmates while speaking and acknowledging interesting ideas.

Any successful learning experience requires mutual respect on the part of the student and the instructor. Neither instructor nor student should be subject to others' behavior that is rude, disruptive, intimidating, or demeaning. The instructor has primary responsibility for and control over classroom behavior and maintenance of academic integrity.

Instructor responsibilities:

- Start and end class on time.
- Treat all students with courtesy and respect.
- Be open to constructive input from students in the course.
- Ensure that opportunities to participate are enjoyed equally by all students in the course.

Student responsibilities:

- Come to class on time, and refrain from packing up belongings before class ends.
- Turn off all electronic devices that might create a disruption in class.
- Be quiet and give full respectful attention while either instructor or another student is speaking.
- When speaking, use courteous, respectful language and keep comments and questions relevant to the topic at hand.

I expect you to fulfill your responsibilities to me and to your fellow students. By the same token, if I am not meeting my responsibilities to you I expect you to let me know. In short, let's make our classroom a comfortable space for real intellectual dialogue, where everyone has the opportunity to contribute.

Class Schedule

Aug. 22 (T) Introduction

Aug. 24 (Th) Middle Eastern Women and the Production of Knowledge

Ahmed: 1-38

*Eickelman: "Introduction" *the Middle East* 1-6;13-22 [recommended for those who have never had another Middle East course].

*Chandra Mohanty: *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* [recommended]

Gaze Assignment Due

Part I Islam, History and the Politics of Interpretation

Aug. 29 (T) The Rise and Spread of Islam

Ahmed: 39-78

Aug. 31 (Th): Women in the Qur'an

Ahmed: 79-101

Wudud: 1-15; 29-43

Sept. 5 (T) Gender and Communities of Interpretation

Wudud: 62-106.

In class small group assignment: interpreting Islamic verses on Polygamy.

First Reaction paper due

Part II The Politics of Sex and Household: Medieval and Early Modern Societies

Sept. 7 (Th) Female Sexuality and the Organization of Society

*Lutfi: *Manners and Customs of the 14th Century Cairene Women*

*Paula Sanders: Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islam

*Story from the Arabian Nights: A woman and her five suitors

Sept. 12 (T) Gender, Class and Power

Ahmed:102-125

*Yvonne Seng: "Invisible Women: Residents of Early Sixteenth Century Istanbul"

Second reaction paper due

Group I presentation

Unit III Nineteenth Century and Early 20th Century Transformations: The Politics of Feminism and Modernity

Sept. 14 (Th) The Transformation of Political, Social and Economic Institutions in the 19th century

Ahmed: 127-143

*Khalid Fahmy: "Women, Medicine and Power"

Sept. 19 (T) Gender and Colonial Rule: Representation and the Civilizing Mission

*Edward Said: "Orientalism"

*Julia Clancy Smith: "Islam, Gender and Identities in the Making of French Algeria"

*Marnia Lazreg: "Exposing and Reconstructing Algerian Identity" [recommended]

**Sept. 21 (Th) Class Discussion: *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*
First Book Report Due**

Sept. 26 (T) Modernity and "the New Woman"

*Afsaneh Najmabadi: "Unveiled Bodies, Veiled Discourses"

*Afsaneh Najmabadi: "Creating an Educated Housewife in Iran"

Sept. 28 (Th) "The Liberation of Women"

Ahmed: 144-168

*Qasim Amin: "The Liberation of Women"

In class reading: Bahithat al-Badiyya: "A Lecture to the Ummah Party"

Group 2 Presentation

Third Reaction Paper Due

Unit IV. The Politics of Gender, Nation and State

Oct.3 (T) Gender, and Nation

*Partha Chatterjee: The Nationalist Resolution of "The Woman Question"

*Deniz Kandiyoti: End of Empire: Islam, Nationalism and Women in Turkey

*Deniz Kandiyoti: "Identity and its Discontents" [recommended]

Oct. 5 (Th) Nationalism and Feminism

Ahmed: 169-207

*Julie Peteet: "Women and the Palestinian Movement: No Going Back"

*Jayawardana: Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World [Recommended]

Oct. 10 (T) Gender and Revolution in Algeria

*Franz Fanon: "Algeria Unveiled"

*Lazreg: Nationalism, Decolonization and Gender

Film: Algeria: Women at War

Oct. 12 (Th) Citizenship and State

*Soraya al-Turki: The Concept and Practice of Citizenship in Saudi Arabia

*Suad Jospheh: Lebanese Women Between the Nation and the State

Group 3 Presentation

Fourth Reaction Paper Due

Oct. 17 (T) Fall Recess-Class cancelled

Oct. 19 (Th) In Class Midterm

Oct. 24 (T) Class Discussion: The Open Door

Book Report Due

Part V. The Politics of Law and Family

Oct. 26 (Th) Film: Divorce, Iranian Style I

Esposito and DeLong-Bas: Women in Muslim Family Law 12-46

Oct. 31 (T) Film: Divorce, Iranian Style II

Esposito and DeLong-Bas: Women in Muslim Family Law 47-70; 93-110

Nov. 2 (Th) Class Discussion

Group 4 presentation

Fifth Reaction paper due

Part VI. The Politics of Islamism

Nov. 7 (T) Islam and Feminism

Ahmed: 208-234

*Bronwyn Wynter: "Fundamental Misunderstandings: Issues in Feminist Approaches to Islam"

*Margot Badran: "Understanding Islam, Islamism and Islamic Feminism"

* "Valentine Moghadam: Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: A Secularist Approach"

In class reading: An interview with Hibba Ra'uf

Nov. 9 (Th) The New Veiling

*Arlene MacLeod: "Hegemonic Relations and Gender Resistance: The New Veiling as Accommodating Protest in Cairo."

***Homa Hoodfar: "The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: Veiling Practices and Muslim Women."**

Nov. 14 (T) Islamist state projects: Iran

***Louise Halper: "Law and Women's Agency in Post-Revolutionary Iran"**

Group 5 presentation

Sixth Reaction Paper

Nov. 16 (Th) Class Discussion: Reading Lolita in Tehran

***Negar Mottahedeh: "Off the Grid"**

Book Report Due

Nov. 21: Class Cancelled

Nov. 23: Happy Thanksgiving!

Part VII. The Politics of Gender, Human Rights and Intervention

Nov. 28: (T) Gender and Regime Change

***"Afghan Women: bombing to be liberated"**

***Lila Abu-Lughod: "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?"**

Nov. 30 (Th) Islam, Women and Human Rights

Film: Submission

Dec. 5 (T) Globalization

***Mervat Hatem: In the Eye of the Storm: Islamic Societies and Muslim Women in Globalization Discourses**

Group 6 Project

Final Reaction Paper Due

Dec. 7: (Th) Wrap Up