Behind Closed Doors: Gendered Home Spaces in an Arab Gulf State (22:00)

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A Qatari architect in our study observed that a woman’s abaya (the black over-garment 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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For example, in music, without the silence between notes the notes themselves lose meaning (Zakia 1993). One may not consciously be aware of the negative space that encompasses a piece, but without it the nature of the artistic creation is often muddled and lost in the composition (Brittain & Beitell 1960). It is when the difference between the negative and positive space is overly exaggerated that one can more clearly see the positive, but also the role that the negative plays in framing the subject itself.

This research shows how the contrast between the positive, in this case a wedding, and the negative, the everyday lives of the participants, is exaggerated to more clearly understand and appreciate the positive or sacred as being differentiated from the profane and everyday. Although all five Aristotelian senses are exaggerated in an Indian wedding this movie only focuses on the exaggerated contrast of audial and visual cues.

The methodology employed in the research was that of a videoethnographic study. The chosen context was a typical North Indian Hindu wedding held in December 2006. The research followed the marriage participants throughout the many different Hindu wedding rituals as well as interviewing family members to understand the cultural meanings associated with the various aspects of the wedding. In total, 14 hours of video tape was recorded focusing on the wedding itself. However, to understand the everyday lives of the participants the researcher continued to follow the couple before and after the wedding as they lived their lives away from the sacredness of the ceremonies. A further 11 hours of video was taken of non-wedding context. The final dataset comprised primarily of observational data and interviews with various people living in Delhi.

From the research it was seen that colour was the most prominently exaggerated visual cue used to differentiate the wedding from the negative space of the participants’ everyday lives. Gold, red, orange and silver all play a prominent role in the observed ceremonies, but are rarely seen in such brilliance and concentration in everyday Delhi life. Clothing is also used as a means of contrast with turbans and finest saris worn especially for the ceremonies, but are rarely worn at other times. The central focus of the main wedding ceremony is the Hawan or holy fire that grows in intensity as the ceremony progresses. The combination of rhythmic chanting and growing flames offer an almost hypnotic audial and visual contrast from the often mundane nature of city life.

Audial cues are clearly contrasted in a number of ways. For example, when the groom approaches the bride on the wedding day he is led by a large band playing traditional and auspicious instruments such as the Shehnai. The sounds experienced by participants are in stark contrast to the soundscape of traffic and white noise that typify modern Delhi life.

Based on the research it is possible to see a number of areas where audial and visual cues are overly exaggerated to promote the importance of the sacred and positive and differentiate it from the negative space that the profane offers. This effect is also seen in many other contexts beyond the Hindu wedding ceremony, such as the prominence of Washington monument over the relatively flat landscape of Washington D.C.; the use of stained glass in Christian architecture and even the importance of a singular finger set aside for wedding rings in western culture. When mixed with the profane the sacred loses its efficaciousness (Durkheim 1915 [1928]); however, by exaggerating the difference between the sacred and profane the sacredness of the Hindu wedding is more easily recognised as such.

References

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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 those 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.