



Conceptualizing Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies in the Middle East and North Africa. Historical and Theoretical Perspectives

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Since the late 1970s, the feminist turn produced an epochal epistemic shift in the humanities and the social sciences. By rescuing women from the marginalization of knowledge's production, feminist scholars did not simply aim at writing an "added" or "parallel" scholarship; they aspired to question dominant narratives that had traditionally silenced and wiped-out women. By introducing relationality as a core category of analysis, feminist scholars questioned the male-centred studies about literature, politics, society, and history, and they produced compelling investigations that shed-light on the nexus between gender, sexuality, and power, and on the interdependence between the public and the private spheres.

In the Middle East, North Africa and, more broadly, in Muslim majority societies of the twentieth century, feminist scholarship soon intersected the study of anti-colonial struggles and the processes of post-colonial state building. In these contexts, the analysis of orientalist representations of women, gender, and sexuality became crucial to the postcolonial feminist critique, as feminist scholars focused on demonstrating how such depictions reflected both colonial power relationships and the gendered nature of colonialism. Since these early steps, the fields of women, gender, and sexuality studies rapidly evolved, also by intersecting subaltern, critical race studies and, more recently, decolonial epistemologies, so that it is not exaggeration to affirm that this is today one of the most dynamic fields in Islamic and more broadly SWANA studies. In this seminar we will discuss the relatively rapid evolution of these approaches, from the late 1970s until today, by providing an overview of both the pathbreaking and the newest studies, their themes, theoretical approaches, sources, and methods of investigation. Particular attention will be given to the intersection between women, feminist, and sexualities studies with other approaches, from the more consolidated, such as the subaltern and critical race theories, to the most innovative decolonial and Indigenous epistemologies, which have been informing Latin American and Sub-Saharan African scholarship for at least two decades but are moving into the SWANA contexts.