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Book Review

A Trade Like Any Other: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt

By Karin van Nieuwkerk. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995, 226 pp.

"A performer is like a candle; she sheds light for others but burns herself up" (p. 10). This rather sad statement gives an accurate picture of the situation of women working in the entertainment trade in Cairo, such as van Nieuwkerk presents it. Caught in a dilemma between economic necessity and their significant others' evaluation of their work as shameful, female

entertainers fight an uphill battle for respectability. They attempt to establish their trade as one like any other, but with no great success.

To Western visitors to Egypt, belly dancing has been seen (and still is) as the quintessence of the sensual and exotic Orient. In order to de-exoticize the trade, van Nieuwkerk takes readers behind the glamorous tourist scene and introduces us to the life-worlds of female performers and their Egyptian audiences. She shows that although entertainment in general is seen as an integral part of big celebrations, female performers' reputations suffer. And she asks:

Is the tainted reputation of female entertainers due to the fact that entertainment is a dishonorable profession or is it due to the fact that the profession is dishonorable for women? (p. 3)

In order to answer this question, which forms the book's main theme, van Nieuwkerk analyzes the history of shifting perceptions of the trade and the cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity. Through this, she is confronted with the body, i.e., the female body, which, in contrast to the male's, is perceived as shameful (*awra*) because it is primarily a *sexual body*. Female entertainers try to improve their respectability through various strategies, such as adapting male attributes, in order to *neutralize* their bodies and present them as productive, not sexual, bodies. But this is partly without success, and thus their work continues to be seen as shameful.

In line with recent developments in the anthropology of the Middle East, the author begins with a historical survey of the ups and downs of the entertainment trade.¹ This gives a very interesting background to the present situation. The entertainment trade has become professionalized in a way that makes it radically different from what it was previously. Entertainers have become differentiated into trained and untrained performers, and their acts categorized as high or low art. Entertainers used to be organized in groups that shared a common code of honor. Today, the trade has become much more individualized and competitive, and individual performers are left to their own devices for developing their performances and negotiating their respectability. In addition, Islamic fundamentalism is increasingly hampering the execution of their trade. These factors make the entertainers more vulnerable.

Van Nieuwkerk distinguishes three different circuits of entertainment: weddings and saint's day celebrations, nightclubs, and performing art. Performers of all three are evaluated according to a *hierarchy of shame*. Different levels are defined by such factors as what kind of entertainment (i.e., music, singing, different types of dancing), context (television, night clubs, weddings), subtle differences in costume, tipping, behavior toward male customers, and the gender of the performer. For women, the most shameful is belly dancing in nightclubs, which Egyptians perceive as immoral places for drinking, greed, and sexual excitement. Thus, many female entertainers prefer to perform at less lucrative weddings, which are

regarded as joyful celebrations of morally sound institutions like kinship and marriage. Thus, they involve less shame, but still—it remains shameful to work as a female entertainer.

Van Nieuwkerk analyzes the entertainment trade in the context of infamous occupations but concludes that the marginality typical of such occupations does not fit female entertainers, most of whom are married mothers sharing common Egyptian values and living among ordinary Egyptians. It is only their type of work that makes them different, or rather, according to the author, the fact that they are *women* doing it. The reasons for this are to be found in the local construction of femininity and masculinity.

Van Nieuwkerk uses as her starting point the common analytical distinction between sex and gender, but also argues that sex, to a large extent, may be culturally constructed. The body thus becomes an important object of research. Quoting Whitehead and Ortner,² she points out that femininity and masculinity might be elaborated to varying degrees in different societies. Further, which female roles (mother, wife, sister) are emphasized have consequences for the elaboration of the different aspects of the body. If, for example, the wifely role is in focus, the sexual aspect, or *the sexual body*, will become prominent. This seems to be the case in Egypt. Taking her lead from Sabbah's³ and Mernissi's⁴ analyses of the Muslim discourses on sexuality, the author finds women to be thoroughly sexualized: From the passive sexual woman in the orthodox discourse (the explicit theory), to the sexually active woman in the implicit theory, and lastly, to the sexually aggressive woman in the erotic discourse. Along the same line, the male role is also reversed: From an active conqueror to a weak man incapable of satisfying the insatiable woman. But common to all three discourses is the understanding of woman as primarily a sexual body capable of enticing man and thus creating chaos—*fitnah*.

Van Nieuwkerk's informants differ according to their social class as well as in their views on female entertainers. In general, lower-class people regard them with more tolerance than people from the upper strata. None, however, refer to female entertainers as sexually aggressive. The author thus concludes that this view is *experience-distant*. But woman is still perceived as primarily a sexual body. Her potential ability to excite makes her wanted as a performer, but if she realizes this potential she pays with her reputation. These women are thus caught in a double bind. The male body is neutral, however. It cannot excite others and, consequently, there is no shame attached to it. Performing in public, a man succeeds due to his skills, and his body is thus perceived as *a productive body*.

In order to escape their culturally constructed double bind, female entertainers use varying strategies: They differentiate their public and private personae, they adopt male attributes in order to *neutralize* their bodies while working, they present themselves as hard-working mothers who perform to pay for the education of their children, and they undercommunicate whatever joy and pleasure they experience in their work. But these strategies are only partly successful. Though they themselves try to define their

bodies as productive bodies, their significant others continue to focus on their sexual bodies, and the shame remains.

A Trade Like Any Other is an interesting book, well written and well researched. Van Nieuwkerk succeeds in de-exoticizing the performers by portraying them in their everyday life, where they come across as typical Egyptians absorbed in the improvement of their children's lives. The body has, in recent years, developed as a field of study in anthropology. *A Trade Like Any Other* represents a valuable contribution to the evolving knowledge about the cultural construction of the body in the Middle East.⁵

In spite of the author's relatively detailed ethnography and her efforts of contextualization, there are, however, certain points that remain debatable. Van Nieuwkerk seems to say that femininity is more elaborated than masculinity in Egypt. On the surface this seems to be true, but is it really so? Or, is this an impression due to the lack of comparable data on men as gender and as sex? Though we have many good studies of women as women, to my knowledge we have none of men as men.

Taking her lead from Whitehead and Ortner, the author implies that the wifely role is the most important female role in Egypt and, thus, women are regarded as primarily sexual bodies. This might be, as van Nieuwkerk shows, the case in the orthodox Muslim discourse. But is this an *experience-near* discourse for Egyptians in general? In my experience, Egyptian women and men perceive the mother role as equally basic as the role of wife, often even more so. Through marriage a girl becomes a woman, but through giving birth she becomes a real woman and her title/name changes accordingly. Her sexual body becomes transformed into the *nurturing* body and its enticing ability is greatly reduced. This can be seen in the acceptance of public breastfeeding. A breast, which in general is regarded as a highly erotic symbol, becomes, through its nurturing function, neutralized and might be displayed in front of men without anyone considering it a source of *fitnah*. I accept van Nieuwkerk's statement about the importance of women as sexual bodies in Egypt, but I think the nurturing body must be taken into consideration. Maybe then we would discover more nuances in the reasons why it is shameful for women to exhibit their bodies in public.

According to van Nieuwkerk, female employment outside the home is generally regarded as erotic aggression (pp. 158, 184), due to women being primarily sexual bodies: "They and their bodies seem to have only one dimension" (p. 184). This conclusion seems far too absolute. All recent studies confirm that female public employment represents a challenge to traditional gender roles. But this has as much to do with the ideal of men as the sole provider and women as mothers, i.e., as nurturing bodies, as women's sexual bodies. Besides, in the upper classes, female employment is by now accepted as normal. Among the lower classes, it is a source of considerable prestige to have a female family member working, for example, as a civil servant or, even better, a doctor.

Many people state that nothing men do is shameful. As a Muslim sheikh explains: "A man's body is not shameful . . . it cannot excite" (p.

132). Van Nieuwkerk takes this as one indication of men having neutral productive bodies. But is this really so? Why are men then seen as sexually dangerous to women, both in the orthodox and in the everyday discourse on gender? The reason it is shameful for a woman to dance is because of her ability to arouse men. Does this not imply that women can transform men into sexual bodies? And if it happens in a context out of wedlock, is this not shameful for men, too?

Much has been written on the need for women to cover their bodies. But is it really true that the male body is without shame? It seems that the general norms regulating men's bodies are greatly overlooked. It is not uncommon to hear men complain, for example, of male foreigners who "have no shame," dressing in shorts and an undershirt and exposing their hairy armpits.

Female dancers use revealing clothes and thereby expose the body to a degree that is shameful in all contexts, apart from the private one with their husbands and (maybe on the beach, but few lower-class women would dress in a swimming suit even there). Male entertainers do not use revealing clothes. Can that be part of the reason why it is not shameful for men? What would happen if they also donned costumes like the women? They do not do so because their bodies are not regarded as beautiful in the same way as women's and because they lack the ability to excite. But does that mean there is never any shame attached to a man revealing his body? I wonder.

A Trade Like Any Other presents interesting material, raises exciting new debates, and presents an important contribution to body-related studies. I do, however, find some of the conclusions somewhat oversimplified. In my view, the Egyptian perceptions of the male and female bodies are more complex than the way they are presented here.

Endnotes

1. See, for example, Marcia Inhorn, *Quest for Conception: Gender, Infertility, and Egyptian Medical Traditions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994).

2. H. Whitehead and S. B. Ortner, *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

3. F. A. Sabbah, *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1984).

4. F. Memissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society* (New York: Schenkman, 1975).

5. See, for example, S. Morsy, *Gender, Sickness, and Healing in Rural Egypt: Ethnography in Historical Context* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993); V. M. Moghadam, ed., *Gender and National Identity: Women in Politics in Muslim Societies* (London: Zed Books, 1994); see also Inhorn, *Quest*.

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