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Feminist Geographies of the Middle East and North Africa: A Panel Discussion at the Middle East Studies Association of North America Annual Conference, 2020

Gabriella Nassif

This piece provides a brief overview of a panel session organized for the Middle East Studies Association of North America's Annual Conference in 2020. The goal of the panel was to explore the ways that insights from the field of feminist geography can contribute to the work of feminist scholars on the Middle East and North Africa region. The panel was organized by Gabriella Nassif (University at Buffalo) and was led by Caroline Nagel (University of South Carolina), and included presentations from Karen Culcasi (West Virginia University), Yalda Hamidi (Minnesota State University), A. Marie Ranjbar (University of Colorado), and Brittany Cook (University of Kentucky).

Opening Remarks (Caroline Nagel)

Caroline Nagel, the panel discussant, opened the panel with a few brief remarks about the field of feminist geography, and the importance of feminist geography as a framework for understanding the current sociopolitical and economic climate across the Middle East and North Africa, with a specific focus on gender. Feminist geography is attuned to the creation and maintenance of "difference" across place. By focusing on place, feminist geographers foreground the very material meanings and implications of social difference, and the ways that place actively (re)produces conceptualizations of gender. Further, the emphasis on place demands attention to the level of the intimate every day and the ordinary. As Nagel points out, "we have to look beyond powerful actors in institutions" to understand how hegemonic systems—including capitalism, globalization, patriarchy, and racial hierarchies—operate. An examination of the micro- and macro-level processes at work at the level of the everyday, grounded in place, can help us to

excavate a truly intersectional feminist analysis of class, race, dis/ability, gender, and sexuality that can shed light on the workings of complex global processes.

In reference to the papers presented during this panel, Nagel commented on the ways that each actively worked to deconstruct hegemonic binaries that are often, within academic and non-academic feminist work, presented as universal. Rather, the papers in this panel highlighted the ways that a context-specific analysis of place unsettles such binaries, and, further, exposes place as anything but static. Across each of the spaces and places covered by the papers presented as part of this panel—Iran, Syrian refugees living in Jordan, and the Iranian diaspora and women’s rights activists in the United States—place is constantly negotiated. Feminist geography pays close attention to these negotiations, and shows how such places are not isolated or static, but are enmeshed in what Nagel calls “expansive moments” that require a multi-scaled analysis.

Lastly, Nagel remarked on the shared “political commitment to emancipation” found in each of the papers. While such a comment could ostensibly be made about most feminist research, at least in theory, the work of each of the panelists showcased the ways that a methodology grounded in feminist geography can advance such a political commitment. This is because in its attention to place, feminist geography research methods are intended to capture multiple perspectives in order to completely expose power relationships, a marker of critical scholarship more broadly. To that end, Nagel concluded, such a methodology is ultimately beneficial for any research done in the Middle East and North Africa, where geopolitics has been a defining feature of academic research on the region during the 20th century. Feminist geography has the potential to disrupt normative understandings not just of geopolitics, but of place and space in the region that is both timely and critical today.

A Note on Feminist Geographic Methods (Brittany Cook)

In an important theoretical reflection, Brittany Cook highlighted the issue of positionality in feminist academic research on the Middle East. Specifically, Cook asks how we, as feminist

researchers, should engage with and challenge our own feminist ideas and beliefs in relation to our research process and our relationships with the communities where we work. While the analyses found in Saba Mahmood's (2005) influential work *Politics of Piety: The Islamic revival and the Feminist Subject* are more commonly found in discussions about religion and gender in the region, Cook argues that a nuanced "reorienting" of these insights can be particularly important when put into conversation with feminist methodologies used by researchers studying the region. Specifically, Cook focuses on Mahmood's "argu[ment] for a separation between her personal views and politics and the ways in which she writes about the communities she works with." While some scholars have critiqued this stance as an "extreme cultural relativism that is illogical at best, and anti-feminist at worst," Cook emphasizes that such critiques preclude a deeper engagement with how difference manifests not only between the researcher and the research subject, but throughout the research process itself as decisions are made daily about who and what ideas to engage with. Putting Mahmood's analysis into conversation with feminist work beyond work on religion and (post)secularism extends her call to think carefully about the ethics of how we approach research participants and our research process—no matter how removed or connected we might feel from our research subjects and communities—participates in politically-imbued knowledge production about the region.

To demonstrate the importance of such a reflection, Cook contrasts discussions about women in the workforce amongst policymakers and activists in Amman and the experiences of women in her research on women's food projects. First, Cook recounts a meeting with UN Women in Amman, where participants discussed the importance of increasing women's labor force participation rates in the country. One researcher, however, raised the concern that moving into the formal labor force might not necessarily be the primary desire of some of Jordanian women; her critique was completely dismissed. However, in Cook's ethnographic research among rural Jordanian women, her research participants had variegated perceptions about the connections between gender and labor. Many of these women, as Cook notes, did not share the UN Women's desire for increased women's labor force participation rates and instead, expressed regrets that "working" (formally) was no longer an option, but had become a necessity to ensure their families'

survival. Through this example, Cook emphasizes the ways that “personal politics,” or the specific feminist beliefs of those in relative positions of power, can overlook the beliefs of program beneficiaries in the case of the UN, and the research participants in the case of Cook’s own work. As Cook mentions, “my personal politics, and what I assume to be a universal good, might obscure other realities.” This is true for both the researcher-research participant relationship as well as the various ideas among research participants themselves, and affects how we can navigate, analyze, and represent this difference in our work.

Using feminist geography, according to Cook, can help to elucidate the various power dynamics at work without privileging certain identities or beliefs. For example, using feminist geography to analyze her research subjects’ opinions about work and labor helped demonstrate that these women were not necessarily aligned with global calls to increase women’s labor force participation in order to increase women’s empowerment. Instead, it brought to the fore what was, for her research participants, their biggest concern: the ever-changing economic instability affecting their families. It is only by “call[ing] into question the role of our ‘personal politics’” when working in communities across different spaces and places that researchers can make room for diverse opinions and beliefs. Centering Mahmood’s call to take seriously the differences in worldview between different research participants and researchers, and to extend this to the realm of feminist geography to help us challenge binary thinking about women, empowerment, and gender in the Middle East.

Intimate Spaces and Coping Labor: Syrian Women Refugees in Jordan¹

Based on interviews conducted with Syrian women refugees in Jordan, Karen Culcasi’s presentation develops the concept of “coping labor” to analyze the ways that Syrian women refugees experience the effects of war in their intimate, daily lives specifically through the lens of the paid work many of these women are now forced to take on in order to survive the effects of displacement. Within the field of geopolitics, macro-level institutions and actors overshadow the realities of everyday life in conflict settings. Feminist geopolitics, however, counters such a

“masculine” emphasis on the macro-level outcomes of war and conflict, and “helps to reveal some of the lesser-known entanglements of war and forced displacement on daily life and experiences.” Highlighting the dearth of research on paid work in the field of feminist geopolitics, Culcasi draws from feminist international relations scholar Spike V. Peterson’s work to argue for the importance of examining Syrian women refugees’ contributions to what Peterson calls the “coping economy.” This coping economy encapsulates the work that displaced persons, among others, are forced to take on—work that often challenges traditional gender, class, and racial hierarchies—in order to survive, or to cope with their current realities in displacement.

Culcasi’s work makes two important interventions. First, Culcasi’s focus on the household in relation to Syrian refugee women’s paid labor challenges the dominant focus on informal labor and informality more broadly within the field of feminist geopolitics. Second, Culcasi’s interviewees challenged romanticized notions of paid labor as “liberating” and instead, pointed to a more nuanced reality wherein traditional gender norms were constantly in tension. As these Syrian refugee women took on paid work opportunities, both within the household and outside of it, traditional gender structures were simultaneously malleable—for many interviewees, paid work for women was traditionally unaccepted—and rigid—as Culcasi notes, her interviewee’s roles as providers for their family did not relieve them of their gender-normative roles within the household and the family. In many ways, their coping labor “greatly conforms to traditional masculine and feminine divisions of labor, entrenching norms of gendered work.” Interestingly, Culcasi also notes that many of her interviewees expressed a preference for paid work that could be done from home “as a way to negotiate maintaining domestic responsibilities” and “negotiating interactions with men they don’t know.”

Importantly, Culcasi’s presentation examined both the positive changes and “new problems” that paid work affected in the lives of her interviewees. A handful of women reported experiencing “time debt,” a concept used to describe the feeling that a person does not have enough time to things outside of formal work. While time debt was a common feeling among her interviewees, many added that paid work was equally empowering. As Culcasi notes, “[Paid work]

gave them income, a sense of power and strength, added value to their lives (particularly if they were working with other Syrians), and even within the household.”

Writing Iranian Women in Geography of the Nation: Colonization of the Male-Dominated Space in “Women without Men: A Novel of Modern Iran”

Yalda Hamidi’s presentation discusses the Shahrnush Parsipur’s *Women without Men: A Novel of Modern Iran*, and challenges normative readings of the book using feminist geography methods. Specifically, Hamidi reads the text’s descriptions of two cities—Tehran and Karaj—as literary representations of everyday life in Iran both during and after the infamous 1953 Coup. Following the lives of a group of Iranian women, the book details the ways that a common, everyday space—an abandoned garden in Karaj—is transformed into a safe space wherein their experiences with various oppressions in Iran, specifically gender oppression, come to light. In this way, Hamidi argues, Parsipur tracks the “life” of oppression, and the ability to speak about such oppression, as it moves between two different spaces, Tehran and Karaj, and the ways that these different spaces effect the women’s lives.

Feminist geography methods inform Hamidi’s analysis of the ways that a seemingly well-known historical moment—the Iranian Coup of 1953—can be rendered unknown when analyzed across hitherto unknown scales and places. Specifically, Hamidi’s presentation works to uncover women’s voices in the 1953 Coup; by reading “against the Western interpretation of this novel as a manifesto of Lesbian separatism,” Hamidi’s work highlights how scholars’ own analyses of what counts as “home” (or “here”) versus what is conceptualized as “out there/away” have encouraged a singular reading of Parsipur’s book that defies an intimate look at the ways that women lived and existed during this moment in Iranian history.

In a similar vein, Hamidi’s analysis challenges how certain “places” are created and maintained. On the one hand, Hamidi is explicitly discussing the Iranian literary canon, as it is taught in Western classrooms, and the geopolitical canon on Iranian history, in which Iranian

feminism and history sometimes are regarded as the equivalent of Western feminism and lost their historical, geographical, and socio-cultural elements. On the other hand, Hamidi is critical of representing the Coup 1953 in Middle Eastern/ Iranian Studies Departments and disciplines, as the Area Studies genre overlooks Iranian women's lived experiences of the historical event. Hamidi argues that in this case, fiction makes up for what is left out of what she satirically calls "serious literature." To that end, Hamidi's presentation challenges readers to work across different spaces to rebuild a "new" understanding of a specific time and place in history, the 1953 Coup, from the perspective of the everyday spaces and banal practices of Iranian women, as constructed in Parsipur's *Women Without Men*.

Soapboxes and Stealth on Revolution Street: Revisiting the Question of "Freedom" in Iran's Hijab Protests²

A. Marie Ranjbar's work on protests against compulsory veiling in Iran brings together postcolonial feminist and feminist geography scholarship to interrogate the ways that women's rights protests and activism are rendered legible in the West. Ranjbar puts the "My Stealthy Freedom" (MSF) movement—developed by Masih Alinejad, an Iranian activist and journalist living in the U.S., the MSF Facebook site is a place where Iranian women can post images of themselves without their veils—and the "Girls of Revolution Street" (GRS) protests—the GRS is composed of solitary protesters who remove their veils in public, and are captured on camera by bystanders who proceed to upload their images to the internet. Through a comparison of the different pictures, rhetoric used by both groups in relation to the photos of unveiled women, and the rhetoric of standout figures like Masih Alinejad, Ranjbar uncovers what she describes as the "social currency" of the MSF and GRS protests, respectively. While the pictures posted to the MSF Facebook site are often edited, with beautiful women posing against beautiful backgrounds, with their hair blowing in the wind, the often-unfocused images of GSR protesters, which are all captured by onlookers, show underexposed photos of unhappy Iranian women standing alone above a crowd. The differences in the photographs alone, argues Ranjbar, contributes to the legibility of these protests among Western audiences. Further, the edited photos of MSF "are also

suggestive of colonial representations of Iranian women that persist” in the colonial imagery of Western audiences. For example, Ranjbar highlights the ways that MSF photos, and the rhetoric of Alinejad alongside the translated captions of posted photos, tend to perpetuate western conceptualizations of “freedom” and “liberation” as that which necessarily requires being unveiled.

These attachments to western notions of feminist liberation and freedom pander directly to a western audience, which, Ranjbar notes, should draw immediate suspicion if we are paying close attention to the dynamics and hierarchies embedded in place. The discussion of spatial dynamics becomes even more important in relation to GRS protests for two reasons. First, although GRS is often spoken about as a protest, which implies a gathering of people, participants in the protest participated in what Ranjbar calls a “solitary protest”: many of these women would unveil themselves in a public or semi-public location and stand there alone and in silence. If not for the cameras of passersby, perhaps their acts of protest would not be broadcast in the ways that they have been thus far. The second important spatial dynamic relative to GRS is that some of the solitary protests were staged outside of Tehran, the capital city of Iran. Challenging the dominant rural/urban binary that positions rural women as somehow less politically active than their urban counterparts, women participants in the GRS not only participated from rural areas, but from some of the most religiously-conservative parts of the country. These spatial dynamics revealed another complexity within the anti-compulsory hijab movement; across Iran, various choices of veiling (e.g. chador versus a shawl) reveal particular political subjectivities. Based on the photos used by the MSF Facebook page, true “choice”—in this case, whether or not religious or conservative women might participate in the protest against compulsory hijab—seems limited. Contrary to this, however, many religious women, including the protester now identified as the “Mashhadi” woman, after the religiously-conservative city from which she protested, participated in the GRS without reproducing the religious versus secular binary within feminist activism more broadly. While both MSF and GRS have made important contributions to the now-global dialogue surrounding the anti-compulsory hijab movement, Ranjbar’s work serves as a critical reminder about the ways that spatial dynamics are neither static nor hegemonic, and reminds us that

attention to place can offer important insights to subjects as complex as the anti-compulsory hijab movement(s) in Iran and across the Iranian and Middle Eastern diaspora.

¹Karen Culcasi's presentation was based on an article published in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, titled "We are women and men now": Intimate spaces and coping labour for Syrian women refugees in Jordan (2019).

²A. Marie Ranjbar's presentation was based on an article accepted for publication in *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* (2021).