

## *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East*

Edited by PINAR ILKKARACAN

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*Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East* is a unique and welcome contribution to feminist studies and its lucid engagement of the concrete sexual and bodily contestations in the region of the Middle East offers us epistemological insights otherwise marginalised in feminist theorisations. The edited volume explores the 'contemporary dynamics of sexuality in the Middle East/North Africa', paying particular attention to the methods states and societies use to retrench the rights of women and other sexual marginalised populations.

This volume begins with the assumption that sexuality is at the forefront of the contestations of power and struggles in the formation of subjects. In the introduction Ilkkaracan argues lucidly that sexuality is a crucial, politically contested site that decides the future of women's reproductive rights, queers' rights and, above all, their existence. The authors in the volume point to the disjuncture that exists between moralistic and legal discourses on sexuality and gender (the declarations made by state officials about women's reproductive rights) that ends up affecting women's lives not just *tenderly but violently* (Wexler, 2000).

The volume comprises nine chapters that engage different sexual struggles in the constantly changing contexts of Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Palestine and Turkey. Each chapter illuminates how discourses and debates by different actors complicate gender and sexual relations. For instance, Ilkkaracan argues that, despite modernisation changes and transformations of legal regimes, many countries in the Middle East are still not securing women's rights with regards to reproduction, choice, and sexual expression. She complicates the regional sexual and gender contestations with other mediating axes of power (religion, imperial colonisations and technological innovations) that shape and are shaped by the political and socio-economic context of the Middle East. She proceeds to argue that there are reductive (I would call them *Orientalist*) moves by the 'west [and feminists] to view Islam and so-called Muslim culture as the sole parameters that determine sexual politics in Muslim societies' (p. 3). Narrowly punctuated epistemological insights about this region's complex and nuanced emergence and shifts of power relations and contestations that reduce everything to 'religion, culture, or a simple binary opposition between the religious right and advocates of feminism or secularism' (p. 11) are problematic as they end up colluding with 'promot[ing] rigid notions of masculinity and femininity and perpetuate a culture of aggression and intolerance' (as stated by the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies, p. 5).

The book centralises sexuality and gender as 'sites of contestation' of power and in each chapter, authors unfold different aspects of sexual and gender struggles that highlight power dynamics. The chapter by Zuhur engages with the 'amalgamation of tribal, religious, colonial laws and their impact on the existing criminal/penal codes' (p. 11). It is a nuanced genealogical tracing of the formation of criminal/penal codes and shows how such codes cannot be reduced to just one worldview as they are an amalgamation of colonial Ottoman, British and French codes. By engaging comparatively the sexual, criminal, reproductive effects of the criminal/penal codes on women, gays, and other marginalised peoples, Zuhur shows eloquently that law legitimises sexual rights' violations in the region. In chapter 3, Ilkkaracan details the women's movement in Ankara and their struggles against political violence in 2004 when Turkey was in the process of applying for EU membership. She argues that their major slogan 'Our bodies and sexuality belong to ourselves' challenged the Turkish political officials to reform the Turkish Penal Code in Turkey with regards to adultery law. Drawing on Erdoğan's comment that 'there were those who marched to Ankara, carrying placards that do not suit the Turkish woman ... A marginal group cannot represent the Turkish woman' (p. 42), she shows how sexual relations are directly linked to questions of national identity within a regional context. The campaign by activists challenging these new articulations contributed to the reforms of the Penal Code from a gender perspective but, as Ilkkaracan tells us, this campaign is a starting point to other constitutional and civil reforms.

In chapter 4, Nanes engages the Jordanian women's campaign to eliminate crimes of honour by cancelling Article 340, which supports adultery killings. Nanes ends up arguing that even when 'the palace in Jordan subtly co-opted their independent associational activity to engage with a very sensitive social issue' (p. 81), the women's campaign points to alternative civil society models of politics that can challenge and reform laws that uphold any kind of sexual and gender violence. Chapters 5 and 6 explore the contested nature of sexuality by engaging with discourses produced by 'modernists', 'traditionalists', 'Islamists', 'feminists', religious authorities, and professional health practitioners. Both chapters show that social, demographic, and other socio-economic and political transformations affect these discourses especially on issues of sex and sexuality. Shahidian shows a convergence between Islamist and scientific discourses around sexuality as these regimes work simultaneously to categorise and regulate sexual behaviour. However, feminists who contest dominant understandings of sexuality, he argues, challenge these practices.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 engage the ways the militarization of societies and the public discourses depend on the erection of discursive regimes of sexuality and gender. Rodhe analyses the controversial debates that appeared in the Iraqi newspapers on female sexuality and shows how the Ba'ath regime shifted its 1974 understanding of women's liberation in the mid-1980s. Instead of continuing to focus on 'gender equality' it began to 'propagate ... gendered and sexualized images with extremely polarized notions of masculinity and femininity to support the massive militarization of Iraqi society' (p. 14). Saigol presents an excellent analysis of how the 'sexual'

becomes a terrain of contestation and/or 'construction of nationalist or militarist ideology' thus making possible particular sexual and gender ideas for incorporation in the everyday life of people. She analyses the imagery of desire, eroticism, and the male gaze in poetry, songs, plays, and popular films in Pakistan. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian examines predominant attitudes toward rape in contemporary Palestinian society and argues that in the Middle East context militarization is not just creating a nationalist ideology in which women's bodies become carriers of the nation but also generates sexual violence with long-term effects on women's resiliency and health. The concluding chapter by Gülçür and Ilkcaracan addresses how the global market depends on discursive regimes of sex and gender. They examine how women from Eastern European and the former Soviet Union undertake sex work in Turkey. They discuss how workers are constructed as 'Natasha', a 'generic term' used interchangeably with the word prostitute in order to make possible and justify their sexual domination and exploitation in the sex industries. For them, thus, the focus of policies and sex debates requires a shift from the idea of whether sex workers have a choice in their line of work to debates on how to change the working and living conditions of women by 'addressing restrictive and abusive immigration policies, and decriminalizing sex work' (p. 15).

Though difficult to admit, in the process of writing our social relations, feminist scholars may still have to recognise that the project of modernity has succeeded in effecting in us a forgetfulness of a very different past about regionality and its sexual economies. This edited volume paves the way for more scholarship on questions such as: how are, for instance, complex social conceptualisations, distilled into bounded concepts (the Middle East)? What is, the presumed understanding of *Middle East and/or Asia* in the tracing of sexual and gender contestations? All that said, this volume contributes immensely to the theoretical debates on sex, sexuality, and gender relations. More so, the scholars in the volume disrupt the dominant and *orientalist* idea that feminists of the Global South and/or regions like the Middle East should just be empirical contributors to such debates. The very carefully and nuanced tracing of the epistemological/political tensions as embodied by different movements, campaigns and practices are revolutionary – that, as women's rights activists, lesbian, gay, transgender, transsexual, working class and all colonised peoples in 'Eurasia' know best, will, if organised collectively, disrupt those power relations that are vehemently (re) creating the conditions that would co-opt, incorporate, and with impunity kill anybody and/or *anything* that threatens the formations of (neo) colonial, patriarchal, heterosexual and imperial orders.

This book is a useful text for scholars in Cyprus to consider how gender and sexuality inform and shape questions about the militarization of the society itself, the youth's understanding of subject political formation, sovereign and territorial issues, racial and national identity questions, and above all, the articulation of alternative community formations. How, for instance, does being part of a military training inform and shape the way men and women understand their femininity or masculinity? What kind of a sexual subject does Turkish, Greek, Armenian, Arab, etc., embody and how does that inform and shape teaching in our schools sexuality and gender?

If sexuality and gender are neither uniform, nor homogeneous as the authors in this volume articulate, how would we contemplate the structures of sexuality and gender in colonial and postcolonial conditions in Cyprus? I want to suggest along with the authors in the text that if these structures of sexuality and gender are thoroughly entangled with the vicissitudes of the affective, the subjective play of sexual, racial, and class then desire and uncertainty are not mere rhetorical figures. On the one hand, gender and sexuality, desire and affect may be seen by some as subtle and gradual shifting relations, almost imperceptible, segregated, on the other hand, from the 'political' and always urgent issues that we face (i.e. militarization of the island, migration conflicts, crime, militarization of youth, neoliberal market changes, privatisation of social services, etc.), presuming that these phenomena are not themselves political and worthy of our urgent attention. Still, what this volume has exposed is that sex and gender, and I want to argue affect and desire are themselves entangled with the phenomena we have come to centralise as politics (i.e. conflict, war, military relations) and consequently, the task of scholars as social critics is therefore to help us think philosophically about the various ways in which sex and gender, desire and affect co-exist with sovereignty and territory, property and crime, military and the erection of hero-hetero-statues. Along with this volume scholars in Cyprus also have to consider how the tracing of 'regionality', either through a European or Middle Eastern orientation of political discourse on sex and gender exposes the limits of our understandings of Cyprus. The interrogation on gender and sexuality as it is entangled with racial, class, and ability is very much related to an interrogation on our contemporary life-world in Cyprus – a world of global infrastructures such as the market, mass media, and technologies which shape in a variety of ways and forms the social relations and power structures of Cyprus. Hence, thinking with this volume about Cyprus and its diverse subjects pushes us to consider how much of our social energies and personal creativity is devoted to producing a sense of a racial (i.e. sanitised form of ethnic) permanence through a production of a hetero-masculine militant soldier ready to either fight against or invade an enemy, or consumers ready to consume anything anywhere by any means possible including 'crime', market gambling or trafficking for satiating one's desires for more sex or money (Agathangelou and Killian, 2011).

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