

Arab Youth Occidentalisms

– Images of the West and the Negotiation of Gender Relations in Syria and Jordan

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Based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews conducted in pre-civil war Syria and present day Jordan, I discuss in my paper the imageries of the West which young adults in these countries deploy in articulating their views and positions on gender relations. Syria and Jordan are two neighboring, predominantly Arab and Sunni Muslim countries in the Middle-East. Due to rapid urbanization and national modernization programs in these societies, the practices of gender relations have gone through profound changes during the past few generations especially in the urban, middle class contexts that my study focuses on. Arranged marriages are nowadays rare, and it has become common for young people to meet potential marriage partners in public places such as college campuses or at work, and most of them uphold an ideal of marriage based on conjugal love. Yet, a lot of controversy remains on the limits of socially acceptable gender interaction, and the practices of dating are still in flux. I suggest that Occidental images of Western gender relations are evoked by the local youth both to justify local norms that limit gender interaction and regulate dating, as well as to negotiate them.

On one hand, the segment of my Syrian and Jordanian interlocutors who emphasize their Muslim identity and support the main principles of local gender segregation practices (the *muhāfiẓ*¹ youth) are re-inventing “authentic” Islamic traditions by evoking contrasting images of the West as promiscuous and excessively individualistic. Regardless of obvious changes in prevalent courtship practices and marriage ideals in their urban, middle-classed communities, they emphasize the importance of holding onto local traditions (*taqālīd*) when they describe their views on these issues, and consider specifically marriage practices as a sphere of life unaffected

¹ *Muhāfiẓ* is an Arabic term used locally to refer to conservative views and individuals in a generally positive overtone, versus the contrasting terms *mutakhallif* (backward or reluctant to embrace new ideas and practices) and *muta‘aṣṣib* (fanatic), which are used to refer to conservative individuals in a negative light.

by Westernization. Therefore, Lindsay A Conklin and I² have argued that when the *muḥāfiẓ* youth refer to “local traditions”, they often do not refer to the exact actual practices of previous generations, but to practices which in their view are “not influenced by the West”³. Therefore, it is interesting to take a closer look at their imageries concerning the West. The *muḥāfiẓ* youth conceptualize gender relations in Muslim societies and the West as oppositional based on whether there are sexual relationships outside the context of marriage or not. In their image of Western relationship culture, the aspect of un-restrictedness of premarital relationships is highlighted, and relationships in the West are described as promiscuous – commitment to a romantic relationship is assumed to be rare and infidelity very common. These youth associate Western sexual liberty with reckless sexual behavior, which they assume to have caused numerous negative consequences, such as rupture in family structure and criminality. Hence, they regard the Islamic prohibition of pre- and extramarital relationships as positive also from the point of view of protecting collectivist family values by preventing “Western influences” in gender relations. I claim that the negative images of Western sexual liberty and its side-effects are integral for these youth in justifying local gender segregation practices, as the West functions as a warning example of what happens when these practices are abandoned. In addition, the Occidentalist vocabulary seems to be deeply entangled with the conceptualizations of practices that from the *muḥāfiẓ* youth point of view are “*too* liberal”. However, as mentioned, rejecting Western marriage practices does not mean that they oppose love marriages or enhancement of agency in spouse selection. Quite contrary, when the authentic Muslim marriage

² Conklin, Lindsey A. & Nasser El-Dine, Sandra. 2015. “Negotiating Courtship Practices and Redefining Tradition: Discourses of Urban, Syrian Youth.” In Gul Ozyegin (ed), *Gender and Sexuality in Muslim cultures*. Surrey: Ashgate Press.

³ Carrier, James G. 1995. “Preface & Introduction.” In James G. Carrier (ed), *Occidentalism: Images of the West*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

is defined based on its differences to Western practices, the images of the West as promiscuous make it possible to frame monogamous marital love as a feature of Islamic traditions.

On the other hand, those youth who position themselves as “open-minded”/*munfatih* contest local gender segregation practices by deploying imageries of an idealized Western freedom and modernity. They view the West as a place where romantic relationships flourish as they are not made complicated by traditional customs and mind-sets of people. Common local framings of pre-marital intimate encounters as immoral are challenged by attaching moral value to genuine romantic love. In addition, the “open minded” youth associate Western gender relations with positive features of idealized Western modernity, such as freedom, independence and personal growth. As in the West it is possible for both women and men to gain experience from different spheres of life, including gender relations, it represents opportunities for self-expression and self-improvement. The *munfatih* youth also sometimes associate their notion of Western type of liberty, that enables an independent lifestyle and gaining life-experience, with adulthood and maturity. These positive imageries of Western liberty offer a powerful alternative ideological framework to traditional honor conceptions in negotiating the limitations of pre-marital intimate encounters. In addition to this, many *munfatih* youth associate Western type of liberty in gender relations directly to the progress of society in general.

Hence I argue that, as important as it is to dismantle the essentialized concepts of “Arab/Muslim culture” and “Western culture”, this can also be done by investigating everyday articulations of these concepts in local contexts. Even though the discourses of Syrian and Jordanian youth may first seem to reinforce a static understanding of cultures, the way that these definitions of cultures are fixed only on the surface, and can be selectively deployed in negotiating local practices, should be further explored.