

Leisure as a Space of Political Practice in Middle East Women Life Writings

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ABSTRACT

Middle East women's active participation in resisting against socio-political impositions and constraints has received scant attention in the existing scholarship within the field. Much of the literature is focused on the socially victimized, subjugated and passive state of the female subjects in facing patriarchal authoritarianism and repression. In contrast, this article aims at exploring the subjected women's investment in multifarious acts of resistance through their leisure time and practices. To this end, Foucault's notion of "counter-conduct," a mode of resistance to be governed differently, is used to examine women's leisure activities in Jean P. Sasson's (1992) *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia*, Azar Nafisi's (2003) *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and Manal al-Sharif's (2017) *Daring to Drive*. The analysis of these narratives within the power/resistance framework underlines the shifting complexities of the female participants' life course, and reveals that the subjugated women's trajectory in the stories is a gradual progression from pure submissiveness towards an active engagement in social, cultural and political realities. Throughout the narratives, women use leisure time and activities such as driving, reading and bonding in parallel to dominant techniques of governmentality to produce alternative subjectivities. The study concludes that the life accounts do not merely provide an oversimplified depiction of Middle East women as passive victims of a misogynistic cultural tradition, but rather chronicle women's active protests—i.e., individual and collective revolts of conduct, acts of opposition and violations of established norms—similar to the forms of counter-conduct theorized by Foucault.

Keywords: leisure; counter-conduct; political spaces; alternate subjectivities; patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary life narratives by or about Middle East women describe the situation of women in the region as constantly subjected to repressive structures of patriarchal power. In many of these stories, the private domain is recognized not only as a space of political battleground but also as a locus of personal autonomy. Within the private spaces of their phallogocentric societies, the portrayed female characters exercise individual and collective practices of resistance. Nonetheless, Middle East women's active participation in resisting against socio-political impositions and constraints has received scant attention in the existing scholarship within the field. Much of the literature is mainly focused on the socially victimized, subjugated, veiled and passive state of the female subjects in facing patriarchal authoritarianism and repression. Indeed, most of the life writers have arguably been faulted in some ways for "oversimplified" portrayal of Muslim women, their "biased Western, liberal-humanistic perspective," and for serving as "key propaganda tool[s] at the disposal of" America's imperialist policies (Dabashi, 2006; Whitlock, 2010). The intense concentration on the victimhood and passivity of female subjects in Middle East women studies has precluded researchers from an unbiased and systematic exploration of the women's agency and activism.

Against the widespread disinclination on the part of scholars to show Middle East women's agency and activism, this article argues that the subjugated women's trajectory in some of these narratives is a gradual progression from pure submissiveness towards an active engagement in social, cultural and political realities. The development is realized through their constant struggle to interrogate, disrupt and alter the ways patriarchal power is exercised. In support of the argument, the study aims at exploring the ways the subjected women, notwithstanding their exclusion from public spheres of the society, invest in multifarious acts of resistance through private and leisure activities against dominant hegemonic ideologies. Of the many contemporary life writings of the kind, this article focuses on Jean P. Sasson's (1992) *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia*, Azar Nafisi's (2003) *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and Manal al-Sharif's (2017) *Daring to Drive* as they have been the subject of scathing criticism over their controversial depictions of Muslim women's level of personal agency. These works portray female characters from two major countries of the region, Saudi Arabia and Iran, and provide us with valuable and original insights into daily lives of women as recounted in their own words.

In exploring these narratives, Foucault's (2009) notion of "counter-conduct," a mode of resistance to be governed differently, is used to examine the ways repressed women use private sphere and activities—not least leisure time and practices—to interrogate their own invisibility within the existing cultural discourses and resist against the normalized behavior expected from all female subjects. Foucault's theories are directly relevant because from his poststructuralist perspective women's leisure can provide them with a "counter-discourse" to destabilize operating structures of power, challenge the dominant ideologies and forge alternate subjectivities (Asl, 2018). In this sense, a central feature of resistance through leisure activities is to reassert personal agency and, at the same time, interrogate the "restrictive or constraining views of femininity, sexuality, or motherhood" (Shaw, 2001, p. 191). The notion of counter-conduct is helpful in understanding the ways subjugated female characters use leisure time and practices to create for themselves a kind of space necessary to control and shape one's self, and resist against prevailing forms of power.

By exploring leisure activities as the locus of resistance practices, this article not only provides an impetus for the academic study of Middle East women's socio-political activism notwithstanding their systematic subjugation, but also expands upon recent scholarship on leisure that often sees it as "innocent" and "marginal or inconsequential" to macro-socio-political issues (Green et al., 1990). Much of the existing leisure literature is engaged with issues of individual experience, and has failed to address political significance of leisure time and practices (Mannel & Kleiber, 1997). This article contributes to the field by examining leisure activities as sites of disrupting the hegemonic order by interrogating prevailing political impositions and constraints. To present a framework for analysis, the paper first explores the recent literature on Middle East women life writings to highlight how they are generally perceived as allegedly representing women as exclusively passive and the object of annihilating power. Then, as a backdrop for the analysis section, the discussion focuses on the ways leisure can function as a context for autonomy, agency and resistance to gendered relations of power. This will be followed by a close reading of the selected narratives to identify the ways in which leisure is used by women as a political practice to enhance individual independence and bring about broader social change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Representations of female subject in contemporary life writings by or about Middle East women have provoked considerable public and academic controversy. Much of the recent scholarly work on these testimonials criticize them for promoting a stereotyped image of

Muslim women as silent, passive and abused victims of male oppression. Abu-Lughod (2013), Bahramitash (2005), Dabashi (2006) and Whitlock (2005, 2010) give the most critical account of the ways these works present the Third World woman before Western eyes as a passive object of repression awaiting liberation. According to them, some of the narratives help to reinforce a widespread, yet factually erroneous, perception of Muslim females as unresisting victims of an enduring misogyny who are incapable of liberating themselves. In depicting Oriental women as victims who are unable to produce social transformation, the life accounts only reiterate the existing Orientalist misconceptions that have formed an essentialist and a homogenous picture of Muslim women (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Asl, 2019; Bahramitash, 2005). Thus, the narratives overlook the various modes of resistance that women in Middle East develop to empower themselves. The failure to address women's agency, resistance and social critique, as Dabashi (2006) argues, reflects the memoirists' too ready acceptance of the post-9/11 sentiment that white men should liberate suppressed brown women from the evil of brown men—a sentiment echoed by some U.S. feminists in support of the country's "War on Terror" propaganda.

The growing charges relating to the exotic, Orientalist and neo-primitive depictions of the women in question are mainly built upon Spivak's (1988) notion of subaltern, Mohanty's (1984) critique of homogenous representations and Said's (1995) concerns about Orientalism. All the three thinkers question the way Third World women are depicted as a homogeneous category of ill-treated women who are hapless victims of despotism, mystical religiosity, patriarchal irrationality and oppression. In her classic essay "Under Western Eyes," Mohanty's (1984) criticizes the fabrication of a culturally stereotypical and monolithic image of the Third World women as homogenous "passive," "powerless," "exploited," and "sexually harassed" group (p. 338). The recent surge of such life (hi)stories, in Mohanty's (2003) terms, does not aim at "decentering hegemonic histories and subjectivities," but to "testify" or "bear witness" (p. 77) to the Third World women's oppression. Drawing upon these critiques, critics (Ameri, 2012; Chambers, 2013; Vafa, 2018; Zine, 2008) have charged Middle East women life writers with "self-orientalization," i.e. reaffirming the Orientalist position of Muslim women as lacking the freedom and agency to resist against oppression. According to Zine (2008), even dissident writers such as Azar Nafisi "are marketing and commodifying their insider stories of Muslim oppression" by depicting Muslim women as "abject subjects" who are unable to resist their misogynistic cultures and hence need to be rescued (p. 111).

Though the criticism is a somewhat valid concern, as the narratives at times play into a western regime of truth that constitutes oriental subjectivities, the present study differs from the definitive judgements in a certain way. The study does not conflate the life accounts with the authors themselves, but with individual experiences, and thus distances the texts from being the mouthpiece of all Muslim women. In doing so, it reflects back the critique on the hostile critics who, as Clemens (2014) aptly asserts, expect the woman writers to represent some sort of "essential" Muslim woman. In fact, such an expectation functions as a sort of "reverse orientalism coming from within the academic community" (p. 587). In contrast, this article explores the ways the life stories depict moments of active agency that the oppressed women create for selfhood—i.e., for individual and collective empowerment—within the private spheres, through leisure time and practices. The objective of such private struggles, nevertheless, is not a complete or total rejection of government, or to look beyond it—as many of the above cited scholars unreasonably expect—but is to look within the government to combat power and create counter-societies that allow desubjugation from particular forms of conduct. In other words, whereas the existing scholarship focuses on visible sphere of institutions, their role in production of subjectivity, and the subjects' traditional and generalized oppositional role, the present study revisits the notion of resistance by examining

the particular modes of opposition that function through the government and self-government of what Foucault refers to as conduct. The subsequent notion of counter-conduct allows a better and different interpretation of the relationship between power and subjectivity as well as a novel analysis of practices of resistance and change, because counter-conduct is a “category for capturing resistances to conduct that do not simply refuse or reject power, but resist by ... conceiving the freedom to conduct oneself and others differently” (Binkley & Cruikshank, 2016, p. 6). The following section elaborates on leisure and its productive role in women’s resistance and identity formation as one of the dominant forms of counter-conduct in Middle East women life writings.

THEORIZING LEISURE AS A PRACTICE OF FREEDOM

DEFINING LEISURE

Leisure is a complex and dynamic concept that has evoked different types of definitions depending on the context and the people who pursue it (Russell, 2017). Literally, it refers to the time and activities free from work or duties. Some leisure scholars, in particular the behavioral scientists, have defined leisure as “recreation,” whether as “the pursuit of an avocation or the indulgence of a desire to do nothing” (Super, 1984, p. 73). Many others have focused on the role of leisure in people’s lives and explored it either as an objective—as an activity, or a specific setting and time period—or a subjective phenomenon, i.e. the individuals’ involvements in leisure activities and their satisfaction derived from them (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997; Parr & Lashua, 2004). More critical perspectives, however, have sought to go beyond the micro-levels of the personal experience of leisure and position it within the wider structural, political and historical contexts (Mata-Codesal, Peperkamp & Tiesler, 2015; Rojek, 2010; Stebbins, 2012, 2017). On the macro-level, leisure time and activities provide subjects with an opportunity to reformulate or resist prevailing modes of cultural formations. In a study to bridge the individual and contextual perspectives, Stebbins (2017) defines leisure as “uncoerced, contextually framed activity engaged in during free time, which people want to do and, using their abilities and resources, actually do in either a satisfying or a fulfilling way (or both)” (pp. 1-2). In this sense, leisure is defined as an aspect of life through which individuals may be controlled and subjugated or empowered and emancipated. Similarly, the present study considers leisure time and practices as embedded in social contexts (e.g., race, class, gender) and as phenomenon of a dialectical condition in which individuals actively challenge the constraints imposed by hegemonic ideologies.

The dialectical concept of leisure as a political practice is of particular relevance to analyzing women’s leisure behavior in Middle East countries. Although “traditional culture and religion” have been fundamentally influential in shaping women’s leisure time and practices (Martin & Mason, 2003, p. 35), a more political pattern of leisure behavior has emerged in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The rapid democratizations at political spheres have inspired women of the Middle East to seek for similar upward progressions in social life and women’s rights. However, women’s political participation in public spheres in the countries of the region has always been limited (Cooke, 2016, p. 31). Hence, the private space of leisure time and practices has moved to the forefront of Middle East women’s social-political activism. By redefining the traditional boundaries of leisure and politicizing its traditionally neutral space, the women have struggled to shape individual sentiments into collective ones, and thereby transform the patriarchal definitions of gender relations.

LEISURE AS RESISTANCE

Recent feminist leisure research has recognized leisure time and activities as potential sites where unequal gender ideologies can be challenged, subverted and re-inscribed (Du, 2008; Kostecki, 2015). Much of this scholarship, however, is carried out from modernist theoretical position which retains the binary of dominant and subordinate, equating power with domination and conceptualizing resistance as acts of opposition carried out against the existing relations of power (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Raby, 2005). The present study of leisure as a “source of empowered, self-determined identities” with which women can interrogate, undermine and disrupt formations of established normative femininity is influenced by Foucault’s poststructuralist accounts of power and resistance (Raisborough & Bhatti, 2007, p. 459; Sharpe, 2017, p. 912).

In Foucauldian framework, power is not something that can be held or possessed but is an ability that can be “exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations” (Foucault, 1978, p. 94). It functions in a diffuse and capillary way and can be exercised to conduct the behavior of human beings. The verb conduct embodies here a triple meaning: it is directing others, i.e. the practice of conducting (*conduire*) or of conduction (*la conduction*), governing the self (*se conduit*) and letting oneself be conducted (*se laisse conduire*) (Foucault, 2009, p. 193). The concept of conduct suggests the possibility of subjects operating as objects, instruments and/or agents of power. In this manner, power refers to the interaction of oppositional parties, “as the decentred network of bodily, face-to-face confrontations, and ultimately as the productive penetration and subjectivizing subjugation of a bodily opponent” (Habermas, 1994, pp. 63–64). This means that the subject is both constrained and formulated through power and an apparatus that wields it.

Yet the exercise of power or what Foucault specifically describes as “conduct” is entwined with practices of resistance or acts of counter-conduct. By the notion of counter-conduct, he refers to the resistance practices against prevailing strategies, mechanisms and tactics of governmentality “whose objective is a different form of conduct” (2009, p. 194). Counter-conducts represent the counter points or the reform movements directed by subjects “towards other objectives than those proposed by the apparent and official and visible governmentality of society” (Foucault, 2009 p. 199). They can interrogate dominant ways of being, reform and alter socio-political impositions, “counter the locally stabilized organizations of power” (Davidson, 2011, p. 29), restructure the formations of power and create alternative ways of being. The act of counter-conduct thus gives the generally considered “negative” and “reactive” notion of resistance a “positive” and “productive” meaning because at the crux of counter-conduct, there is the formation of alternative forms of subjectivity. Conduct and counter-conduct thus operate in a mutually formative relationship, and the two notions can be taken as “interconnected and entangled” (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014). In other words, to conduct an individual presupposes a level of freedom and choice-making on the part of the subject: “Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free ... power and freedom’s refusal to submit cannot, therefore, be separated” (Foucault, 1982, p. 790). This means that resistance and counter-conduct are “coextensive” and completely contemporaneous to conduct and power.

Such potentiality of self-reflexivity, which makes acts of counter-conduct possible, forms the basis of the ongoing interpretation of leisure as a locus of individual agency and self-determination. In other words, leisure offers an emancipatory space where subordinated subjects like Middle East women can exercise personal power. The study of leisure as a potential locus of counter-conducts and practices of freedom presupposes the exercise of political and ethical modes of governmentality that takes “as the object of their techniques and practices the *conduct* of human being” (Davidson, 2011, p. 260). Leisure time and

practices allow the subject to forge new identities and new freedoms by disrupting the “limits” that are imposed and normalized through everyday codes of conduct and behavior (Sharpe, 2017, p. 923). On the one hand, this way of looking at leisure problematizes the traditionally essentialist perspective that takes women’s lives and their leisure as negative and yoked to their subordinated status within a phallogocentric society (Green, 1998, p. 175); and on the other hand, theorizing leisure through Foucault’s poststructuralist perspective disproves the assumption that all leisure is immutably politically manipulated and structured by the hegemon. In other words, the idea of leisure as a possible locus of political resistance accentuates its positive socio-political repercussions which include “individual empowerment, as well as social change based on equity, recognition of, and respect for, disadvantaged populations” (Shaw, 2001, p. 198). Under this premise, leisure provides the subjected individuals with a space to re-/form themselves as works of art and conduct themselves against limits and normalized systems of thought using tactics of “refusal, negation, destabilization, disobedience, or transgression of the limits of the present order” (Hoy, 2005, p. 94). Furthermore, the exposition of leisure, acquired through a reflection on the notions of conduct and counter-conduct, allows the problematization of established leisure-based norms and systems of thoughts. This makes the study of leisure through Foucault’s theory of resistance applicable to the situation of women in Middle East Muslim countries where certain kinds of leisure are unwelcome and illegal for women in both public and private spaces—examples range from short term, project-based leisure pursuits such as reading certain books to fulfilling hobbies and serious leisure like driving.

Foucauldian framework of counter-conduct is also helpful in recognizing diversity among individuals—based on their race, class, age and etc.—and connecting it with discussions within “leisure theory on individual lifestyles as a source of identity and fulfillment” (Green, 1998, p. 173). Evidently, the stress on diversity of personal subjectivities underlines the importance of the private spheres and idiosyncratic factors, and hence the need for a close analysis of the micro-workings of power. According to Foucault, “resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power ... one is always ‘inside’ power” (1978, p. 95). This means that in the ongoing study on leisure the focus will be on micro-functionings of power, and the ways power is exercised “from below”—by the subjected women—in the everyday relations of power that are formed between all individuals. As he contends: there is “no such duality extending from the top down and reacting on more and more limited groups to the very depths of the social body” (1978, p. 94); rather, there is a multiplicity of points of power and resistance each of which deserves its own analysis as a separate and an individual case. Such conceptualization of resistance as entwined with personal practices of freedom and the freedom to forge alternative identities that appreciates diversity amongst individual women is the reason leisure researchers should focus on personal empowerment and individual resistance (Parry, 2005, p. 137). In like manner, Foucault’s counter-conduct approach, with its particular focus on micro-politics of everyday life, enables the present study to explore the ways in which the so-called passive Middle East women harness the discursive possibilities within leisure to formulate alternative realities and identities.

RESISTANCE AND EMPOWERMENT IN DRIVING, READING AND BONDING

Notwithstanding the formulated leisure barriers and constraints in Middle East countries and the acknowledgment that certain kinds of leisure are culturally and institutionally defined as a male privilege, the auto/biographical accounts by Manal Al-Sharif, Azar Nafisi and Jean p. Sasson offer a rich insight into the subjugated women’s daily struggles to (re)shape leisure opportunities and redefine the existing relations to the normative. Al-Sharif’s *Daring to Drive*

chronicles the ways her co-organized Women2Drive campaign encouraged Saudi women to protest in defiance of the ban on women driving. Women's public activism to challenge the ban started through virtual space of the social media websites and continued to the public space of the streets. More domestic ways in which women use leisure time and space as a site of counter-conduct to resist against gendered inequalities and patriarchal authoritarianism are illustrated through two other life narratives: Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and the Saudi princess Sultana's story, ghost-written by Sasson. The former is about a group of female subjects who form a private reading class to discuss over institutionally forbidden books, and the latter describes gender inequalities experienced by Saudi Arabian women and details the oppositional activities they exercise through women's club to contest patriarchal boundaries. In what follows, the study explores the ways the company of women, their friendship, bonding and identification function as a form of counter-conduct in parallel to prevailing techniques of governmentality.

DRIVING AS RESISTANCE

A notable example of women's employment of leisure as counter-conduct is given by Al-Sharif's story of Saudi women who take up driving as an act of anti-normalization. *Daring to Drive* reveals two functions of driving. First, as an activity that is normalized to encourage individuals to appreciate a set of already formulated values and practices. In Saudi Arabia, driving is structurally and culturally defined as a stereotypically masculine leisure activity and women's driving is regarded as an intolerable deviance. The constraint is imposed by a prevailing patriarchal ideology that supposedly rests itself on Islamic principles (Alenazy, 2017). Even though Islam supports a positive view of leisure—especially in the form of rest or recreation—the acceptability and normality of a leisure practice is determined by the dominant interpretation of Islam (Martin & Mason, 2004). This means that certain Islamic communities and countries develop different levels of sex segregation when it comes to women's participation in leisure activities—e.g., whereas women's right to drive is not acknowledged in Saudi Arabia, it is appreciated in countries like Iran and Iraq. In other words, driving, positive as it is for female drivers, is defined negatively by Saudi male non-participants who find women drivers disgusting. Despite the serious undertakings—in terms of skill and self-development—of the driving experience, the activity is widely considered a hedonic experience with visible negative effects. This ideology is most explicitly illustrated when on one occasion, forty-seven women tried to defy the ban on driving and drove around the capital city, Riyadh. Once arrested, “they were depicted as sexually loose, un-Islamic, pro-Western women who danced in the streets with the American soldiers” with blatant disregard for Islamic laws and customs like covering their hair with hijabs (Al-Sharif, 2017, p. 210). In this manner, sex segregation is reinforced within driving as a leisure activity.

Second, driving is used as a potentially resistance force to desubjugate the women who are driving, “stand up to repression, authoritarianism, and tradition” (Al-Sharif, 2017, p. 225), and thus normalize the leisure experience. Therefore, Al-Sharif's Women2Drive campaign is not a direct political protest to hegemonic structure with the aim of destabilizing the ruling system, but a mode of transgression to interrogate the limits and enable the production of alternative subjectivities. As she clarifies, she loves her country and the King and is proud to be Saudi. Saudi women like her only struggle to “effect change” and “overrun long-standing views” because they no longer can accept being conducted like that (p. 66). Their goal is to redefine driving as a positive leisure activity. In doing so, they want to conduct themselves differently and “demonstrate to Saudi society that while they were women, they were competent enough to sit behind the wheel of a car” (p. 209). In this

mechanism, driving is strategically used to challenge the dominant discourses that structure Saudi women's daily lives.

The two points discussed above demonstrate how driving is both a normalized and a normalizing leisure practice, not least upon gendered relations. At the same time that women's not-driving reinforces formulated phallogocentric norms of disciplinary boundaries, their driving is a powerful oppositional response to the normalizing discourses. This is more understandable within Foucault's (1978) theory of exercising power "from below" or the micro-workings of power that "where there is power, there is resistance" (p. 95). Women driving, when they are disciplined not to, emphasizes the multiplicity of power relations, the various modalities that power is exercised and the parallel techniques used to resist those relations and constraints. Al-Sharif's Women2Drive campaign is of great significance with respect to Foucault's notion of counter-conduct because of the ways in which Saudi women struggled to transform a fundamentalist interpretation of women's leisure—which embodies the belief that "if women are allowed to drive, prostitution, pornography, homosexuality, and divorce would 'surge'" (Al-Sharif, 2017, p. 270)—into a more socially acceptable and positive practice.

For Foucault, the counter-conduct is "the active intervention of individuals and constellations of individuals in the domain of the ethical and political practices and forces that shape us" (Davidson, 2011, p. 32). In an attempt to transgress dominant social values, Women2Drive uses the social media to call on all Saudi women to drive on a particular day. Saudi women participants further use the virtual space to write petitions, share photos and videos of themselves driving, express complaints, and connect with similar feminist and transnational groups. As a revolt of conduct, daring to drive thus facilitates techniques of care of the self and others. In other words, the emphasis in this emancipatory movement is on both individual and collective resistance, and the ultimate goal is to effect individual empowerment as well as wider social, cultural and structural changes. It is noteworthy that this technology of resistance is "neither particularly radical nor particularly unique" (Death, 2016, p. 215), but within the context of the Saudi feminist movements, it represents women's will to be governed differently—a way of "not being like that" and of creating alternative forms of conduct—and exposes contingency of the existing norms.

PRIVATE READING CLASS AS A TEMPORARY AUTONOMOUS ZONE

Reading Lolita in Tehran recounts the life story of an Iranian female university teacher who, in reaction to the increasing cultural and political oppression at public universities, holds a special class at home every Thursday morning to discuss institutionally forbidden literary works with a handful of her selected female students. The private reading sessions, however, have a dual function. On one level, they provide the female participants with an aesthetic experience to enjoy the works for their own sake. From the viewpoint of leisure studies, both writing and reading literature are popular leisure expressions because "[l]ike looking into a mirror, literature offers a view of human life, including leisure" (Russell, 2017, p. 2). Therefore, the gatherings prepare a suitable site for leisure and relaxation by demanding an active withdrawal from a growingly hostile reality (Nafisi, 2003, p. 11). In this sense, the meetings are defined in terms of the participants' recreational pursuit to achieve individual happiness, self-enrichment and personal fulfillment. Yet on another level, meeting and reading together functions as a key element of women's friendship, reassertion of personal agency and collective resistance against gendered inequality. In other words, the reading sessions create temporary autonomous zones of resistance against force relations that evade state supervision and governmentality. This particular point is clearly echoed in Nafisi's (2003) own words who writes:

The aura of such magical affinity allowed us to defy the repressive reality outside the room—not only that, but to avenge ourselves on those who controlled our lives. For those few precious hours we felt free to discuss our pains and our joys, our personal hang-ups and weaknesses; for that suspended time we abdicated our responsibilities to our parents, relatives and friends, and to the Islamic Republic. We articulated all that happened to us in our own words and saw ourselves, for once, in our own image. (p. 57)

Hence, the intimacy provided by the company of the women turns the reading sessions to a powerful medium in the exercise of personal power, re-inscription of their relationships with others and progression of counter-hegemonic challenge to the status quo. The sessions offer its female participants an opportunity to find community, escape oppressive reality of everyday life, dream, take action and be resistant. It creates a transformative experience that facilitates the theorization of female subjects as active agents in re-/forming their identities rather than as passive victims of overdetermined structures. It is during these sessions that each woman “gained an outline and a shape, becoming her own inimitable self” (Nafisi, 2003, p. 6), and lost their inhibitions to question not just others but themselves as well. This particular progression from passivity to activity is also strongly suggested by Nafisi’s division of her life story into four chapters of *Lolita*, *Gatsby*, *James* and *Austen*. Participation in reading sessions not only produces immediate joy and temporal happiness for its female participants, but it also metaphorically transforms them from “*Lolita*’s utter helplessness” to *Daisy Miller*’s blatant activism in defying the conventions of the time

Therefore, unlike the institutional classes which “were subservient to politics and subject to arbitrary rules” (Nafisi, 2003, p. 10), and notwithstanding their formal structurelessness (p. 28), the reading sessions feature normative practices that transgress dominating networks by challenging the discourses that structure subjects’ daily lives as well as the expected outcomes. The female participants enact through the sessions a counter-attack against oppressive practices and institutions in the process of creating for themselves a self-transformative experience. Hence, unlike more politically radical opposition to hegemonic structures—e.g., violent demonstrations, “taking over administration buildings” or exercising murder (pp. 90-7)—the reading sessions’ objectives are effectively fulfilled with less severe risks, and with more notable success in bringing individual contentment by enabling the production of alternative subjectivities. In transforming female subjects’ experience from docility and compliance to creative resistance, the reading sessions turn into an effective leisurely intervention that provide its female participants with a cathartic ambience to interact with each other and overturn suppressive norms. They all attend the sessions “in a disembodied state of suspension,” sharing with each other “their secrets, their pains and their gifts” (p. 58).

The Thursday sessions thus produce open spaces and time—an alternative reality—in which stereotyped gender roles change. The female participants feel protected from “the gaze of the blind censor ... [and] the censor’s world of witches and goblins” (Nafisi, 2003, p. 25-26). They take the opportunity to flaunt their insubordination “against the betrayals, horrors and infidelities of life” (p. 47). The emancipatory and anti-normative nature of the sessions reflects Foucault’s (2009) theorization of “counter-society,” or another society, which aims at giving birth to a new social order and producing a new person. A counter-society, reformulates the existing society, and functions as a sort of “different governmentality” and “a different society, a different form of conduct” that overturns social relations and hierarchy (pp. 199-212). Since the public sphere is ideologically defined and controlled, the private reading sessions offer these women a liberating space in which they rearrange and reshape reality, and simultaneously re-invent themselves. This leisurely freedom prevents the female participants “from utter despair” by providing them with a safe “refuge in a life that is

consistently brutal” (Nafisi, 2003, pp. 32-3). Within this context, the leisure practice of “discussing harmless works of fiction” becomes a political practice through which female participants re-inscribe their relationships with others and reassert genuine social relations of friendship. The modalities of counter-conduct facilitated by these gatherings both “changed the force relations between individuals and modified one’s relation to oneself. One conducts oneself in another way with friends, fabricating new ethical and political possibilities” (Davidson, 2011, p. 34). Through friendship, women exercise counter-conduct against dominant patriarchal power structures and exert their will to be conducted differently.

FRIENDSHIP AS RESISTANCE

A less collective action than Al-Sharif’s Women2Drive campaign against social inequalities and hierarchies in Saudi Arabia is taken by Sultana who forms a girls’ club called “Lively Lips” with two of her friends. Much like Al-Sharif’s campaign and Nafisi’s reading sessions, the primary objective of the club is not denial or subversion of the ruling system, but rather a pursuit of an alternative form of subjectivity and governmentality. Its goal is to effect “social change” by interrogating Saudi women’s passive submission to the imposed gender roles and awakening in them a spirit to control their own lives (Sasson, 1992, pp. 103-4). In pursuing this objective, the Lively Lips operates as a counter-society that, in Foucauldian terminology, possesses “a considerable capacity both to appear as a different society, a different form of conduct, and to channel revolts of conduct” (Foucault, 2009, p. 199). The club involves female members battling for their rights through active creation of leisure spaces and times that allow women to contest dominant patriarchal ideology.

Of the multiple leisure activities the female participants do for “fun” and “diversion”: befriending foreign men; dialing random phone numbers; and, playing pick-up lovers. On some occasions, for instance, two of the club members, Wafa and Nadia approach foreign men and ask them if they have a private apartment to take the girls and have fun. With these “pick-up lovers,” as Sultana tells us, “they did everything except penetration” (Sasson, 1992, p. 113). On other occasions, the girls would dial random phone numbers to hunt for a foreign man who may be interested in female companionship. In defiance of compulsory veiling of women in public sphere, the girls then would metaphorically reveal their bodies by portraying them “from head to toe, in lewd detail” to the strangers on the phone (p. 113). Even though all the members, in particular Wafa and Nadia, fully realize the illegality and adverse consequences of such morally transgressive deeds, they believe the state of autonomy, individual choice, self-expression and satisfaction they regain is worth the risk. This final example show female body not merely as a normalized object, a passive victim of patriarchal governmentality, but as a potentially resistant power that can be used to disrupt norms of appearance and oppression.

Hence, leisure activities of the Lively Lips emphasize two central points: First, leisure functions as a coping mechanism to deal with unwelcome patriarchal impositions and domestic abuse. That is, the female participants use leisure to partly alleviate the negative influences of cultural compulsions and constraints. Therefore, the club members’ amusing activities, as Sultana explains, function as “an ‘out’ from their future, which loomed before them like a dark and endless night” (Sasson, 1992, p. 114). Second, leisure is used to facilitate individual empowerment and positive personal development. The girls’ socializing with men when they are disciplined not to is a strong reaction against “[t]he absolute lack of control, of freedom for [their] sex” (p. 114), and an active involvement in countering normalizing discourses. This progression to activity and agency, in a society that values women’s unquestioning obedience and docility, is not an orthodox social mobility, nor is it a highly political movement. Rather, it is an appeal to be conducted differently that has much

in common with practices of freedom aiming to disrupt the form of subjectivity that is enforced upon female subjects in order to formulate alternative identities.

Another example of women taking up friendship and socialization as anti-normalization occurs during afternoon tea-parties where women seize the opportunity to display their “individual clothing” and talk over culturally forbidden topics. According to Sultana, women arrive at these parties “carefully dressed in lace and satin, with their garments tastefully accented by a display of priceless diamonds and rubies” (Sasson, 1992, p. 153). They dress for each other with such dazzling selection of fashions that they “resemble bright exotic birds ... under [their] black veils and *abaayas*” [italics original] (p. 153). The object of exhibition, however, is not a show-off of personal wealth, but rather a reclamation of power over their bodies, a celebration of freedom of choice and a demonstration of their desire to be conducted differently. The safe space of the gatherings also give its female participants the courage to talk outside the limits of patriarchally accepted topics. For instance, discussions regarding sex, a subject considered taboo in Saudi Arabia, “dominate all female gatherings” (p. 158). The women share intimate details of their marital life, from moments of pleasurable sex to traumatic experiences of forced sex. The mutual self-disclosure and the shared intimacy of these talks reshape women’s friendships with each other and thus facilitates the formation of a new subjectivity that possesses an active feminine voice. It is in this manner that Saudi women strategically use leisure space and time to regain autonomy, forge new identities and seek a different form of conduct.

CONCLUSION

Foucault’s post-structural theory of counter-conduct is an important concept for understanding the role of leisure in life writings by or about Middle East women. The notion of counter-conduct emphasizes the politically productive nature of leisure time and activities that can work in parallel to dominant techniques of governmentality to produce alternative rationalities and subjectivities. One implication of this conclusion is rejection of the actuality of an absolute domination, and celebrating instead the Foucauldian motto “[w]here there is power, there is resistance” (1978, p. 95). Highlighting resistance within leisure space and time underscores micro-physics of power and the leisure-time activities that have been neglected by mainstream scholarship. A re-assessment of these spaces and practices through a counter-conduct approach cultivates an appreciation of women’s leisure as a site where gendered relations can be contested, disrupted and inverted. The production of counter discourses, which allows the reconstruction of feminine subjectivities and thereby accentuates women’s ability to act and resist, provides important insight into other modalities of resistance and identity-formation—not least the ability within leisure activities to empower individual as well as collective lives, and to spark and accelerate cultural transformations.

The analyses of Middle East women’s much-debated personal stories within the power/resistance framework reveals the shifting complexities of their life course, and underlines the nuances of agency that are not appreciated in the existing literature. Al-Sharif’s Women2Drive campaign, Nafisi’s reading class and Sultana’s Lively Lips’ Club perform alternative social and political rationalities in both public and private spheres of their respective societies. Whereas the first group conducts a more explicit and transformative collective protest, and is more noticeably counter-cultural, the other two use more domestic spheres and create less visible spaces to interrogate and alter mainstream social values. Throughout the narratives, the female bonding which is developed through leisure time and activities offers women the opportunity to act beyond the limits of normalized gender relations, reassert personal agency and formulate alternative subjectivities. In this sense, the life accounts do not merely provide an oversimplified depiction of Middle East women as

passive victims of a misogynistic social, cultural and political tradition, but rather chronicle women's active protests—i.e., individual and collective revolts of conduct, acts of opposition and violations of established norms—similar to the forms of counter-conduct theorized by Foucault. Therefore, viewing life narratives by or about Middle East women in the light of a counter-conduct approach not only disallows the easy labeling of them as self-orientalizing, unresisting, apolitical or insufficiently transformative, but also redefines them in relation to a distinct level of socio-political performance which is not a traditional revolt against sovereignty but an appeal for an alternative mode of governmentality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work was supported by the short-term grant [304/PHUMANITI/6315300] from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). The author is also indebted to two anonymous reviewers for their valuable insights on earlier version of this manuscript.

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