Behind Closed Doors: Gendered Home Spaces in a Gulf Arab State

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A Qatari architect in our study observed that a woman’s abaya (the black overgarment that is the national dress), shayla (an accompanying black head covering), and niqab (a black face veil covering all but her eyes) are the embodied extension of gendered spaces in Qatari homes. That is, it provides a sense of privacy and modesty as well as a screen safeguarding the woman from the gaze of the outside (predominantly male) world. This video provides an introduction to the changing role of home design in the wealthy state of Qatar and how it relates to gender identity and other meanings.

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LONG ABSTRACT

In the United States misunderstandings of Middle Eastern women are particularly strong. As Read (2003) observes, “Cultural stereotypes of Arab-American women tend to collapse religion and ethnicity into synonymous components of culture, portraying them as veiled Islamic traditionalists” (p. 208). These misunderstandings are fueled by prejudice and are, if anything, stronger when it comes to Arab women in the Middle East rather than emigrants to the United States. While Western xenophobia and prejudices toward the Middle East and Islam have grown stronger since the September 11th attacks on the Twin Trade Towers, there is a long history of vilifying Arabs in Hollywood films (Shaheen 2001). These stereotypes of Arab women over a century of Hollywood films include the woman of the closeted, subservient, and oppressed wife, the exotic, scantily clad, and sexually seductive harem maiden, the fat, unattractive beast of burden, the shapeless, ululating bundle of black, and the mindless fanatical terrorist. Never do we see normal Arab women at home with their families, in the office or workplace, or occupying professional positions as professors, engineers, or doctors. In other words, rather than portray a common humanity, Middle Eastern women are depicted in the Western media as objects, villains, threats, and victims.

By focusing on the home and gendered spaces and objects within it, our research presents a more accurate, normal, and human face for Qatari women. In so-doing, we hope to help create greater understanding as well as contribute to research streams concerning home, identity, culture, consumption, and gender. We sought to know what goes on behind the closed doors of the Middle Eastern household. As a crossroads of the Middle East, Qatar offers a unique opportunity to understand what is unique as well as what is common in Middle Eastern and Western values involving women, privacy, identity, and the home.

The consumption of spaces and places within our homes is expressive of culture. Using observation and ethnographic depth interviews with 30 middleclass Qatari families, we hoped to understand the meanings of home spaces and artifacts in their lives. We find that the home and its spaces and objects are encoded differently by men and women, particularly in terms of notions of privacy. Historically, the idea of personal versus shared spaces within homes is a relatively new one. Tuan (1982) shows that it is only within the last few hundred years that notions of privacy and of separate public and private spaces within the home have emerged. Notions of private space are also encoded architecturally and intimacy within the nuclear family is a concept that has grown as the presence of extended families sharing the same home has diminished. As Rybczynski (1986) points out, it was highly unusual for someone in the sixteenth century to have his or her own room and it was another century before people had rooms where they could retreat from the public view. In the process of privatization of areas of the home, individual family members began to think of areas of the home as being their territories (Altman 1975). Even when a particular area like the bathroom must be shared with other family members, it is common to temporarily claim private space for hygienic, purifying, and beautification rituals, on either a scheduled or first-come/first-served basis (Kira 1970). All of these distinctions are expanded in the Arabian Gulf. When these spaces are encroached upon by others, there is a sense of violation of privacy and person. There is therefore an inclination to formally or informally designate spaces and boundaries defining personal space, spaces for close kin, and spaces where gender-segregated friends, neighbors, and strangers can meet within the home.

The Middle Eastern sense of what is totally private is more absolute, due largely to the moral concerns of Islam. Within Arab Muslim homes, there is a sharper distinction between men’s and women’s spaces as well as transitional spaces in moving from one to another. Compared to the West there is also a sharper distinction in these homes between public and private space, often with high exterior perimeter walls and inward facing rooms. Furthermore, there is a sense of private space that a Muslim woman carries with her as she goes from home to marketplace. As Cooper (2001) found for women in Niger, creating and decorating a room of their own was extremely important to their identities as well as their sense of social and economic status. Although some (e.g., Nageeb 2004) have called this enclaving of space a “neo-harem,” reducing rather than increasing women’s sense of space and of control over their lives, our informants find it liberating. While there are also gendered areas within Western households, we find sharper and more formally drawn boundaries within the present study in Qatar. The basis for these differences are cultural and do not arise from prescriptions within Islam, although there is disagreement on this point (Campo 1991; Nageeb 2004).

If clothing can be thought of as a second skin for the individual, home and personal possessions may be seen as a third skin defining who we are by forming a part of our extended self (Belk 1988). Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) found that Americans’ favorite objects were more likely to be linked to personal memories, while those from Muslim Niger were more likely to mention objects linked to social status. They also found gender differences, with men in Niger more likely to cite the Quran and women more likely to cite silver jewelry as well as objects given to them by others. On the other hand, we found less difference, with favorite possessions within the home likely to be sentimental objects, especially for women in our study. The present video focuses more on home spaces and provides a context for further on-going examination of favorite possessions.