

Through My Own Gaze: An Arab Feminist Struggling With Patriarchal Arabness Through Western Hegemony

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As I sit quietly in the Middle Eastern Hookah Lounge¹, I pause and take a look around. Will my culture accept me for who I am? My inner voices yearn for the need to write about feminism and about women's issues but how will the Arab Male perceive this? I begin to remember how my Arab male friends would make fun of me when I scolded them for being sexist. I feel a struggle within me and begin to feel uneasy. I glance around and feel a heightened sensitivity to each and every man looking at me. I seek safe haven in my computer and start typing again frantically. Is this the fear of patriarchy? Or have I been caught between the West and the East in a battle over my own identity? The waitress walks over and brings me my Arabic Coffee, and I feel a sense of belonging. The Saudi man I met a few weeks ago comes over to say hello in Arabic and my inner voices lay to rest.

I am peculiar to this culture, I belong... but I don't... This site is a Middle Eastern one, it is one that embraces Islam and embraces female modesty and submissiveness, but I am interested in feminism. How will I fit in to my culture? How will I fit into any culture? Will I be ostracized by Arab men? Will I be sidelined by global hegemonic patriarchy? I feel another contestation unfold within me and delve back into my computer again. Why do I not struggle like this among my white male peers? Patriarchy is ubiquitous so why am I more sensitive to it in my own culture? Does this mean that race matters? That culture matters? I look up from my computer, and my new Afghani friend is standing in front of

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¹ A **Hookah** is a common Middle Eastern water pipe that is used to smoke fruity tobacco. It is a stemmed instrument filled with vapor and water and coals are placed on the top of it in order to produce smoke.

me. I feel prostrated by a cloud of dominance and force, which is instantly nullified when the check arrives and we engage in a fierce tug of war over who will pay for the hookah. Suddenly my Arabness rushes through my body like an invigorating energy. I feel proud to be part of such a generous culture no matter what class or ethnicity. As we wait for the check, I over hear the table next to me discuss the Palestinian/Israeli Conflict. I feel unity, I feel nationalism, and I feel melancholic. I feel an aching pain in my heart and I remember the wounds that I have been carrying down from generation to generation as a Palestinian. The Palestinian struggle is a regional struggle; it might be the only thing left that will unite us as Arabs. I get up to leave and feel a dozen brown eyes slowly undress me. I seek refuge in my phone as I walk towards the exit.

Hegemonic and Heteronormative Whiteness

Time and again, hegemonic and heteronormative whiteness is omnipresent. It exists in a vacuum and we are consciously and unconsciously sucked into this space of constant patriarchy, colonialism, and hegemony. As Middle Eastern feminists we travel abroad to study and are stuck in a chaotic binary. It is a dualism between resisting our own Middle Eastern patriarchal structures while not appearing to be too Western. It means resisting Western notions of imperialism at the risk of prolonging patriarchy in our part of the region. Thus, it is a different struggle depending on where we are at that given time. *The Hookah Lounge* represents a blending of these contradicting struggles. It represents Middle Eastern patriarchy in the midst of hegemonic whiteness. Thus, it is the goal of this paper to describe this cultural milieu as it stands and to demonstrate the cultural aspects that prelude to this struggle.

Methods

In order to observe these cultural struggles, a Critical Ethnography lens guides my research. First, critical ethnography aims at addressing injustices within a particular space (Madison 5). It deconstructs power structures, truths and uncertainties (16). Thus, the goal of the ethnographer is to disrupt the cultural neutralities. In addition, critical ethnography thirsts for a need for self-reflection coupled with critical theories (Madison 7).

As of importance in the realm of critical ethnography is positionality. Madison stresses the need for positionality “because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege and biases just as we denounce the power structures that surround our subjects” (Madison 16). Therefore, I am accountable for my own positionality in this study. As a Middle Eastern intersectional feminist, I would not have been able to conduct this study if I were of a different background. My identity as a Middle Eastern woman and as a Middle Eastern feminist is what made this study possible. The implications and results would have not

emerged if this study was being done for example, by a white heterosexual female.

The study was primarily conducted over a period of two and a half months of detailed observation at a hookah lounge in Denver, Colorado. The field notes, consisted of approximately ten hours of observation per week. The site's conversations were also recorded meticulously. The goal of the study was to study the cultural site primarily through observing the interaction of the people, the physical site itself and my own positionality.

The study was an attempt to identify cultural disruptions or patterns that are divergent from the Middle Eastern region itself. It was also an attempt to locate interactions that serve as a breeding ground through which hegemonic whiteness and patriarchy emerge out of. Through these detailed observations, the study reveals an even more complex miniature struggle, which in turn can have further implications for Middle Eastern women.

Middle Eastern Patriarchy

It is important to note that in this paper, I refer to Middle Eastern patriarchy in the context of masculine domination and privilege. Thus, patriarchy is a global paradigm and exists ubiquitously. In Middle Eastern Societies, Females must respect the men in the family and are assumed to take on a more passive role than men (Joseph 195).

In this midst of this global patriarchy is the need to define women and feminism. I am not in any capacity trying to generalize feminism because I do not believe in universality concepts because they are detrimental to the advancement of Third World Feminism and to intersectionality theories. First, I define Third World Feminism as "imagined communities of women with divergent histories and social locations, woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but also systemic" (Mohanty 46). I believe in defining third world feminism is vital for this study because it is essential to understanding how third world feminism operates under Middle Eastern or Third World Patriarchy. Moreover, Middle Eastern Patriarchy is a concept I refer to constantly because the men in the hookah lounge are of Middle Eastern decent. In addition, this form of male dominance has a direct relation to myself and other women of color. Which is why intersectionality is vital. In order to empower feminist knowledge, one must take into account, the need to embrace race, class and gender as interlocking points of oppression (Collins 222).

Most of the people in the study are a mix of different Middle Easterners. Some are first and second generation Middle-Eastern Americans. Others are Middle Eastern students that are here only to study and go back. There aren't many white people at this site. However, the ones that are there are only there

to smoke hookah or are there with a Middle Eastern friend who is familiar with the site.

Through My Own Gaze: A Middle Eastern Cultural Milieu

As I drive up to the hookah lounge in Denver Colorado, situated behind a sushi bar hidden in the wings of a parking lot, I notice a familiar belonging. The lounge has parking all around the building. Looking around I see expensive German cars, indicating that the people inside or either car dealers that drive expensive cars or are students from the rich oil Gulf States (Middle East) who can easily afford these expensive cars. I also notice a third set of old Hondas and Nissans, indicating a more Arab-American crowd who did not have the luxury of high spending living that the students from the Gulf States did back home. There is a yellow sign at the top of the entrance to the lounge, barely visible to the eye from the main road but large enough to see if you are in the parking lot. The sign reads The Hookah Social House. Tall massive windows surround this social house but the maroon and gold curtains always remain closed, signifying that this lounge is a private and exclusive milieu. I enter an Arab melting pot of different racial overlays and feel both at home and at unease.

Upon entering the lounge the right side has three big seating areas with large black cozy leather couches. It feels and smells new, fresh and modern. It is a feeling that you don't get to experience in other hookah lounges in Colorado because they usually feel gloomy and dull because they are usually only opened at night time and are filled with smoke. The LCD screens on top of each seating area make it feel even cozier as many people sit down to watch the Cola Studio videos which bring Arabic and American artists together. It almost feels like a hybrid space of divergent cultures.

The ambience in the hookah lounge feels misty and dark. The modern/traditional chandeliers provide one with a dualistic feeling, almost as if the chandeliers are telling a story of where two roads or cultures meet. The gold curtains (that remain open) that separate the three leather-seating areas also provide privacy between the tables but also create discursive spaces where people can talk to each other across tables. In the middle section of the lounge are people playing backgammon and cards on restaurant style seated tables, making it more accessible to play games. The wall colors are relaxing but extravagant as seen through its beautiful shade of reddish-maroon. Another row of long couches that face all the other tables provide one with a sense of domination and power over the room. This side of the lounge can oversee everything. The couches are filled with traditional pillows and gold old-fashioned but modern round coffee tables. The tables have aesthetic Persian carpets under them that set the undertone of a vibrant Middle Eastern culture. At the very front of the restaurant is a long beautiful brown wooden bar with Arabic textile drawings. On the top of the bar are miniature gold plated hookahs and beautiful wooden backgammon boxes. Behind the bar is a door entrance that leads to

the kitchen. But more importantly are the shelves that are filled with beautiful and colorful hookahs, an old golden trumpet and an antique record player. To the right of the bar is a small hallway that leads to the bathrooms and to the left of the bar is a door that leads to the outside of the lounge and to the restaurant. It is a site that could be a breeding ground for Middle Eastern hybridity in the West.

As I glance around, I notice how friendly the waitresses are with their customers. Dressed in semi-formal clothing, they consistently bring out charcoals to place on top of the hookahs that provide the atmosphere with a fruity but smoky feeling. The customers seem eager to interact with the waitresses and are on a first name basis with them, making the atmosphere even more hospitable. Little attention is given to the fact that the waitresses often drop the charcoals on the floor or sometimes are slow on waiting the tables. This is due to the intimate bonds that have been established between the customers and the waitresses. The customers feel that they are in a familiar and home-like cultural milieu. The waitresses seem to be extremely acquainted with the customer's habits. For example if one customer seems to prefer two pieces of coal on his or her hookah, the waitresses try to remember these details and try to meet the customers needs. Moreover, many of the men in the room seem to like flirting with the waitresses. They do this on a constant basis and the waitresses usually reciprocate. In one instance, a group of guys were trying to speak to a few female customers on the adjacent table, when they didn't respond, the guys starting flirt again with the waitress.

As I reach for the menu that says, *Eat & Entertain*, again I feel a recognizable belonging. The menu, which has only two inside pages, consists of seven categories of different qualities of tobacco. The second page becomes even more familiar, as descriptions of the Arabic coffees and teas provide one with a heightened sense of smell almost as if the coffee aroma is lingering in the air.

The hookahs that the waitresses bring out are made out of floral glass from the bottom and have a brass/silver neck that supports the transport of the smoke to the top of hookah. The top part of the hookah consists of fruity tobacco stuffed inside a fruit and wrapped elegantly with foil. The hookahs provide a lingering smell throughout the lounge, which is consistently purified with a modern air ventilation system. Moroccan tea, another common drink at this cultural site seems to also bring familiarity to the customers. This caffeine inducing ritual also helps ease the smoking of the hookah. Some people order *Fatayer* (Arabic Pizzas) from the attached restaurant. The most common white pizza, which consists of Arabic white cheese, compliments the sweetness of the tea. As the waitresses come out with metal buckets with charcoal in them, the customers are persistent in calling them over in fear that their coals will burn out.

Then the chef comes out to ask the waitresses a question. He then walks over to the manager/owner to see if he needs anything. There is also the Hook-

ah maker who (if the place is not busy) often brings out his hookah and sits with the manager/owner. Sometimes when the lounge is extremely busy, the kitchen workers ask the manager for help. In this case, the manager usually gets very stressed. In more than one occasion he is seen yelling at the staff from inside the kitchen. In other occasions he bully's people into sitting at different tables so that he can maximize space when the place gets full. Many will complain that he is rude but they still return. The instability in managing the hookah lounge provides one with a remembrance of how unstable our region is. It feels like home again. Thus, the interaction of the staff, the owner and the manager create an even more familiar belonging to the place. The instability of this lounge is a cultural meeting ground, a home away from home. It is a remembrance of the unpredictability of our region, of colonialism of war and of death.

Suddenly, the music changes and gets louder. A white American belly dancer comes in and instantly there is a sudden shift in the atmosphere. Many continue to interact as they have before. Others stop to admire the dancer in the literary aspect, watching the dancer's body as she moves gracefully from side to side, thus admiring her abilities. Others watch the dancer and throw money at her mistakenly thinking that they are in a strip club or that the dancer is a sexual object. Some of the dancers seem comfortable with money being thrown at them but many are offended and leave the money on the floor at the end of their routine. The dancers are dressed in gold and colorful clothing that looks like a long skirt with gold sequins and a bikini top also overlaid with beautiful sequencing. The dancers mostly dance barefoot making it easier to move around the lounge and to move their bodies more liberally.

The interchange and interaction between dancing, gossiping, drinking and smoking becomes the foundation and very existence of this milieu. It symbolizes a regional Arabness, a familiar belonging but with new emergences as I aim to demonstrate.

Through My Own Gaze: Middle Eastern Patriarchy and Hegemonic Whiteness

On another day, I drive up to the hookah lounge once again and see a plethora of cars. My heart begins to race as I begin to think of the number of eyes that will be meticulously studying me as I walk from the front door to my table. As I enter the land of Middle Eastern patriarchy, my eye catches the beautiful edge of a Persian Carpet. I look down at it, seeking asylum in its material presence. I retreat into the aesthetic woven details of the carpet. The carpet represents much more than just its beauty. It represents Islam, the Middle East, the people, the wars and the pain that the region has been through. Its abundance of colors and designs provides comfort and reminds the culture of what they have been through. I glance away as I walk towards my table. I feel grateful that our culture resonates so strongly within this milieu.

My eye then catches the eye of another young Arab man who is engaged in a deep male gaze. Unfortunately, I am the object of his gaze. He slowly undresses me with his eyes. I quickly turn away in fear that he may think I am returning eye contact. He keeps staring at me trying to ascertain if I had accidentally or intentionally looked at him. I feel a relief when he finally turns away. Eye contact is not very common in Middle Eastern culture. If two people exchange eye contact for a long period of time, it signifies an interest in one another.

I am interrupted with the sound of a card slapping against the table. My head turns unconsciously, like a magnet. Four men are playing Tarneeb, the most popular card game that is played in most Middle Eastern countries with slight adaptations for each country. I feel a sudden surge of excitement rush through my body. Tarneeb isn't just a card game. It brings the flavor of the divergent Middle Eastern Cultures together. It is a communication bridge. Then I remember my incredible skills at this game. Suddenly I freeze, has this game been a means in which I aim to deconstruct Arab masculinity? Can I prove that women can be as competent as men in a male dominated Middle Eastern card game? I remember the accountability that I have been held to upon making mistakes. I remember some of my male Arab friends blaming it on my gender, saying, "You are a girl, you shouldn't be playing cards". This is why I have struggled to be the best that I can at "masculine" games. I have to be twice as good in order to deconstruct notions of Arab Masculinity.

I remember how I came to these masculine spaces... I remember my parents raising me with no borders around the concepts of masculinity and femininity... Wrestling with my feminist father was normal and playing soccer with the boys outside our house was a part of my everyday life. Shopping with my mother wasn't a feminine or female-centric activity. It was a capitalistic endeavor that I enjoyed. Thus, I was one of the very lucky few to be raised in a secluded space with no differences between masculinity and femininity.. No sexism... No differences between my brother and my sister... I was so sheltered... I was so sheltered that when my parents sent me out into the real world, I was devastated because the world was not like that... The world was neoliberalistic, sexist, patriarchal and imperialistic... This is how I came to these spaces of masculinity like the Tarneeb game and this is how I felt discluded as a Middle Eastern Female.

I am interrupted by a sudden change in the music to a more traditional vibe. The music gets louder and the belly dancer comes out. She remains in the center, a safe haven away from the tables and one that allows her to move freely. She then dances up and down the lounge in a linear line but does not enter the impassable spaces between the couches and the tables. Entering those spaces would bring her closer to the male gaze and risk a regrettable encounter. I look around again; does this belly dancer represent the sustained continuity of a patriarchal society? Does she prolong the gaze or does she bring new femininity to the forefront in the midst of a new feminism? I feel torn. She is portrayed as a sexual object on the one hand but on the other hand presents the mere fact that a woman has the right to engage in any activity that she desires.

The material environment of the Hookah Lounge presents a surplus of symbolic cultural representations. The lounge itself, and the hookah itself, is a cultural site that brings a divergent mix of Middle Eastern cultures to the fore.

The sharing of the hookah minimizes the spaces in between bodies. It creates a personal exchange and reminds us of the comfort of close proximities in Middle Eastern culture. The lounge itself is a sacred smoky ground where middle easterners feel that they are at home. To them, it is a breeding ground for the sustainability of the culture. However, it is also a breeding ground for the female to be the center of patriarchy once again, among a plethora of Middle Eastern men.

I delve back into my computer, in order to type some new observations that I have witnessed. Suddenly a Bluetooth pair request pops up on my computer screen. Someone is trying to request to chat with me. I feel a sense of discomfort merely because I am not used to this type of dating. I decline the request and continue observing. It is vital to note that an integral part of Middle Eastern culture is to date by exchanging numbers via Bluetooth or/and social media sites. Sometimes it starts with eye contact from both sides and then numbers are exchanged. It is also always conducted in a discrete manner because some (but not all) Middle Eastern societies (especially the Gulf Region) are used to segregated environments. Depending on the individual's cultural upbringing, it would be a violation of cultural norms if two people were to engage in flirting or dating openly in front of everyone.² In one instance, a group of Saudi Arabian males were sitting very close to a table of Saudi Arabian girls. Numbers were exchanged discreetly and then each group left separately (they would probably meet up later). Thus, this place is not just a cultural milieu but also a dating milieu, an escape from societies strict dating standards.

However, it is vital to note that Middle Eastern society is a segregated society only in certain parts of various countries but especially in the Gulf States. In the Levant area—Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Palestine—for example, mixing is more common. In some situations women and men are taught to live separate lives and to not mix with one another. Some of the men that come to the US for the first time engage in behaviors that they would normally not engage in, in their home country. These men are suddenly exposed to the complete opposite environment of what they have been raised in. They flirt discreetly in fear that others will catch on to what they are doing. When they do flirt, one would barely even notice that they are trying to make contact with a woman on another table. Most of the Arabs that are here in Denver also seem to be part of a middle class and seem to be more conservative. *My eye catches interaction at one of the tables in the back of the room. I notice a Saudi Arabian male trying to catch the attention of another woman. Finally, I see them exchange numbers. Minutes later, he gets up and leaves and then she does the same.*

I turn my head in the other direction. There are a group of young women wearing hijab, (when a woman covers her hair) and smoking hookah. I notice a few men staring at them almost as if they are pleased that they might have a chance to talk to these girls and are also disappointed at the same time. I feel a surge of anger and then ask myself, why do

² However, it is vital to the note that this does not apply to all middle easterners for example in my case, I was raised in a mixed environment.

we have to conform to our own patriarchal structures and the feeling that we are constantly disappointing either our male counterparts or even the Middle Eastern women around us who have had heterosexual patriarchy inscribed upon their bodies? I feel hopeless, I feel discriminated against. I feel empty.

I glance around at the people around me and hear a plethora of different Arabic and Middle Eastern dialects that come together so harmoniously. Almost immediately, I recognize each person's nationality by his or her accent. The Gulf States like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar each have distinct physical appearances and different accents. I look over at the Arab-Americans who are speaking in both Arabic and English as if it is one language on its own. Those from the Levant area have a lighter and more feminine accent, while those from Iran and Afghanistan speak a different language but with almost the same alphabet. I retreat back into my head; does this hookah lounge represent a melting pot of the various Middle Eastern cultures? I start to draw columns in my head. The Arab-Americans are very different than the Arabs that are here just to study or visit. I notice the Arab-Americans splitting their bills just like the Americans do. However, the Arabs that are here to study or visit never do this. I remember the first days here in the United States, where I was confused as why the bill was split up among Arab-American groups. In our culture, we fight over the bill even if we have a mere twenty dollars in our account. Our involvement as a region in decades of wars has created this feeling among us to live each day as if it's our last. And so this breeding ground has brought together a wide variety of cultures that share one common space. Denver, a mid-sized city brings a Middle Eastern middle class of students. If this lounge were in D.C. or New York for example, there would be an even wealthier class of students. Moreover, if this lounge were in Kuwait, it would be an even more male dominated lounge or a mixed one where people go to meet each other. However, Denver is where the middle class Arabs commonly go to study. It is important to also note, that a numerous amount of Qatari, Saudi and Kuwait students are on scholarships and have partnerships with more than one university around Colorado. Therefore, there is a large amount of Middle Eastern students in Colorado and most of them are on scholarships.

I immerse myself in the music. Cola Studios is playing in the background and I feel at peace with myself. Cola Studios is a new project that brings renowned Arabic and American singers together. For example, the American singer FloRida was brought together with the Arabic singer, Miriam Fares to record a song together. It merges two cultures into one. I feel my Westernized and Arabic side finally aggregate. I look around... Does this song have the same effect on everyone else? I notice many glaring at the screen as if they are hypnotized by the meshing of these two worlds into one. My fear of whiteness taking over kicks in. Is this another neoliberalistic way of erasing our culture? Is this hegemony in disguise?

The belly dancer prances in again. She is wearing beautiful colors that compliment her elegant dancing. She is not overtly sexual by American standards but seems to be by Middle Eastern standards. A man gets up to dance with her, while the other men are clapping for him. The crowd goes wild and suddenly men are throwing money at the dancer. A group

of married women are unhappy that there is a belly dancer revealing a half naked body. One of them said in Arabic, that this is a disgrace. Three of them have their arms crossed and are furious that their husbands have now directed all their attention at the belly dancer. Most importantly, one of them says, "Why are our belly dancers always white?" I stop typing and retreat into my thoughts. If this belly dancer were Middle Eastern, she would be dancing to a plethora of women instead of men. I feel that something has been taken away from my cultural milieu. Is this White belly dancer a symbol of deconstructing the Middle East of its culture? Doesn't this further take away from third world feminism by sustaining western feminism? Isn't this a moment of holding on to white hegemonic masculinity? I notice that there are no male waiters in this place. I wonder if this is a strategy to lure even more men in, to succumb to hegemonic whiteness.

My attention suddenly turns to the first openly gay Arab (Saudi Arabian) man I have seen walk into The Hookah Lounge. I see about two dozens of eyes staring at him. I have the sudden urge to go protect him and sit next to him but I hold myself in fear of being intrusive to the man. I see many tables giggling and staring at him. I hear another man say, "Oh wow look at the way he is walking". Then a young man on the table next to me turns to me and says, "wow there are so many of them these days, they come here from Saudi Arabia and just go crazy". I am shocked and disappointed. Has our society gone so backwards? I feel another struggle unfolding within me. Hegemonic whiteness has already done its damage, leaving out women of color, spreading its white patriarchy across the world. But how do I explain the disappointment I am experiencing within my own culture? Queerness is a White/US phenomenon and is constructed as inorganic to Arab cultures. How can I come to terms with this? Are we that far behind? I think of how the region turned fundamentalist as a means of resisting colonization and how perhaps Middle Easterners are not used to the openness of western culture. I feel the struggle unfold within me again. I want to blame Middle Eastern heterosexuality on the West but I can't. this time. I can't because the West has already elegantly masked the marginalization of queerness. They seem to be more progressive, more accepting of minorities and marginalized groups, at least that's how they appear on pop culture and other communication mediums. The Middle East has tried to strike against whiteness in a variety of forms. Is the strike against queerness, a strike against whiteness? Has queerness been victimized in the intersection of race, gender and sexuality? I pause and think... What if we suddenly revealed to the Middle Easterners that queerness is even inorganic to the West, but the West has managed to make it look better? What if they knew that queerness is stuck at these rigid borders and is in need of fluidity? Would they embrace queerness in an anti-white hegemonic attempt? Maybe this is a trick that Whiteness has applied to pop culture and to the media so that the rest of the world will stay inorganic to queerness. I go deeper into thought desperately trying to find a way to counteract the oppression that queerness faces.

My thoughts are suddenly interrupted by a young Saudi Arabian man who asks me what I am doing on the computer. I reply, "I am conducting a research study" He asks me, "why did you choose this place?" I reply, "Seemed like an interesting site where Middle Easterners meet." He said, "Are you analyzing gender?" I said "I'm not sure yet I am observing for now." The man suddenly went into deep thought and then turned and looked at me, "Look how backwards we are, we should learn more from the Americans, they have

eradicated the plight for equality with women, look at us we cant even get women to drive.” I responded, “They haven’t solved women’s issues, they have only masked it and inscribed western feminism onto the rest of the world instead of keeping other factors such as race, sexuality, religion etc. into account. They are making us think that we are in a post feminist society but we are not.” He then asked me to explain so I explained how Post-feminism and post race implies that we have rid ourselves of equality but in reality we haven’t. He then said, “I fear that one day women will be able to drive in Saudi Arabia because they will be abused by the police but I also want them to have more rights”. This conversation stuck with me throughout the night. Has cultural Imperialism and hegemony collided with discourses of primitivism? Has hegemonic whiteness been inscribed onto these Middle Eastern bodies? In coming to the United States to study, do we risk being hypnotized by a white hegemonic and heterosexual force? Is western feminism already inscribed onto Middle Eastern bodies? Has popular culture, education and the news already engulfed its imperialistic arms around all these bodies?

It certainly has when it comes to conflict within our region. Imperialism has left a scar among many Middle Easterners. A wound so deep, that nothing can or ever will heal it. A group of American-Palestinian women walk in and sit next to me. They recognize immediately that I look Palestinian and start to talk to me. They then ask me to come sit with them. They enter a deep conversation about the Palestinian/Israeli Conflict. They dive into details about the separation wall that has caused a harsh divide among many. They discuss their encounters with Israeli officials at border crossings and discuss the occupation and the implications it has had on the region. They describe how they use their American side to talk back to Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and then suppress their Arab side when they approach the IDF. I start remembering my great grandfather’s story of how he went from being a mayor to a refugee overnight in 1948. I remember the story of my father’s cousin that has stuck with me forever. He fought with the Palestinian resistance in 1948 when the Israelis started to forcefully remove Palestinians from their homes, causing one of the largest refugee problems. They then showed up at his house to arrest him. My father’s cousin chose to shoot himself then to be tortured in the darkness of the Israeli prisons. This story is one of the wounds that I carry down, as do so many other families with similar stories. I remember the hardships that my grandfather went through trying to build himself from scratch, frantically travelling around the region and then finally settling in Kuwait. I am Kuwaiti now but I will never forget the wounds that were carried down to me as a Palestinian. These are the stories that we carry down as Middle Easterners. They are stories of occupation, hardship, neoliberalism, and imperialism. They are stories of neo-liberalistic hegemony and they have spread throughout the region and they are further symbolized in this hookah lounge.

I pause and retreat into my old field notes. Is this issue the most discussed issue among Middle Easterners? I remember the days before where I had encountered numerous conversations about the conflict. I frantically go back through my notes, turning each page and meticulously tearing up the text. I remember the group of Lebanese and Palestinian men trying to ascertain who was to blame for the Sabra and Shatilla Massacres of 1982 in South Lebanon. I remember another group of Iranians who engaged in a conversation of how to help the plight of the oppressed Palestinians. I then remember the sympathy I would

receive upon telling other Middle Easterners that I am originally Palestinian. Is this the only thing that keeps us together or has it torn the region apart? Is the sustainability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict another way of prolonging white hegemonic structures? The Arab-Israeli conflict, symbolizes some sort of regional nationalism that stirs up a lot of hurt and anger among many. Thus, it is, the most talked about topic in this lounge.

Discussion and Conclusions

Middle Eastern Patriarchy. Like most academics, I am aware of the side effects of neoliberalism, patriarchy and hegemony. Frightened as I am that third world cultures will be erased, I firmly believe that preservation and resistance strategies can be unfolded.

As a Kuwaiti-Palestinian anti-race Feminist I have faced patriarchy living among Middle Eastern men in Kuwait and in the region as a whole. Gender roles have placed women and men into set boxes of what it means to be a feminine and/or masculine. Likewise, sexism and objectification has always been a creation of masculinity (Tragos 542). Hence, being a man is a masculinity requirement of set verbal and non-verbal behaviors. This includes, chants, symbols, dress code and so forth (Tragos 544). It is a heterosexual paradigm that has infiltrated all aspects of life and has become a masculine domination and one that has marginalized women for centuries.

In Middle Eastern Societies, when a couple marries, they are expected to live near the male's family; however, today many Arab families do not practice this (Joseph 195). Honor is probably one of the most vital elements of Arab culture. According to Suad Joseph, "Family honor implies one's sense of dignity, identity, status, and self, as well as public esteem are linked to the regard with which one's family is held by the community at large" (200). Honor has also become a means for controlling women's behavior in every aspect including economic, sexuality and even in the social arena (200). However, Ghabra notes that it is in these spaces of discipline that we can deconstruct patriarchal ideologies into spaces of resistance (2015).

These same notions of Middle Eastern patriarchy are carried into *The Hookah Lounge* and onto the bodies of both the women and men. *Tarneeb* (the card game) is only one example of a plethora that binds women and men into these male/female boxes. I had to be the best at the game and am still seen as incompetent.

A veiled women smoking hookah is not just a disappointment for the men but a disappointment for feminists like myself as to why we have to be "othered". It is also vital to note that the veiled woman represents much more than a religious connotation where the women should cover because of various interpretations of Islam. The veil covers the fear of the woman's body (Eisenstein 32). Men's internal fears are what has inhibited woman from gaining equal rights in today's society. Furthermore, there fear is what has led many women

to cover their bodies. Hence, the woman feels that her body is ostracized and therefore must cover it. The woman starts to cover her body because she loathes it. The veil interferes with the male gaze and prohibits the man from gazing at the woman's bodies. The veil can allow the woman to cover her body and uncover it with whomever she pleases. Thus, she can have control over her sexuality. In one study the hijab was seen as a form of liberation from the male gaze and a tool to give women power to control their own bodies. It was also seen as a means to physically mobilize women to be free from men (Ruby 62). As an Arab woman I have seen many of my friends cover their bodies in a sort of liberating control over their bodies. Thus, they can undress to whomever they desire and cover in front of whomever they do not desire.

However, women aren't the only oppressed group under this Middle Eastern Male-Dominated Ground. The Saudi Arabian gay man represents another ostracized group. He symbolizes the need for gay, lesbian and queer rights in a culture where queerness is inorganic to Arab cultures. In U.S. literature and Academia, there is a debate between gay, lesbian and queer studies. For example. Yep, Lovass and Elia state that that an *assimilationist position* supports same-sex marriage and is more concerned with the legal aspect of gay rights. *Radical Position* challenges same-sex marriages, arguing that this fosters more breeding ground for heteronormativity (Yep, Lovass and Elia 51). Moreover, Slagle defines the difference between queer theorists and gay and lesbian studies. Where queer studies recognize differences and challenges with heteronormativity, traditional gay and lesbian studies focus on a more mainstream and traditional approach (Slagle 313). What I want to prelude to here, is the fact that this literature has not permeated into the Middle East for a number of reasons. First, it is something that is not discussed, especially in conservative government systems. Moreover, within the realm of academia we are not allowed to teach LGBTQ studies or even sexuality as a whole discipline. It appears inorganic to our culture. Many act as if it doesn't exist. Therefore, we need to start by dismantling heterosexual boundaries before we can progress into deeper debates around LGBTQ studies. We need to start with an acknowledgement that LGBTQ people are being marginalized and then focus on their rights as individuals within the intersectionality of race, religion, class and so forth. Without intersectionality they will remain inorganic to Middle Eastern Culture. With intersectionality we can start to lay the groundwork for introducing the oppression and marginalization of these groups that have been a result of heterosexuality. *However, this also beings with a constant re-visiting of our privileges in order to find room to ally with other oppressed communities. As critical communication scholars we have an obligation to be an ally to one another. Privilege is what distorts communication. Privilege tears us apart from marginalized groups that we could have connected with. My heterosexual privilege causes pain to the LGBTQ community and this is something agonizing that I have constantly and will always need to continue to disrupt through painful emotional work.*

Hegemonic Whiteness. I also have aimed to demonstrate above how *The Hook-ab Lounge* brings in hegemonic whiteness. Listening to Cola Studios bringing Arabic and American singers together was a threat to the culture. The conversation with the Saudi Arabian student (and others) who only knew feminism from a western feminism point of view, also brings forth the need to introduce third world feminism to our own part of the world. Mohanty states that the universality of gender oppression is harmful because it erases class and race and highlights the gender oppression aspect. This in turn, devalues women's intersectional experiences (Mohanty 107).

Universal sisterhood (the transcendence of the "male world") ends up being a middle class, psychologized notion that effectively erases material and ideological power differences within and among groups of women, especially between First and Third World women. (Mohanty 117)

With Shome we come to an understanding that White femininity is a site where racialized patriarchal relations are organized and reproduced through mothers, wives and daughters. Thus the white female's body becomes the production of a white man. Shome argues that white femininity is where race, gender, sexuality and nationality are safeguarded. This makes it also a site where otherness can easily spread (Shome 323). The white belly dancer is a representation of these patriarchal relations. In her article, *Belly Dancing: Arab-Face, Orientalist Feminism, and U.S. Empire*, Maira argues that belly dancing is a performance that links the U.S. and the Middle East and depicts a deeper intersectionality of imperialism, racialization and feminism (317). She says, "belly dancing has become a popular site for the mobilization of "whiteness" and "Americanness" in relation to Arab/ Muslim femininities and masculinities" (Maira 317). Therefore, it is vital for white femininity to exist in order to sustain white hegemonic heterosexuality, which makes it even more vital to deconstruct both white femininity in the context of western liberalism and patriarchy in the context of male-centric imperialism.

I have lived in the Middle East and experienced all forms of male dominance, I then return to the U.S. and feel a need to deconstruct white hegemony and globalization that seems to be erasing our culture and sidelining women of color. This struggle of ideas and thought processes between the East and West is what tears us apart. White privilege has constructed all other races into the images and discourses that it seems fit. Every other race is "othered" in comparison to Whiteness. I feel an anti-whiteness struggle in the United States and then a struggle for taking apart patriarchy in the Middle East. I fear the thin line between being pro-west when trying to resist Middle Eastern patriarchy and being anti-patriarchy by focusing solely on Anti-Whiteness. This is why as women we need reflectivity along intersectional paths. Third world women need reflectivity in order to deconstruct otherness and First World women need to reflectivity in order to be aware of the bodies that they

are othering. Calafell says, “reflectivity refers to an intersectional critique, an illumination of power, and acknowledging one’s rationality to all of this” (Calafell 7). She also notes that we theorize through history and relations are theorized through our bodies (Calafell 7). She says that sexuality and gender are constantly critiqued but the intersections of racial bodies are ignored. (10). She calls for reflectivity not just in the “I” but also in the “we” that is found in otherness (11). Moreover, Jones and Calafell argue that through intersectional reflectivity, we can begin to examine our bodies in relation to neoliberal ideologies. (959). Thus, intersectional reflexivity assists one in coming to terms with their privileges and non-privileges as well (Calafell and Jones 963). Ghabra adds that we need to move towards an intersectional communication ethic in which we listen, don’t speak for the other, and become aware of cultural differences through identity, privileges, and oppressions. She notes that becoming aware of intersectional ethical communication can be a site of resistance and reflexivity. She defines reflexivity as “the need to be critical of one’s self, especially when one is in a privileged positionality” (2015).

Cultural milieus such as this hookah lounge are becoming a breeding ground for this racial otherness and also for hegemonic white structures. It has also become a duplication ground for Middle Eastern patriarchal struggles. There is a need then, to deconstruct these structures and find ways to stop the bleeding of hegemony. This, in turn creates double the work for Middle Eastern Feminists. As intersectional feminists our goal is to address race, gender, sexuality, political and individual struggles of women of color. This site represents a pause in time. We become immanent into a dichotomy between anti-race and anti-gender in what I call an *Intersectional Dualism or Binary*.

The Hookah Lounge represents this Intersectional Dualism as a site of Middle Eastern patriarchy in the midst of hegemonic whiteness. It represents the East and the West all in one site. We struggle between resisting our own Middle Eastern patriarchal structures while not appearing to be western/hegemonic and between resisting western hegemony but at the risk of prolonging patriarchy in our part of the region. It is a dark and ugly struggle. We are torn in half affectively, academically and most importantly culturally.

I get up to leave the lounge. The brown eyes start to undress me once again; I resist seeking refuge in my phone... I can not continue to retreat in fear of this gaze... The white belly dancer is still dancing... she continues to spread her whiteness... I seek refuge in my phone... If I do watch her, I will be supporting the spreading of whiteness and the erasing of our culture. I choose the brown eyes instead of the white belly dancer... I choose my culture for all its flaws over hegemonic whiteness... My struggles lay to rest... for now...

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