

Teaching Muslim Women's History Between Timelessness and Change: 18 Parts of Desire

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THE ACTIVITIES IN A CLASSROOM dedicated to teaching Middle Eastern history differ little from those of other history classrooms. Instructors of Middle Eastern history, like those of other fields, construct lectures and discussions around the hallmark activities of the profession, illustrating change over time, encouraging thorough contextualization of events, and modeling the development of evidence-supported arguments. Middle Eastern history teachers devote lecture time to topics that make up the modern era, covering subjects such as imperialism, revolutions, the formation of nation-states and nationalisms, reform programs, geopolitics, and war. While the details differ, the stories told about the Middle East in the modern era invite rich comparisons to imperial, colonial, and post-colonial societies.

To their list of classroom tasks, however, American teachers of Middle Eastern histories must add confronting students' misconceptions about the subject matter. The typical activities of the classroom frequently are punctuated with frank discussions about American stereotypes about the region, which run the gamut from misunderstandings about such subjects as the veil and its origins, the meaning of *jihad*, and the roots of religious fundamentalism. Students' fantasies and fears about the region are sometimes an obstacle. Just as frequently, however, misconceptions provoke lively discussions about "what we know," and "how we come to know the things that we know."

One common student misapprehension about the Middle East, however, prohibits constructive classroom encounters with the past—the stereotype of Middle Eastern “timelessness.” Students arrive to the classroom having been exposed to newspaper accounts in which the contemporary struggle between Palestinians and Israelis, for example, is reduced to “timeless division” or “primordial hatred.” Similarly they read press accounts of sectarian strife in Iraq that rely on expressions such as “from time immemorial” and “hatred based in the seventh century” to frame a by-product of the 2003 invasion and of the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime (r. 1979-2003). Given their too-frequent exposure to such turns of phrase, American students—when asked to explain change over time in the Middle East—are surprised at the suggestion that there has been any change at all.¹

The challenge of teaching against stereotypes—especially the timelessness myth—is particularly heightened in courses about women in the Middle East. Accompanying a seemingly endless array of media images of veiled women is the persistent suggestion that gender norms, relations between the sexes, marriage and divorce laws, and dress codes can be explained through a religion that has not changed since its founding in the seventh century. At the same time, the typical American college student—whose life span has witnessed at least one Gulf War, the occupation of Afghanistan in 2001, and the 2003 occupation of Iraq—has been exposed to the idea that Western interventions in the region serve to rescue women from a religion that has oppressed them.² Before the work of narrating the modern—and largely secular—history of modern Iraq can begin, for example, or before the complex sets of circumstances surrounding veiling can be unraveled, the history teacher has to unpack engrained mis-representations.

This essay addresses the challenges of teaching to myths and misperceptions through a discussion of two books that I use to frame my course on the history of women and gender in the modern Middle East. I use two books by the same title—Geraldine Brooks’ *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (1995) and Heather Raffo’s *9 Parts of Desire* (2006)—to structure writing and discussion exercises through which my students confront stereotypes, reckon with the “timelessness” myth, and witness the importance of context to the study of history. These two books provide examples of the most prevalent types of literature about Middle Eastern women in the modern era. The first presents Middle Eastern women as objects of curiosity and contempt, binds those women’s experience to moribund traditions, and suggests that the social, cultural, economic, and political circumstances that define men’s lives somehow fail to apply to women. The second approaches the study of Middle Eastern women

the same way historians study women in other societies: by considering the various roles women play in those cultures, by becoming acquainted with the diverse activities and institutions in which women participate, by learning the history of those institutions, and by analyzing the ways in which categories associated with women have been constructed and changed over the modern era. Using these texts as bookends, at the beginning of the semester and at its end, helps structure a course that opens with the advent of European imperial presence in the region, replete with its powerful distortions of non-Western women's realities, narrates the relationship between the emergence of the modern nation-state and the position of women in Middle Eastern societies, and closes with women struggling to maintain a footing in period of vast challenges to Middle Eastern nation-states. The books demonstrate the connection between stereotypes and the interventions of outside powers, and highlight the importance of context for challenging myths and for producing accounts of women that reflect change over time. The essay examines each book's content and strategies, and discusses classroom activities associated with their use.

Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women (1995)

The first of the two readings, Geraldine Brooks' *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (1995) places the experiences of contemporary Middle Eastern women within the frameworks that American students typically expect in a course on the Middle East: the religious, the bizarre and the hidden. While the book is certainly full of correct and useful examples of women's actual experiences, it is also a brilliant example of literature that couches the contemporary Middle East within a timeless, changeless religion. The cover of the book's paperback edition perfectly illustrates the text's logic: a picture of a modern veiled woman sits next to two paintings of similarly clad women from the medieval era.³

The Australian-American journalist's bestseller has been making the rounds of book clubs and women's studies courses since the mid-1990s—years before the events of September 11, 2001 brought Islam and Muslim women to the center of the world's attention. Brooks' travelogue focuses on what the author calls the "hidden world of Islamic Women."⁴ Brooks sought to understand why women are subjugated in Islamic societies, despite the Prophet Muhammad's favorable treatment of women. Brooks therefore hoped to uncover what she understood to be the links between women's position in the contemporary world and the Prophet Muhammad's relationships with his wives.⁵ During a tour of the Middle East in the late 1980s, she interviewed women, trying to connect those women's daily realities to Islam's sacred texts and to a distant past.

Brooks' exposé of the intimate worlds of Muslim women is organized around two central premises. The first is that religion is the predominant factor in shaping both the public and private behavior of men and women in the Islamic world. She opens her well-written, entertaining account of her journeys through several countries in the Islamic world with a description of her initial inability to secure lodging in Saudi Arabia as an unaccompanied female. After several frustrating encounters with two men, as well as a recalcitrant receptionist and a police detective—both of whom tell her that only prostitutes travel alone in their country—she is finally allowed the courtesy of several short hours in a Dhahran hotel room. As she awakens to the sound of the call to prayer, she postulates: “The reason for my sleepless night lay in that desert town. I couldn't check myself into a Saudi hotel room in the 1990s because thirteen hundred years earlier a Meccan named Muhammad had trouble with his wives.”⁷⁶

What follows Brooks' introductory revelations is the link that she makes—in places as far flung as Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt, and Turkey—between contemporary practices and events in early Islamic history. Similarly, Brooks suggests that texts like the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*, the collected sayings and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, are the sole arbiters of women's contemporary situation. She writes, “In Saudi Arabia most women today still live curtained off from the world. A woman can't check herself into a modern Saudi hotel because, like the prophet's wives, she is supposed to be secluded in her home.”⁷⁷ In Islamic countries where women are enlisted as soldiers, serve as prime minister, are elected to parliament, Brooks suggests women's emulation of a different set of female role models, also from early Islamic history: “The soldiers look to Nusaybah, who helped save Muhammad's life in battle, standing her ground at his side when male soldiers fled. The politicians cite Fatima, Muhammad's shy daughter, who spearheaded a political power struggle after the prophet's death.”⁷⁸ Brooks hereby signals that her quest is not to uncover the historical circumstances that have produced contemporary Islamic societies, or the context in which conservative Islam has come to dominate the political landscape. Rather, she suggests to her reader that modern Muslims, male as well as female, live lives, however varied, whose patterns were determined solely by men and women who lived thirteen hundred years ago.

The countries Brooks visited have certainly witnessed increased religiosity over the second half of the twentieth century, in both the public and private realms. Brooks is not incorrect in suggesting that there are Muslim women who intentionally emulate women like Fatima. In choosing to couch her descriptions of women's lives within a framework defined solely by religion, however, Brooks glosses over, even ignores, centuries

of historical change. For the Western reader unfamiliar with the history of a society like Saudi Arabia, for example, the result is a conflation of past and present from which Islam emerges as a totalizing force, unaffected by change of any sort.

Examples of such conflation abound in the text. Brooks situates Ayatollah Khomeini's (r. 1979-1989) rise to power in Iran, for example, within a discussion of seventh-century succession struggles and alongside a brief mention of what she calls Iran's twentieth-century "theocratic revolution."⁹ Absent is any historical account of Iran's twentieth-century political experiences: the Pahlavis' modernization programs, state-driven secularization, uneven economic development, geopolitics and Western interventions, the rise of the police state under Mohammed Reza Shah (r. 1941-1979), or increased political repression. In other words, absent are the contemporary phenomena that explain the emergence of that "theocratic revolution," and of the willingness of Iranians to embrace it. Indeed, Brooks claims that when Khomeini took power in Iran, he tapped into Shi'a identification with defeat stemming back to Islam's first century, ignoring the Iranians' grievances against the Pahlavi state altogether.¹⁰ In what appears to be an unbroken line between the past and the present, Iranians appear motivated by the same phenomena that influenced their ancestors in the seventh century C.E.

The second of Brooks' premises is that conversations with women will allow her access to their "hidden worlds," hence enabling her to know the Middle East more authentically. She therefore isolates women's history from broader contexts, and suggests that it is only in talking to women that their position and experiences in Middle Eastern society can be understood. Brooks reached this conclusion when her Egyptian colleague Sahar, a well-coifed, aristocratic American University graduate, became a "Muslim fundamentalist." As Brooks opened her door in Cairo one morning to find a newly veiled Sahar on her threshold, willing to discuss the processes through which she had adopted a new religiosity, Brooks concluded that, as a woman, she had access to women's private lives, their stories, and, therefore, the key to understanding the region's growing conservatism. While Brooks watched her husband, fellow journalist Tony Horwitz, gain easy access to Egypt's male-dominated political and economic arenas, she felt excluded because of her sex. However, Brooks found access of a different sort, reflecting, "thanks to Sahar, I looked up and noticed the window that was open only to me."¹¹ Brooks felt she would be able to access a world of growing religiosity by speaking with women like Sahar: "Something was going on and I was determined to understand it... To find the answers I did something so obvious I couldn't believe it had taken me a year to get around to it. I started talking to women."¹² Brooks gained

entry to a space likely off-limits to her husband: the home of Ayatollah Khomeini's widow, Khadija. Brooks made her way to the operating theater of a female Muslim physician whose specialty is hymen reconstruction, the apartment of a Palestinian woman whose extramarital sexual liaisons made her the target of an honor killing, and a classroom in the Islamic University of Gaza. She found herself in the company of brides before their arranged marriages (and with wives who discuss the polygamy of their husbands), a female member of the United Arab Emirates' military, and Queen Noor of Jordan.

In her accounts of these conversations, Brooks blends a description of each woman's situation with references to the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*, linking the present to the past, and illustrating for Western readers the ways in which she sees the actions of the first generation of Muslims informing the behavior of contemporary Muslims. Brooks seems driven to know if the contemporary Islamic world upholds the traditions of its prophet or, by contrast, fails to live up to early standards.

Brooks' conversations with women about veiling provide an example of this strategy. During her time in Iran, she devoted herself to the task of understanding why women were adopting increasingly conservative forms of dress. Her first inclination was to attribute the phenomenon to Khomeini: "What was happening to Muslim women from Algeria to Afghanistan had its roots here [Tehran]. Khomeini had persuaded women that the wearing of a medieval cloak was a revolutionary act."¹³ Without regard for the vastly divergent historical circumstances that shape the histories of Algeria and Afghanistan, Brooks placed the re-emergence of the *hijab* within the context of the Iranian Revolution, which—in her analysis—had more to do with the seventh century than the twentieth.

Brooks' second inclination was therefore to contextualize Muslim women's veiling practices solely within a seventh-century framework. She attributes the beginnings of the practice of veiling to the Prophet Muhammad's marriage to Zeinab, a marriage that allegedly had its roots in temptation. Tradition tells that Muhammad visited the house of his adopted son and glimpsed the youth's wife (Zeinab) partially naked. Consequently, the young man divorced his wife, Muhammad married her, and uproar ensued within a community accustomed to the strict rules against incest set down in *Qur'anic* revelations. The problem was solved, according to the story Brooks recounts, through two new revelations, one against adoption and the other in favor of the seclusion of the prophet's wives. Brooks cites the *Qur'an's* instructions for women who were not married to Muhammad: "Tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms."¹⁴

Armed with this quote, Brooks asked women to comment on the *Qur'an*'s role in motivating them to don the *hijab*. In addition to her friend Sahar, Brooks interviewed Iranian women, some of whom eschewed her hypothesis about the religious roots of veiling in favor of more political ones. Other women, both in and outside Iran, concurred that their decision to veil reflected "Muhammad's Islam."¹⁵

The point here is not that Brooks (or the women she interviewed) are wrong about the *Qur'an* or about women's very real sentiments about their religion. Rather, the suggestion is that Brooks apparently asked women to reflect on their decisions without any consideration for historical context. Rather than asking women to draw on the rich tapestry of circumstances and experiences—political, religious, economic, and cultural—that informed their decision to veil (or that, by contrast, informed men's decisions to force veiling upon them), Brooks asked for their reflection on a single *Qur'anic* verse. In so doing, Brooks sidesteps discussing how women's circumstances differ from Algeria to Afghanistan. She ignores analysis of how those differing circumstances might shape women's experience with religion. She avoids asking if, in the twenty-first century, Algerian women interpret their holy texts the same way they interpreted them in the twentieth century, or in the nineteenth. She neglects to ask if education, economics, and the political climate shape women's interpretations of religious texts in an ongoing way.

Classroom Activities for *Nine Parts*

I have students read *Nine Parts of Desire* the very first week of class, just after they have completed a brief writing exercise about their expectations from a course on women in the modern Middle East. (I have them write an informal, in-class, one-page paper on what they think they know about women in the Middle East. They then place their paper in an envelope, seal the envelope, and then sign their names across the seal so that they can trust that I will not open them. Those envelopes remain in my file cabinet until the end of the semester, at which point students read their papers and use them to write a longer essay on the changes that have occurred in their thoughts about women in the Middle East over the course of the semester). In the discussion that accompanies the writing exercise, students are quick to tell me that veiling, seclusion, religion, untrammled male authority, and bizarre sexual and cultural practices constitute the topics they anticipate my course will cover. These themes are therefore on their mind as they begin reading Brooks' text.

We discuss *Nine Parts of Desire* at the beginning of week two, prior to wading into course content and fresh from our discussion of stereotypes

and expectations. Students typically praise the book, and have lots to say both about Brooks, whose writing, travels, and efforts they admire, and about the women she interviewed, whose experiences pretty closely match their expectations. Those who have taken previous courses on the Middle East tend to be more critical of the text; history majors wonder why Brooks' accounts of history seem to end in the seventh century. I stay out of the way and let discussion unfold, typically between those who see their stereotypes brought to life in Brooks' pages, and those who see *Nine Parts of Desire* as a stereotype itself.

I inform the students that we will visit the text again at the end of the course, and move on, using the discussion of Brooks' text to segue to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, during which imperial interests in the region brought greater numbers of Europeans into Ottoman and Persian (Safavid and Qajar) territories. Literature written by Europeans in that era, both leisure travelers and those with business interests, is—like *Nine Parts of Desire*—not only rich in fairly accurate descriptions of the region, its institutions, and inhabitants, it is also replete with stereotypes about them. Here, I typically have students read excerpts from Billie Melman's *Women's Orient: English Women and the Middle East, 1718-1918* (1995) or Rana Kabbani's *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of Orient* (2009).¹⁶ In both texts, students encounter a European fascination with veiling and polygamy that is not unlike Brooks' enthrallment, or their own. Melman's and Kabbani's books also place travel literature within a greater context: it was not simply markets and raw materials that drew the West to "the Orient," but rather, like Brooks, Europeans were seemingly driven to encounter the "hidden world" of the harem, where they might encounter women, witness their customs, converse with them, and, therefore, know the Orient inside and out. Indeed, by the 1870s, travel guides suggested that only an invitation to visit harem space would assure travelers thorough knowledge of the region.¹⁷ Many travel writers used tropes Brooks would recognize: alleged visits with women in their homes, and fixations with veiling and seclusion. Timelessness permeates literature from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As one late-Victorian traveler wrote, "to most of us, Egypt means three or four things only: A long narrow strip of eternally encircling water...all along its banks are reeds...in which dwells a kind of ubiquitous Moses...and a Lotus air where even mummies are by no means out of place."¹⁸ Writers linked contemporary practices to those of the Pharaohs, to scenes from the Bible, and to the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*, disregarding many intervening centuries.

A recent spate of reprints of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travel literature makes assigning a text or two easy and affordable.¹⁹ Students respond well to reading travel narratives, and enjoy discussions about what

they see as the “outlandish” things that earlier generations of Westerners attributed to the Middle East. It does not take them long to find the antecedents of their interest in the veil in the Victorians’ fascinations with it, for example, or to notice that Brooks’ determination to get inside Middle Eastern women’s “hidden worlds” had precedent. They are amused by an earlier generation’s conflation of the living with the dead. Mostly, however, they find entertainment in tales of allegedly imprisoned women, whose existence appeared to be limited to gossiping, drinking tea, smoking hashish, and fulfilling their husbands’ sexual demands. Some will admit that it is this kind of literature they were hoping for when they registered for my class.

What comes next in my course, therefore, may be disappointing: I use travel literature as a foil for lectures about the realities of elite women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. An ever-growing body of work about Middle Eastern women of all classes from this era allows the history teacher to portray an increasingly detailed account of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women’s activities.²⁰ In the case of elite women, harem activities had little to do with gossip and hashish. Rather, the private space of the harem was a realm from which women ran household economies, managed estates, endowed charitable projects, brokered marriages, and ran businesses by proxy. Harem women studied and taught their children. Some of them were learned enough in the *Qur’an* and the *Hadith* that they held classes and led discussions of those texts in their homes—frequently for women who left their own harems in order to attend. In short, harem women’s reality was much like that of elite women of the Victorian era in which the household was the woman’s world, and in which women’s authority was largely unchallenged when it came to household matters.²¹

I also use travel literature to make an additional point: Westerners’ frequently incorrect conclusions about the “hidden world” of Muslim women had long-lasting political consequences. In Egypt, for example, Europeans linked the harem to the alleged inability of the Egyptians khedives to govern, and the “hidden world” of women was therefore used as a partial justification for the British occupation of 1882. Not only did the British see themselves as liberating the so-called inmates of the harem, they also saw themselves as rescuing the political and economic institutions that had allegedly been corrupted by Egyptian men’s practice of secluding their wives.²² The architect of the British occupation, Lord Cromer (r. 1882-1907), admitted that he drew his conclusions about Egyptian domestic and governing practices from the travel literature he had read over the years.²³ Cromer rationalized British presence in Egypt by suggesting a thorough reform of Egyptians’ political as well as their domestic institutions.²⁴

As a means of linking the women that European travelers allegedly encountered in the harem (very few Europeans likely had access to harem space) with the realities of elite Egyptian women, I next assign the memoirs of Huda Shaarawi (1879-1947), who began her life in the harem of an elite family, but later took to the streets against the British occupation and in favor of women's rights.²⁵ The book satisfies students' appetite for harem literature. Unlike travel writers, however, Shaarawi sets her harem years (1879-1900) within the context of a rapidly changing Egypt. She contextualizes the customs of her home not within the framework of unchanging Islamic practices, but rather within the changing customs of elites born both in Egypt and in places like Anatolia and the Caucasus. Shaarawi expresses frustrations with some of the traditions that defined her childhood, especially an arranged marriage to an older cousin. At the same time, however, she writes of her family's support of her when her husband took a second bride and Shaarawi therefore temporarily left the marriage. She discusses the rights accorded to her within Islam, the atmosphere of state-driven modernization programs that affected many of her class positively, and the heady intellectual debates taking place among the increasingly educated Egyptian elite—including discussions about choosing one's mate and the importance of companionate marriage. She records her education, her literary salon, her French mentor, the beneficent organization that she and other women of her status created in order to help the urban poor, the intellectual society that she and several women established in 1914, and her increasing frustrations with the British occupation. The last years of her memoir (1919-1924) chart Shaarawi's emergence from the harem as a political organizer and a demonstrator in increasingly heated confrontations with the British. Those years would also mark her emergence as a feminist and a determined campaigner for women's suffrage. While she died several years before women received the vote in Egypt, Shaarawi did witness the flourishing of a woman's press, an increase in women's education, and the establishment of an active civil society in which women of all classes took part. She and many of her peers removed their face coverings, not because of men's dictates or because of religion, but rather because they determined that their work in the public sphere was best accomplished uncovered.

The possibilities for writing assignments abound at this juncture. Since travel literature and Shaarawi's memoirs are primary sources, students can try their hand at using the books as historical evidence, and at critiquing the relative strengths and weaknesses of those sources. Comparisons between Shaarawi's harem activities and those depicted by Europeans invite not only rich comparative work, but also encourage students to

think critically about the authors of harem literature, the contexts from which they hailed, and the agendas that may have motivated their writing. I have had students write letters to Lord Cromer as if they are Shaarawi, and to assess his plan to reform them. I have had them read memoirs of early twentieth-century suffragettes from different parts of the world to see if those women's upbringings resembled Shaarawi's. In each case, students take on stereotypes and at the same time place women—both as authors and subjects—in the context of the historical circumstances in which they lived.

The remainder of the course is dedicated to examining women's lives and activities within the changes that engulfed the region between the late nineteenth and the early twenty-first centuries. (Over the course of many years of teaching this class, I have heard numerous students exclaim that they did not expect a course on women to include so much history!) During the modern era women have been recognized as historical actors and as objects of debates about modernity, tradition, religion, and ethnicity. Once exposed to modern Middle Eastern history, students see that changes in women's situations and in societies' thinking about women have resulted from a host of factors: government-driven reform programs; imperialism and resulting changes to local and global economies; war; the emergence of the nation-state in the post WWI-era; nationalisms of various sorts; revolutions; and—in some cases—invasions. The current body of historical work about women in the modern era is rich, and, through it, students encounter women in classrooms—leading and participating in strikes, boycotts, revolts, and revolutions; working in factories; sitting in parliaments; organizing feminist unions, workers' unions, professional syndicates, and women's movements; establishing religious study groups; and producing film, art, and literature. Students see politicians use reforms related to women to produce new national identities and new reform programs. In Kemal Atatürk's (r. 1923-1938) Turkey and the first Pahlavi Shah's (r. 1926-1941) Iran, for example, unveiled and increasingly educated women heralded Turkish and Iranian secular identity. In Egypt and Iraq, respectively, Jamal `Abd al-Nasir (r. 1952-1970) and Saddam Hussein (r. 1979-2003) promoted their own visions of Arab and Mesopotamian identity by encouraging women's emergence into the workforce, among other things. Students encounter reactions to secular regimes in the forms of increasing conservatism and revolutions in the name of Islam, such as the Iranian Revolution in 1979. In each case (and this is but a small sample), students come to understand that while Brooks was not wrong to talk to women about their lives, she restricted the scope of her conversations with those women by asking them narrowly focused questions about religion.

9 Parts of Desire (2006)

Middle Eastern women appear in a very different light when treated by the pen of Heather Raffo, an Iraqi-American playwright. In a short play titled *9 Parts of Desire*, which Raffo titled in such a way as to contest Brooks' claims about the timeless effects of religion on women's lives, the reader encounters the desires of educated, civically engaged female citizens of modern Iraq.²⁶ The theater piece presents women's experiences in a secular nation-state, drawing on events both before and after the 2003 American occupation. Raffo illustrates that it has not been religion alone that has dictated women's behavior. Rather, she shows that in contemporary Iraq, women's fortunes have fluctuated along with those of the Iraqi state.²⁷ The short play, which uses a series of monologues to narrate the experiences of nine women—composite characters based on interviews and research—illustrates jarring differences between so-called timeless traditions and the changing conditions of modern Iraq.²⁸ Placed within the full context of their familial and professional lives as workers, mothers, artists, and intellectuals—rather than within the framework of religious practices—Raffo's women are not curious creatures. Rather, they are familiar to a Western audience—Iraq's current circumstances notwithstanding. While Raffo credits Brooks' text for inspiring her play—the title of both women's books is drawn from a saying attributed to the prophet's son-in-law `Ali, that God gave women nine out of ten parts of sexual desire, evidence both of God's favor for women and of women's sexual appetite—the agendas of the two texts could not be more different.²⁹

Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* broadens the conversation with Middle Eastern women—in this case, women from Iraq—by including the many factors that have shaped their lives. I have my students read Raffo in the last two weeks of the course, at the conclusion of my survey of the modern era, and as we discuss the seeming unraveling of the post-WWI arrangements that has resulted from the American invasion of Iraq and the events of the Arab Spring. At this point in the semester, students are very familiar with the themes that dominate the twentieth century. Nonetheless, I have them read Raffo just after finishing Nadje Sadig el-Ali's *Iraqi Women: Untold Women from 1948 to the Present*, so that the specifics of modern Iraqi history are fresh in their minds.³⁰

Raffo portrays nine Iraqi women whose lives are neither hidden nor framed by Islam. The stories that her characters—composites of Raffo's interactions with many Iraqi women beginning in the aftermath of Gulf War—tell about their lives portray the full complexities of the society from which they hail. Raffo's Muslim women are the products of families, marriages, tribes, schoolrooms, art studios, medical schools, dictatorships,

wars, and sanctions. They struggle with love, fear, death, imprisonment, deprivation, failure, and success. "My process," Raffo writes, "was...one of spending time together living, eating, communicating on such a level that when I parted from their homes it was clear that we were now family."³¹ Raffo claims to have written her play without an articulated agenda:

It would be wrong to overdramatize for the sake of a political point, or to use women for sympathy...I would encourage those doing a production of *9 Parts of Desire* to never think of these women as victims or to portray them sentimentally but rather explore the resilience, ambitions, warmth, humor, integrity, and the ancient history of the Iraqi women depicted here.³²

Indeed, rather than structuring the play around a single narrative trope, like religion's restricting consequences, Raffo has her characters reference the full spectrum of Iraq's historical experiences, from Tiamat (an ancient water goddess), to Scheherazade, to pan-Arabism, communism, and the American occupation.

Raffo's characters allude to the fact that in contemporary Iraq, women's destinies have been harnessed to that of the nation-state, the circumstances of which have changed dramatically over the last seventy-five years. Raffo does not dismiss Islam: The call to prayer, played five times over the course of the play, reminds us of its presence in Iraq, and of its continuity. Nor does she dismiss tradition: The *abaya*—the black cloak that we have seen Iraqi women in with more frequency since 2003—also commands a presence in the play, worn differently by each of the characters. But Raffo's women's lives are neither dominated by the call to prayer nor defined by the *abaya*. Rather, the most constant ingredient in their lives past and present is the ever-changing nature of the Iraqi government, by whose agendas their lives have been defined and from whose plans they cannot escape. As the character "Nanna," an old woman who sells odds and ends and other people's treasures as a street vendor, says: "I have lived through 23 revolutions."³³

Some of Raffo's characters had their start in Iraq of the 1950s and 1960s, when the Iraqi state encouraged secularization, modernization, development, and political pluralism. Baghdad was a culturally vibrant city, in which well-educated women from all classes (Iraq had an 85% literacy rate among women in 1958, and even women from the lower economic orders had at least a primary school education) participated as artists, poets, and intellectuals.³⁴ The ranks of female artists, writers, doctors, lawyers, engineers, and teachers were the product of a nation-state that poured resources into the educational realm and into a political economy in which women found steady and meaningful employment.³⁵ Raffo's character "The Doctor" points out, "We had the best hospitals in the Middle East. Everyone was coming to us."³⁶ Iraqis pointed to

women and their accomplishments as symbolic of the ideologies that shaped Iraq after its independence from the British: Iraqi nationalism, pan-Arabism, and democratic political pluralism. Men encouraged women to participate in an open political arena as philanthropists, political activists, and demonstrators. Politics, education, and Iraq's cultural life each witnessed the mixing of sexes, classes, religions, and religious sects. Says the character "Huda," an Iraqi in exile: "Iraqis don't want to be cut up, to be separated... We had fine relations. My family married with a Shi'a, my husband was a Kurd there was no segregation sort of thing."³⁷

Similarly, Raffo's characters each experienced the rise of the Ba'ath Party, which defined Iraq in increasing measures from 1968 and ended Iraq's twenty-year experiment with political pluralism.³⁸ For many women, the first decade of Ba'ath-party rule was a golden age—economic reform and expansion, women-friendly laws, a flourishing middle class.³⁹ But expansion was quickly coupled with fear and repression by a government that was increasingly unwilling to tolerate dissent.⁴⁰ (Says the character "Iraqi Girl," for example, "I saw Papa Saddam on TVs [sic]... I thought he was bigger than anyone.")⁴¹ While the state continued to advance women's education and participation in the labor force, it also co-opted many women's associations, including a massive organization called the Iraqi Women's League, into a huge apparatus through which it supervised women's behavior.⁴²

However much women resented an increasing state role in their private and public lives, their dissent tended to be buffered by a flourishing, oil-driven economy from which many benefited—including women.⁴³ Saddam Hussein, fully in control of Iraq by 1979, claimed that women were half of society.⁴⁴ Accordingly, he encouraged women's education and participation in an economy that was increasingly buoyed by oil. As part of Saddam Hussein's "New Iraqi Woman" discourse, women's salaries went up, and state assistance for working mothers increased. Iraqi men were fined if they failed to allow women to participate in education and labor.⁴⁵ The 1970s was thus a decade of contradictions between women's repression and advancements.⁴⁶

A series of wars, beginning with the Iran-Iraq War, which lasted from 1980-1988, brought advancement to a halt, and, at the same time, an increase in repression. As Iraq's war with Iran dragged on, women were asked to sacrifice much for the nation. Raffo's "Iraqi Girl" says: "Momma she cried she said, 'Saddam stole my sons, he stole my sons.' I had three brothers they were bigger I didn't really know them, they were martyrs. She always says... 'what now, what now, what now.'"⁴⁷ Kurdish women (and men) suffered the agonies of a secondary war: that of "eradication." Hallabja in 1988 is the most brutal example of an ethnic cleansing designed

to purge Iraq of state enemies. Shi'a Muslims would face similar atrocities in Iraq's southern regions.

War brought new gender expectations for men as well as women. New images of masculinity, wrought of war, required men to protect the homeland, and women to tend to the home; accordingly, women's prominence in the public sphere began to lessen, as did their comfort in it.⁴⁸ Says "Iraqi Girl" again: "We don't go anywhere, really!!! Momma she doesn't even go to work anymore... She never leaves the house except to go to the market with my uncle."⁴⁹

Operation Desert Storm (1991) and the thirteen years of sanctions that followed it accelerated for Iraqis that which the Iran-Iraq War had started. While in 1990, Iraqi women's employment levels were the highest in the region at 23%, that number would drop to 10% in 1997. Salaries for work in the public sector—the largest employer of women—dropped substantially over the 1990s.⁵⁰ Consequently, women's unemployment levels skyrocketed. Women had to be creative in order to maintain their livelihoods. (Raffo's characters "Mulaya," a professional mourner, and "Nanna" both sell other people's castoffs in order to survive). Al-Ali tells us that as sanctions made the availability of food and medicine insufficient, women spent increased amounts of time in search of scarce resources, making time for activism and volunteerism a luxury. Increasingly, as Iraq's infrastructure continued to deteriorate, as day care and nurseries closed, as public transportation shut down, and as crime increased, women's access to the public realm became increasingly fragile.⁵¹ Women stopped looking to education as a vehicle for change. Accordingly, illiteracy increased from 8% in 1985 to 55% by the late 1990s.⁵²

Iraqi women would also bear the burden of changes in gender ideology that were the by-product of Saddam Hussein's reaction to war and sanctions. State discourse shifted away from one that favored women's participation in the work force toward more conservative and traditional roles for women.⁵³ Raffo's character "Huda" says: "Then the worst 13 years of suffering... and it made Saddam stronger, and the country more backwards and more religious... This 13 years of embargo just gave the fundamentalists their legitimacy."⁵⁴ The housewife replaced the working woman as Saddam Hussein's state-sponsored icon.⁵⁵ The state became more conservative, pointing to Islamic tradition rather than secular values a means of solving Iraq's crisis. Saddam Hussein became obsessed, for example, with the idea that Iraqi women had given up their morals in favor of prostitution, and acted aggressively to repress women's sexuality. "Huda" says: "One summer he beheaded seventy women for being prostitutes, but he made them prostitutes."⁵⁶ Dress codes consequently became stricter. Men began demanding that women wear the *abaya*.⁵⁷ From her exile in London,

“Huda” observes that “they are still shell shocked all these girls. They’re going backwards. They abandon their education and now they are wearing the veils. Their grandmothers are more liberated than them.”⁵⁸

After many years of war and of deprivations, some Iraqi women welcomed the U.S. invasion in 2003. Some were skeptical about the motives for the invasion, however, citing oil, big business, Zionism, and unbridled American support for Israel as driving the Bush administration’s decisions.⁵⁹ “Huda” claimed: “Personally, I had my doubts about American policy. I felt they were making their own map of the Middle East.”⁶⁰ Others were less cynical, seeing the arrival of American troops as a necessary first step in Iraq’s return to earlier days of democracy, freedom, and human rights. Still others saw the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime as reason enough to celebrate. Even the skeptical “Huda” concluded that Saddam Hussein was a bigger enemy than imperialism: “I walked for peace in Vietnam. I walked for Chile but this war was personal, this war was against all my beliefs and yet I wanted it.”⁶¹

By 2005, any hope that the occupation would improve Iraq was replaced by deterioration in living conditions, bombardments, lack of basic infrastructure, thieving, looting, lawlessness, and violence—both by occupation forces and by Islamist militias.⁶² Women who once aspired to participate in the public realm now struggle simply to survive. “Huda” says: “You think the people don’t want liberation? Every day they risk their lives just to go to school. The children even they leave the house and don’t know if they’ll come back.”⁶³ Raffo’s “Iraqi girl,” meanwhile, cannot go to school, in part because of the danger, in part because her mother caught her waving to cute American soldiers.⁶⁴

But women’s desires to participate in the public realm have also been shelved by changing gender norms, many of which have been framed as Islamization but which in reality have to do with politics.⁶⁵ Women—and men—who have been elected to govern Iraq have been the target of violence by those whose parties and political interests they do not represent.⁶⁶ The sectarian- and ethnic-based groups who are currently struggling to gain control of the Iraqi body politic use women, and women’s behavior, as symbols of their agendas. Women have been used by Islamists and others as a means of articulating anti-Ba’ath, anti-Western, and anti-imperialist agendas.⁶⁷ Islamist militias, both Sunni and Shi’a, have used dress codes, gender segregation, and *fatawa*, or legal injunctions, against women leaving their homes as a means of claiming control of the political arena and of defining Iraq to their liking.⁶⁸

American students who have grown accustomed to viewing images of covered Iraqi women, and to hearing stories about rising sectarianism in Iraq, might be tempted—as was Brooks—to search through holy texts

for explanations. Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* offers an alternative. Without dismissing religion and tradition, the play insists that women's desires be placed within the context of contemporary Iraq, shaped as much by international and local politics, economics, culture, war, and ideology as by tradition. Within such a context, we are not asked to overlook religion. Rather, we are asked to understand it as a single strand in the constantly changing fabric of modern life.

Classroom Activities for *9 Parts*

To facilitate discussion of the play, I divide the class into nine groups, each representing one of Raffo's characters. Their job is to contextualize the woman they represent, and to identify the political, economic, social, and cultural histories that have shaped her life. I have not yet asked students to perform the play, but I do ask them to imagine how they might cast their character, what she might look like, and how she might dress, speak, or carry herself based on her class, educational background, and living conditions. Based on Raffo's introduction to the play, I ask students how their characters might wear their *abaya*, and what wearing it in such a fashion might represent, both for the character and within the context of contemporary Iraq.

For a second discussion, keeping the students in these same groups, I ask for comparisons of Raffo's characters with women from other regions in the Middle East whose stories they have heard over the semester. Where else might they find women like "Huda", "Nanna", "Mulaya", and "The Doctor"? What would the differences and similarities be for these women in places like Iran, Egypt, and Turkey? What historical factors might produce a "Huda" in Iraq but not in Egypt, for example? What kinds of factors have produced "Nannas" throughout the region?

As a final project, I have student read Brooks' *Nine Parts* a second time. Comparative discussions of the two texts—eighteen collective parts of desire—tend to be lively and rich. I ask my classes to reflect upon the books' shared title. What is it that modern Middle Eastern women desire? Are desires specific to a region and a religion? Does a Middle Eastern woman's potential to transform a desire into a skill, or a mate, or a possession issue from the woman herself, or God, or the government, or the global economy? In the end, both Brooks and Raffo attribute women's place or station to forces outside of the control of women themselves. While Raffo's nine women's desires are met (or not) by forces that historians can measure (states, economies, educational systems), both women seem to suggest that historical subjects are constituted by a host of factors, some of which we can account for and others we cannot.

This exercise is not one of praising Raffo's work at Brooks' expense. Students remain fond of Brooks, and find that her *Nine Parts of Desire* has much wit and attention to descriptive detail to recommend it. The second time around, however, students are able to read her book more critically, to notice the lack of context, and to appreciate the pitfalls attendant to ignoring historical detail. They question Brooks' narrow focus on religion. They ask questions about the motivations of a Western woman looking to find traces of the seventh century in the 1980s, much as they earlier learned to question the impulses of Victorian travel writers. In light of increased U.S. interventions in the Middle East at the time of Brooks' publication (1995) they wonder if Brooks' women appear to need rescuing. They ask if Raffo's Iraqi-American heritage prevented her from seeing "the whole picture," and wonder if she "left religion out." The beauty of this final discussion lies not in the arrival at any definitive answer, but rather in the end-of-semester blossoming of students' skills at interrogating sources, questioning authors, and contextualizing those authors' projects.

I ask them to focus on Brooks' notion that Muslim women are "hidden" in light of their reading of Raffo, and to pay particular attention to veiling and to women in the public sphere. I ask them specifically to trace the history of the veil/*abaya* over the course of twentieth-century Iraq. Did Iranian clerics produce women's impulse to cover, as per Brooks' perception, or might we not look at specific forces in Iraqi history? I ask the same about women's relationship to public space in Iraq. Is women's increased need for seclusion the result of the Prophet Muhammad's relationship with his wives, or are there specific historical circumstances that need to be investigated? In each case, I ask students to reflect on Brooks' paradigm as well as Raffo's and to consider the merits and liabilities of each.

For a final writing assignment, I ask students to choose a favorite episode from Brooks, and to re-write it with more attention to historical context. For example, if they select the incident with which the book opens (Brooks' struggle to secure a hotel room in Saudi Arabia), I ask them to address what has happened in the Arabian Peninsula since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, specifically in the modern era, to produce the relationship between what appears to be religion and public culture. If they choose the Iranian Revolution, I ask them to address the contemporary phenomena that produced the upheaval, and then to discuss women's roles in it.

Conclusion

Reading and discussing these collective eighteen parts of desire within the context of a class on modern Middle Eastern women facilitates student engagement with two histories. The first is the history of Western

imagination about the Middle East. In the present, as in the past, that imagination produces potent and resilient images of harems, veils, and polygamy. Without careful investigation, it has been possible to reduce places like Saudi Arabia and Iraq to institutions that subjugate women and, at the same time, appear to weaken the body politic. It is crucial for American students to encounter the history of that imagination and of its consequences. The second is the history of women outside of the confines of imagination. Here, women appear as teachers, artists, politicians, and revolutionaries. When viewed within the political, economic, and cultural institutions that define women's experiences worldwide, Middle Eastern women appear to be neither hidden nor unusual. When placed within a historical context that is not reduced to religious experiences or defined by the past, Middle Eastern women emerge as historical subjects, more familiar than bizarre, less hidden than visible.

Notes

1. Thanks to the students at Davidson College for allowing me to try out these comparisons in a lecture there in 2011, and to my students at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington (UNCW), whose desire to be historians fuels great discussion and debate. Thanks to my writing cohort in the UNCW history department, and to Sarah Shields and Patricia Conlon for reading several drafts of this article. The anonymous readers for *The History Teacher* were similarly astute critics, whose suggestions helped shape my thinking about this article and its application to my classroom. For a recent example, see Thomas Friedman, "The Fear Factor," *The New York Times*, 26 June 2012.

2. George W. Bush, press conference, 11 October 2011, available at <<http://www.johnstonarchive.net/terrorism/bush911e.html>>.

3. Geraldine Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995).

4. *Ibid.*, 5.

5. *Ibid.*, 3.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, 5.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 23.

10. *Ibid.*, 17.

11. *Ibid.*, 7.

12. *Ibid.*, 10, 11.

13. *Ibid.*, 16.

14. *Ibid.*, 20-21. The quote is from Sura 24, verse 31.

15. *Ibid.*, 19.

16. Billie Melman, *Women's Orient: English Women and the Middle East, 1718-1918* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Rana Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions:*

Europe's Myths of Orient (London, United Kingdom: Saqi Books, 2009).

17. Melman, 76.

18. William Morton Fullerton, *In Cairo* (London, United Kingdom: Macmillan and Co., 1891), 1-2.

19. Examples include: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *Turkish Embassy Letters* (London, United Kingdom: Little, Brown Book Group, 1884); Florence Nightengale, *Letters from Egypt: A Journey on the Nile (1849-1850)* (New York: Grove Press, 1987); Charles Dudley Warner, *My Winter on the Nile, Among the Mummies and Moslems* (Hartford, CT: American Publishing Company, 1876).

20. For an overview of the field of Middle Eastern women's history, and for suggestions on useful literature, see Nikki R. Keddie, *Women in the Middle East Past and Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

21. See, inter alia, Leslie Pierce, *The Imperial Harem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Afaf Marsot, *Women and Men in Late Eighteenth-Century Egypt* (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 2005); Mona Russell, *Creating the New Egyptian Woman: Consumerism, Education, and National Identity, 1863-1923* (New York: Palgrave Press, 2004); Mary Ann Fay, *Unveiling the Harem: Elite Women and the Paradox of Seclusion in Eighteenth-Century Cairo* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012).

22. Lisa Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation: The Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing, and Liberating Egypt, 1805-1923* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), chapter 3.

23. *Ibid.*, 88 and note 45.

24. Earl of Cromer (Evelyn Baring), *Modern Egypt* (London, United Kingdom: Macmillan, 1908), 528.

25. Huda Shaarawi, *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*, ed. and trans. Margot Badran (New York: The Feminist Press of the City University of New York, 1986).

26. See Maria Beach, "Nine Parts of Desire" (review), *Theatre Journal* 58, no. 1 (March 2006), 102-103.

27. Heather Raffo, *9 Parts of Desire* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 2006).

28. *Ibid.*, 5.

29. Muhammed bin Hasan al-Hurr al-'Amili, *Wasa'ilu sh-Shi'ah* (20 volumes) (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Ihya' I't-Turathi' il-'Arabi, 1391 AH edition), vol. 14, p. 20.

30. Nadjie Sadig Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present* (London, United Kingdom: Zed Books, 2007). Raffo's *9 Parts* joins ranks with a growing body of literature on modern Iraq, from blogs to historical accounts and novels, dedicated to portraying women's experiences within the context of Iraq's current circumstances. Al-Ali, for example, illustrates the powerful role of the nation-state in determining women's lives. She and co-author Nicola Pratt draw similar conclusions in *What Kind of Liberation: Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), in their portrayal of women's lives under the American occupation. Iraqi blogger "Riverbend" likewise provides a searing account of women's realities after 2003, illustrating that the decline in women's contributions to the public realm have been the result of chaos wrought by the occupation and by the fall of the Ba'ath regime. (Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning, A Blog by Riverbend* (New York: The Feminist Press of the City University of New York, 2005). Memoirists like Nuha al-Radi, in *Baghdad Diaries: A Woman's Chronicles of War and Exile* (New York: Vintage Press, 2003) and novelists such as Betoool Khedairi, in *Absent* (New York, Random House, 2007), paint vivid depictions of the consequences of war and sanctions on women's fortunes.

31. Raffo, "Author's Note," 5.
32. Ibid., "Production Note," 68.
33. Ibid., 43.
34. Al-Ali, 62.
35. On Iraq in this era, as portrayed through interviews with Iraqi women, see Al-Ali, 59-108. See also Marion Farouk-Sluglett, "Liberation or Repression: Pan-Arab Nationalism and the Women's Movement in Iraq," in *Iraq: Power and Society*, ed. Derek Hopwood, Habib Ishow, and Thomas Koszinowski (Oxford, United Kingdom: Ithaca Press, 1993), 51-74.
36. Raffo, 25.
37. Ibid., 40.
38. On women in Ba'athist Iraq, in addition to Al-Ali, see Amal Rassam, "Revolution Within the Revolution? Women and the State in Iraq" and Amal al-Sharqi, "The Emancipation of Iraqi Women," both in *Iraq: The Contemporary State*, ed. Tim Niblock (London, United Kingdom: St. Martin's Press, 1992).
39. Al-Ali, 112-113.
40. Ibid., 111.
41. Raffo, 28.
42. Al-Ali, 136-137.
43. Ibid., 127-131.
44. Ibid., 131.
45. Ibid., 137.
46. Ibid., 139-146.
47. Raffo, 28.
48. Al-Ali, 150-165.
49. Raffo, 27.
50. Al-Ali, 186-187.
51. Ibid., 188.
52. Ibid., 198.
53. For an excellent account of women's experiences during the sanctions, see the chapter entitled "Embargo," in Nuha al-Radi, *Baghdad Diaries: A Woman's Account of War and Exile* (New York: Vintage Press, 1998), 61-131. In her novel *Absent* (New York: Random House, 2007), Betool Khediri offers a painful juxtaposition of the 1970s' "days of plenty" with the deprivations of sanctions.
54. Raffo, 40.
55. Al-Ali, 188-189.
56. Raffo, 23.
57. Al-Ali, 200-201.
58. Raffo, 39.
59. Al-Ali, 215-217.
60. Raffo, 22.
61. Ibid., 23.
62. Al-Ali, 217.
63. Raffo, 51.
64. Ibid., 26.
65. Al-Ali, 244.
66. Nadje Sadig Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation: Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 97-99.
67. Ibid., 13.
68. Al-Ali, 240-242.

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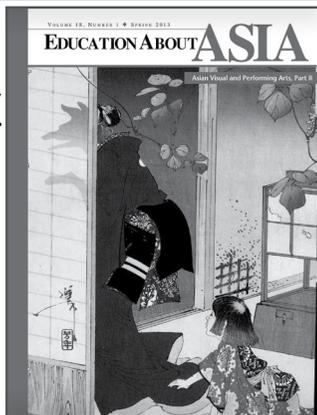


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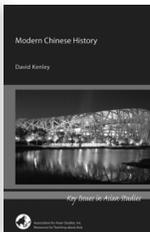
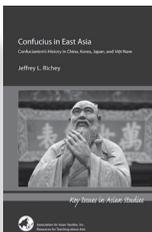
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