

Triply Detached

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This issue of *Al-Raida* deals with the “Other” from a triply detached perspective. Writing about ethnic and linguistic minorities, immigrants and “guest workers” in the Middle East and North Africa challenges the researcher and author to see the Arab world as more than merely the object of Western expropriation and Orientalist misinterpretation. The peoples of our region have well demonstrated their ability to be both the victim and the victimizer, oft times simultaneously.

To date, the masculine gaze predominates when considering foreign cultures. Seeing non-Arabs from a gendered perspective undermines the common-sensical assumption that foreignness and alienation are first and foremost a male prerogative. The intercultural implications of issues as varied as income, mobility, nationality, family, cultural heritage and access to information can not be understood if gender mainstreaming is not placed at the very heart of our study of them.

Finally, scholarly reflection on the position of non-Arab women means writing about power and prejudice. And here, the well worn adage that racism (and sexism as well) can be defined as “prejudice plus power” can serve us well when grappling with the thorny issues of person-

al involvement and subjectivity. Can and should a writer - or guest editor for that matter - attempt objectivity, or is subjectivity a unique and valuable scientific method desperately needed in both the study of gender and cultural difference? “Betroffenheit”, a term commonly used in my native Austria¹, puts a name to this phenomenon; i.e. the desire to deal with topics that directly affect our daily lives, that are woven into our privileged position as academics, compiling knowledge in the service of a system that is still so obviously based on our ability to secure a definition monopoly, to (pre-)judge and define others, and thereby perpetuate our power and their subjugation.

When I suggested compiling a file on non-Arab women to the *Al-Raida* board, I based my suggestion on several decades of personal experience, both as an academic and political activist, working with indigenous and immigrant minorities in Central Europe. As one of the few male researchers and trainers in the field of gender studies in Austria, I was acutely aware of the need to highlight the divergent ways in which women and men experience not belonging to the dominant group in society. I was also intrigued by the opportunity of editing an issue of this journal as a non-Arab and non-woman living in the Arab world now for almost half a decade.

As a Western, white, male academic, my position in Lebanon is privileged indeed. Having married into a well situated Beirut family, I enjoy the fruits of a network of close ties on both sides of my wife's family. As anyone even faintly acquainted with the region is aware, without these connections nothing moves in Lebanon. Nevertheless, I found myself being drawn, like so many other Westerners in the Middle East, to the plight of the immigrants and "guest workers" at the bottom of the socio-economic pile; the Asian and African domestics, unskilled manual laborers and street vendors who enjoy few basic human rights and often live on the margins of society. My experience in the field of migration and minority studies in Austria has made me aware that life on the cultural sidelines of mainstream society almost automatically leads to an affinity with others who find themselves in the same boat. Thus, I don't find it surprising that many of my friends here in Lebanon are non-Arabs; along with a variety of Western immigrants, mainly Armenians from the Middle East. These contacts proved helpful during the often daunting process of finding contributors able to cover all the topics necessary for this issue. Finally, being a non-Arab male has proven to be an unexpected disadvantage when starting a household and family in Lebanon. Not only did my wife's Lebanese nationality in no way facilitate my immigration procedures, but more significantly, the predominant patrilineal legal system robs her of her birthright to pass her citizenship on to our future children. I have learned to appreciate the wisdom of the internationally sanctioned concept of reciprocity.

The most interesting challenge encountered while preparing the call for papers for this issue was the need to define the term Arab. There was some contention with respect to whether multiethnic countries like Morocco and Iraq should even be considered Arab. Initially, I felt that the term "predominantly Arab" would have been more accurate, as would be the case when carrying out a parallel study in a European setting. This question, along with determining the usefulness of religion when defining "Arabness," was avoided by choosing a political and linguistic definition for this category. The Arab world is seen here as being made up of all those countries that are currently members of the Arab League. Non-Arab women are defined as those who either do not speak Arabic as their mother tongue or who do not use it as their language of day-to-day discourse. This category includes women who have lost their ability to speak their (non-Arabic) mother tongue as the result of cultural genocide. Thus, the issues of power and dominance, with

respect to the definition monopoly, have remained largely neglected in the interest of expediency and because of the need to adapt to the current, politically unstable situation in the region. One exception was made to the above mentioned, relatively restrictive and uncritical definition, namely the daughters of Arab women and non-Arab men who have been denied their Arab nationality because of the patrilineal family laws predominant in the Arab world.

In order to delve more closely into the issue of "Betroffenheit", i.e. the manner in which we all, as scholarly writers working in a Western context, deal with the way we are affected by both gender and cultural difference, a comparatively large number of articles were dedicated to the Western vantage point vis-à-vis the Arab world. My goal was to discover – through the eyes of non-Arab female scholars and travelers – whether the "kind of intellectual authority over the Orient within Western culture," so aptly described by Edward Said², is affecting not only Western women, but also Arab women working in Western academia. Here, an attempt was made to pay equal attention to both the issue of gender and the way in which cultural difference is experienced on both sides of the cultural divide between "Orient" and "Occident." The intended result of this sub-collection of articles is to determine whether an "encounter" between equals is actually possible or whether the Saidian "authority" enjoyed by women from the West will always tilt the playing field in their favor.

This file is a modest first step in the direction of a better understanding of Otherness in the Arab world. It is by its very nature highly eclectic and lacking in comprehension and balance. To be considered a success, it should, however, have illustrated that the Arab world is a major cultural and socio-economic center in its own right. This status brings with it not only international recognition, but also the responsibility to deal equitably with those members of society who, for whatever reason, have been marginalized, underrepresented or outright excluded from mainstream society.

End Notes

1. Born in 1956 in Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA into a Swiss-Austrian family, I immigrated to Salzburg, Austria as a teenager and have been living in West Beirut with my Lebanese wife and her daughter, under a varying set of circumstances, since the spring of 1999.
2. Edward Said, *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, 1978, 19.