

Gender, agency, and embodiment theories in relation to space

Les théories du genre, de l'agencement et de l'incarnation en relation à l'espace

Maria Frederika Malmström



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RÉSUMÉ / ABSTRACT

LES THÉORIES DU GENRE, DE L'AGENCEMENT ET DE L'INCARNATION EN RELATION A L'ESPACE

L'auteur s'interroge dans cet article sur l'intérêt d'étudier les espaces urbains à travers le prisme du genre et nous montre comment cette approche théorique permet d'analyser la singularité de l'expérience vécue, non seulement comme une forme d'interaction sociale, mais comme liée à des structures sociales, ce qui implique des négociations, des tensions, des conflits et des incertitudes. Elle montre la nécessité d'une approche en termes de contextes de changement social, culturel et politique.

GENDER, AGENCY, AND EMBODIMENT THEORIES IN RELATION TO SPACE

Why (and how) is it important to query into the particular lived experiences and 'embodied agency' of women if we want to study urban spaces through the lens of gender? The paper discusses this overarching question in relation to recent dynamic and generative theories of gender, embodiment and agency. This theoretical approach is relevant since it is possible to analyse the singularity of lived experience, not only as a form of social interaction, but as linked to social structures and discourses, which implies negotiations of tensions, conflicts, and uncertainties. Such an approach is particularly fruitful because it makes it possible to analyse agents within a context of social, cultural and political change. It also means the possibility to grasp women's narratives and body language as they engage in acts of resistance, as well as the marking of body and space. The actions of 'the secret self' among younger generations, for example, give increased space and have manipulative potential as long as these 'morally forbidden' and dishonourable acts are not brought out into the public sphere. The need to understand agency as the capacity to act according to the exigencies of the specific socio-cultural context forms the main premise of this paper; where each context comprises the complex interaction between the local and a variety of wider global forces.

MARIA FREDERIKA MALMSTRÖM est une anthropologue suédoise qui s'intéresse au Moyen-Orient, au genre, au corps, à la sexualité, à la politique, à la violence et à la sécurité. Elle est pour le moment chercheur invité au Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality à la New York University. Elle a obtenu son doctorat d'anthropologie sociale de la School of Global Studies de l'Université de Gothenburg en Suède. Sa thèse examine comment l'identité féminine est continûment créée et recrée en Égypte à travers des pratiques quotidiennes. Elle est aujourd'hui impliquée dans un projet de recherche interdisciplinaire : « Le Hamâs entre la Shari'a et l'islamo-démocratie ». Le projet tente de voir comment le Hamâs s'adapte aux réalités du terrain. En outre Mme Malmström entreprend une recherche de terrain sur la violence sexuelle et les conflits armés dans un monde globalisé (avec Maria Stern et Maria Eriksson Baaz). Elle est également consultante sur les questions de genre et membre de plusieurs réseaux académiques/politiques, entre autres, le Think tank for Arab Women.

MARIA FREDERIKA MALMSTRÖM is a Swedish anthropologist and her areas of interest are the MENA region, gender, body, sexuality, politics, violence and security. Currently, she is a visiting scholar at the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality at New York University. (See <http://www.csgsnyu.org/visiting-scholars/current-visiting-scholars/>.) She received her PhD from the School of Global Studies, Social Anthropology, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Her dissertation examined how female gender identity is continually created and re-created in Egypt through a number of daily practices, of which female circumcision is central. The study explored how the subject is made through the interplay of global hegemonic structures of power and the most intimate sphere, which has been exposed in the international arena. She is today involved in the inter-disciplinary research project " Hamas between Sharia rule and Demo-Islam." The study aims to investigate in what way Hamas will adapt to the new realities on the ground (together with Michael Schulz, et al.). Additionally, Dr. Malmström is involved on the ground research on sexual violence and armed conflict in a globalised world (together with Maria Stern and Maria Eriksson Baaz). Furthermore, she is a gender consultant (UNFPA and others) and member of several academic/policy networks, e.g., Think Tank for Arab Women.

MARIA FREDERIKA MALMSTRÖM

GENDER, AGENCY AND EMBODIMENT THEORIES IN RELATION TO SPACE

Why (and how) is it important to query into the particular lived experiences and ‘embodied agency’ of women if we want to study urban spaces through the lens of gender? Recent dynamic and generative theories of gender, embodiment and agency are useful if we want to understand gender in the field of urban studies. Central to such a line of inquiry is an exploration into the ways in which these women’s experiences of space are shaped and challenged by the political, religious, economic and social processes that impinge on their lives. This theoretical framework, based on the combination of the scholars (Lois McNay, 2000; 2003; 2004), (Saba Mahmood, 2001; 2005) and Sherry Ortner (2006) approach of gender, agency and embodiment, also means the possibility to grasp women’s narratives and body language as they engage in acts of resistance, as well as the marking of body and space. As is the case elsewhere in the region with regard to gender, the norm is to associate men with the public domain and to separate them from female domestic, private spheres associated with women. Evers Rosander (1987) notes that in Morocco, the separation of women from men forms the very basis of social order. Ghannam (2002) also notes that Egyptian public spaces are gendered and women’s movements are more restricted than men’s. Men may tease and harass women on the streets, while women should show modesty by walking fast and straight and avoiding looking into men eye’s or responding to their comments. In my earlier research among Muslim women in Cairo with a modest income, I explored the idea that the actions of ‘a secret self’ among younger generations may give increased space, and have manipulative potential, as long as these ‘morally forbidden’ and dishonourable acts are not brought out into the public sphere (Malmström, 2004; 2009; 2010).

After a brief discussion of the theoretical concepts of subjectivities and agency, the following text explores the notion of lived experience.

The second part discusses the role of the body in relation to space and the analytical approach of embodied agency. The third part investigates the links between the senses and agency. This section, as well as the second one, includes ethnographic accounts. The chapter concludes with an elaboration of the analytical approach of gender, agency, embodiment theory and urban space. It also discusses the significance of analysing urban space in combination with particular local historical contexts. Analysing personal experience in relation to historical context makes its interplay with economic, political and cultural forces visible (McNay 2004). In the examples given, the constant interaction of morality and secrecy in relation to space in the Egyptian context seems to be crucial for further understanding. My concluding argument is that recent theories of gender, agency, and embodiment in relation to space give us not only an enriched understanding of the phenomenon of urban spaces through the lens of gender, but a complex and much deeper analysis.

LIVED EXPERIENCES

Paying attention to ‘lived experience’ (to be further explained below), also prompts inquiry into the role of agency in the construction of gender. Hence, the concern is to explore gendering practices as lived experience rather than as fixed subject positions. This means paying attention to women’s subjectivities¹ and agency, that is, their personal capacities to feel, reflect, intend and act within the particular social relations and historical contexts in which they live their lives, drawing on scholars such as Lois McNay (2003; 2004), Saba Mahmood (2001; 2005) and Sherry Ortner (2006). In other words: Agency is a universal capacity to act, but it is socio-culturally mediated, i.e., agency is locally defined. The need to understand agency as the capacity to act according to the demands of the specific socio-cultural context is crucial; where each context comprises the complex interaction between the local and a variety of wider global forces. According to the scholar (Lois McNay, 2004), the continual process of becoming a subject results from a complex interplay between the phenomenal nearness of lived experience and social structures of power and inequality. She places into the centre of analysis agency as lived experience in relational terms. This approach to agency means to privilege people’s own views and voices in an experience-near analysis of the processes of making woman – or manhood in daily life, which is

1. Subjectivity is the ground for agency – that thoughts and feelings guide action. Subjectivity is ‘a necessary part of understanding how people (try to) act on the world even as they are acted upon’ (Ortner 2006: 110).

vital in relation to method. The relationship between norms and personal experience in this approach is central.

Experience here refers both to the sensory and also to the more reflected and interpreted ways in which we are in the world and the ways in which we act on it, since all lived experiences are embodied inasmuch as we experience the world and our selves through our bodies (Edward Bruner, 1986). The inclusion of the subject's lived experience makes it possible to broaden our analytical focus in studying gender in the field of urban studies and to take account of the importance body language and the meaning ascribed to the body.

The notion of experience has been problematic for feminist theory, which has assumed a 'unity' between women as women, and viewed experience as a source of 'true' knowledge while neglecting its relation to locally constructed knowledge. An awareness of the disarray between women as women and the heterogeneity of women's experiences in relation to class, ethnicity, and age for example is crucial when discussing women's role in the urban space. Moreover, there is a need not to exaggerate and essentialise gender differences, but to look for similarities between women's and men's shared experiences, interactions and appropriations of spaces. Surprisingly, gender is still often associated as equivalent to women issues, which is very problematic. Gender structures more or less everything in societies and concerns not only the characters and identities of women, but also of men, since women and men construct gender ideologies and social values together. In addition, gender of course structures institutions such as those within the economy, politics and religion. Moreover, gender is often discussed mainly as a problem, or treated as a vulnerable category, particularly in relation to women. Women and men should instead be discussed as active agents, and women in particular should not be analysed as a vulnerable or non-existing category. The combination of different forms of discrimination needs to be further analysed to disclose certain exposed groups.

EMBODIED AGENCY

The body is also relevant in discussions of agency². The body is acted upon by others and by a conscious self, through the techniques and practices of learning to be a woman. Saba Mahmood's (2005)

2. See also Csordas (1990; 1994; 1999; 2002), Lock (1993), Lock & Scheper-Hughes (1996) and Williams & Bendelow (1998).

notion of embodied agency as intention and desire is fruitful in this regard³. Mahmood followed the women's mosque movement in Cairo from 1995 to 1997, focusing on how female agency is formed by the conscious subject in a specific historical context with the help of bodily practices. This approach offers valuable tools for understanding agency. In contrast to Bourdieu's⁴ (1990) focus on the unconscious power of *habitus*⁵, Mahmood uses the concept to cover the formation of self as a conscious process and the bodily procedures whereby a moral self is shaped. She describes the Aristotelian model of moral cultivation in the following way:

Habitus in this older Aristotelian tradition is understood to be an acquired excellence at either a moral or a practical craft, learned through repeated practice until that practice leaves a permanent mark on the character of the person. Thus, moral virtues (such as modesty, honesty, and fortitude) are acquired through a coordination of outward behaviours (e.g., bodily acts, social demeanour) with inward dispositions (e.g., emotional states, thoughts, intentions) through the repeated performance of acts that entail those particular virtues (Mahmood, 2005: 136).

Mahmood's ethnography illustrates how women consciously educated themselves in Islamic 'feminine' virtues in order to approximate their ideals. For example, women who were not naturally shy would try to make themselves shy. After a period of practice, both shyness and modesty became imprinted upon them (*ibid.*:156f). Mahmood's notions of embodied agency is a useful point of departure to explore the ways in which women consciously cultivate themselves (intention and desire) to be proper and respectable women, including strategies toward real and symbolic violence, for instance women's responses to inappropriate remarks and gestures in urban spaces. Furthermore, Mahmood's embodied agency is practice-oriented, and her embodied approach develops the poststructuralist and feminist liberal notions of subjectivity formation by bringing embodiment into the analysis.

3. See also Busby (2000).

4. See Jackson (1996) for a critique of Foucault and Bourdieu for their rejection of the subject. He argues that 'Bourdieu's notion of habitus, like Foucault's notion of discursive formations and discursive practices... excludes autonomous subjects from the anonymous labyrinths of culture' (Jackson 1996: 20f).

5. See also Mauss (1979 [1934]).

SENSES, BODY AND AGENCY

The body may be said to have agency also in other ways than through the conscious making of self described by Mahmood. I am referring firstly to the unreflected, sometimes painful, sensory memories and responses generated by bodily procedures enacted upon women's bodies that cannot be recalled. Secondly, I am referring to the way in which women unreflectively learn about womanhood and re-create themselves as women through sight, hearing, touch, scent and flavour. For example, sometimes violence and experiences of suffering cannot be talked about, but may be brought to mind by something ordinary.

In my earlier research which examined constructions of gender among Muslim Cairo women through the prism of female circumcision, bodily agency was expressed foremost through the reliving of pains (Malmström, 2009a; 2009b). Women spoke of recurrent pain in their lower abdomens many years after their circumcision. Three bodily pains that every woman among the urban poor has to pass through in her life cycle are female circumcision, defloration and childbirth. There is a close link between the three events in a woman's life, and it is impossible to understand the Cairo women's view on female circumcision without also discussing childbirth and defloration at the same time. When talking about one with me, women were often reminded of the others⁶. The women themselves were surprised when I pointed out this association, but they told me that they had never spoken about their experiences of pain before. Especially circumcision and defloration were experientially linked. The women depicted childbirth in similar terms to the 'tiring pain' of circumcision. Sometimes they would compare the pain of an episiotomy to that of circumcision. When speaking about her circumcision one woman said: 'There is pain [*fiḥ alam*]. I cannot remember. I was so small. But the pain was the same as when I gave birth'. My argument is that the body is an active agent in parallel to other agents of socialisation. The duration of pain during defloration or childbirth may communicate with a body memory from the experiences of female circumcision. It was clear that the women I spoke to relived pain in their lower abdomen years after the circumcision in totally different life situations than these three crises (Malmström, 2009a; 2009b). Some young women told me how, years after their circumcision and without warning, they began experiencing lower abdominal pain when they passed slaughterhouses. This may be

6. Johansen also found that her informants' memories of pain were reactivated both in the sexual debut and during childbirth (Johansen, 2006).

understood as an 'expression of words in the body' (Brodwin, 1994: 95) and as body memory. A body memory is about how 'we remember in and by and through the body' (Casey, 1987). Something we 'are' rather than 'have' (Elise Johansen, 2002: 315; 2006). Body memories can be revived through new experiences of pain, some of which are self-inflicted, such as with the painful depilation.

An Ethnographic Account

Homa told me about her circumcision when her mother was not present. Her description was fragmentary because she found it so difficult to speak about what she had undergone. At the same time it was obvious that she was longing for someone to talk to. I tried to string the fragments of her account into a coherent narrative. When we talked about the same passages on another occasion, Homa seemed to have forgotten some of them or she no longer considered them suitable for representation and for this reason I have not included these passages here. However, it is possible that Homa felt she had told me too much the first time round, and this may be a question of deliberate repression of memories that I cannot, as an anthropologist, comment upon.

Homa said she must have repressed the painful memory for some years because she was unable to remember the intense pain and the complications. But when she was about twelve years old, she began to feel a stabbing pain in her body. Her lower abdomen began to ache and she felt severe pain in the genital area as soon as she saw blood or meat at the butchers' shops around the city, or when she saw her mother cutting up meat for dinner or if she only thought about blood or cutting. Homa explained that when she thought about what she had gone through, she could not remember seeing the circumcision but she had felt it deep inside her body. She simply said: '*I felt the operation*'.

Homa's circumciser had been a *dâya* (traditional birth attendant), a refugee from Sudan who lived in the neighbourhood and was known to be a good circumciser. Homa clearly remembered when the *dâya* had entered their home. Um Karim's niece was already there since she was supposed to assist the *dâya* and support Um Karim's daughters. Homa had waited outside the bedroom together with her mother as the *dâya* circumcised the older sister. The youngest daughter Nuura was by then only a little girl and she was forced to play in another room of the apartment, while the brothers had to play outside on the street. Homa remembered that she had screamed in fear when it was time for her circumcision. Her cousin had tried to calm her but had also told her she must not cry or move her legs when the *dâya* was cutting. She

was too frightened to move while the incision was being made. Homa remembered that it was painful but she had been comforted by her cousin, who stayed by her side all the time. The *dâya* had then tied the cut off parts around her left arm and after one week her mother had thrown these down the lavatory.

After the circumcisions were done, the *dâya* had told both sisters to stay in bed for one week, but Homa was too active for that. She began to play with her older brothers on the second day. On the third day, she and two of her siblings had run around in the apartment. Suddenly Homa had felt something warm flowing down her legs. It was blood. One of her brothers was shocked and began shouting that he had not done anything to his sister. Homa observed her mother's frightened face when she came running and yelled at Homa to go straight back to bed. Her mother placed a piece of cloth between her legs but the bleeding did not stop. Homa began to feel dizzy and eventually her mother ran to the neighbour, who advised them to go to the local clinic. Um Karim was so afraid that the neighbour had to follow the mother and daughter to the clinic. Homa could remember nothing of the trip to the clinic. The physician had been angry with Um Karim and he told them that this was an emergency and that it was necessary to perform another operation immediately, because the first one had been so badly done. There was no time for anaesthesia because Homa was on the brink of death. Homa said she had felt very alone when she went through the first circumcison, even though her cousin and the *dâya* were there with her. During the second circumcison both the neighbour and her own mother sat in the same room throughout. She said she knew that her mother was feeling the same pain that she was and she could feel her presence. The neighbour stroked her hair and cheeks as the operation was performed.

Homa said that the second circumcison was the one she remembered clearly. She felt as if the physician had cut and cut for two or three hours though she still does not know how long it actually took. Homa told me in a low voice: 'my body was on fire, my body was very hot'. Homa said she felt the intense pain with each cut and she remembered crying as if she was outside of herself. She saw her mother's terrified eyes in the corner of the room. Then everything went black; she had fainted. When she woke up again, the operation was over and she was lying in her own bed. It was hard for Homa to find words to talk about the second circumcison. She stopped and started. Then she broke off and began talking about her lived experiences another day.

Homa was alone with her feelings for a long time before she finally, at the age of twelve, broached the topic with her older sister. She told

me this helped and that by this time she no longer had the same acute pain in her lower abdomen but she still associated circumcision with raw meat and slaughter (Malmström, 2009a).

In sum, girls and women may be taught morality through the endurance of pain and through the body's capacity to feel; the body actively experiences and remembers how to be a moral woman in daily life, in accordance with the norms of suffering. The norms and cultural models of pain are embodied (*cf*Talle, 2007). Girls may be moulded into women via the senses and within the local framework of meaning; they learn through the body how to be feminine. Thus, a sensory approach is necessary for an enriched understanding of women's experiences. This is useful when analysing how women experience different forms of violence, as well as their impact on women's use of public space. However, the sensory approach must always be combined with cultural representation, so that both meaning and experience are included in the analysis.

SECRECY, MORALITY AND SPACE

As mentioned in the introduction, the combination of gender, agency and embodiment theory also means the possibility to grasp women's narratives and body language as they engage in acts of resistance, as well as the marking of body and space. In this section, I will refer to the themes of secrecy and morality in relation to space, by giving illustrative ethnographic accounts:

My earlier research (Malmström, 2004; 2009a; Malmström, 2009b) among different generations of women in Cairo revealed changes and continuities of morality. These are observable on the individual level, especially among the young generation in Egypt. In a context in which former routes to moral selfhood are no longer available or desirable, young women are seeking out new strategies for maintaining a publicly respectable self image. However, the negotiations of womanhood are filled with ambivalences and ambiguities that affect the cultivation of a proper self. In this, they operate within the Egyptian cultural scheme according to which the self embodies the collectivity and is responsible for her family's reputation in the public arena. They also use 'the secret self', which gives increased space and the possibility of acting out desires without public knowledge.

As described in this study, the inner, hidden and secret have a value of their own; silence and secrecy are crucial in learning how to act in gendered and respectable ways. Young women use conventional forms

of actions but they also creatively challenge these. However, this also makes younger women particularly vulnerable; secret love relations, hymen operations and even abortions go on without the knowledge or support of families. These practices are of course not unique for Egypt. The increase of hymen operations in the Middle East/North Africa region was discussed by several scholars at the Second World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies, Amman (June 2006).

These young women violate norms concerning female sexuality and they move into areas that are forbidden by the family and the surrounding community. At the same time, the increase in hymen repair surgery may be understood as a new way for women to achieve the ideal of the conventional bride. Young women are now able to purchase, sometimes with the help of 'traditional' women's micro-credit associations, a 'closed' virgin body. The 'locked' body is essential for marriage. This modification awards women with a body that is in keeping with the 'correct' gender norms. Hence, young women strive, with the help of their 'secret selves', to negotiate gender ideologies. Their 'modern' practices undermine previous norms and engender new gender ideologies, but they also position young women precariously at a cultural crossroads. The following short narrative is an illustrative example of young women's negotiations of gender ideologies:

Lila and Nuura remembered when they were students at university a few years ago. They talked about the large number of students who had married in secret and how some of the girls underwent hymen repair. Like many others, they were convinced that these operations were on the increase. Lila and Nuura knew that some of these girls had become pregnant, which is a disaster for an unmarried girl. Lila said:

I have a friend ... She was only engaged but she got pregnant and she asked me to come with her to a clinic to do an abortion. I refused and told her to talk to her mother instead, and she did. In the end, my friend married the guy; but first she had to do the abortion in secret, and only her mother knew about it.

Another young woman, Leila, told me that she hated a certain type of girl at the university. These girls secretly married boys from school and 'dressed in sexy tight clothes and had too much make-up'. Many of them came from the middle class, she said, but some were lower class and Leila thought these girls only wanted to imitate the middle class girls. However, the quotation reveals that girls from lower income neighbourhoods have more to lose since class dynamics imply differential restrictions upon female agency.

Naala, another young woman, had had sexual relationships without any papers before marriage. She said that she did what she wanted, 'but society did not know. I do not tell them, you know'. Naala said that she was lucky because she had met a man who accepted a girl like her but that he was unusual and that young women often had to lie. Naala is a good example of how young women make individual spaces and make decisions about how to act against social norms.

Naturally, all these practices of secret sexual relations, hymen operations and abortions shape the subject and body in new ways. Hymen operations help young women to recover their social virginity but also make the body conform to the ideal of being 'closed' until the marriage night. Furthermore, young women thus create individual space for themselves, since they can have relations before marriage but still be socially respectable. These practices repeatedly teach the 'inside of the body' to feel the required emotions. Women's conscious striving to take control over their own emotions may be understood as a desire for control of the self. In all these cases, the body is the locus of moral cultivation by the self and others. However, these strategies may also destabilize ideologies of gender and family (*cf.* Malmström, 2009a; Malmström, 2009b).

CONCLUSION

The objective of this chapter has been to explore how gender, agency, and embodiment theories in relation to space can be applied. The text has also given glimpses of particular ethnographic accounts where examples of agency, morality and secrecy in relation to space have been explored. The chapter has clearly shown the importance of bringing in embodiment, a sensory approach and agency into the analysis. However, this analytical approach is not enough. The analytical approach of embodied agency is only useful if we also explore the relation between the individual and society. We must explore how the subject is part of larger social and cultural webs. As I mentioned in the beginning, the combination of these theories connects subjects' identities to dominant discourses and social structures, by paying attention to 'lived experience'. Theoretically, this approach means to explore gendering practices as lived experience rather than as fixed subject positions, which means paying attention to women's subjectivities and agency. By using this approach, it is possible to analyse the singularity of experience, not only as a form of social interaction, but as linked to social structures and discourses, which implies negotiations of tensions, conflicts, and uncertainties. Lived experience makes visible the ways

in which economic, political and cultural forces impinge on daily lives (Mc Nay, 2004). Additionally, it makes it possible to analyse agents within a context of rapid social, cultural and political change.

In sum, my approach is thus to combine experience with representation through phenomenology and ethnography, and to combine recent generative theories of gender, embodiment and agency theory. An experience near ethnography that begins with women's own practices and attends to how they understand themselves, how their bodies are involved in this process, and how they live out norms and ideologies in their everyday lives. Thereby we are able to understand how women's realities and identities are interpreted, negotiated and constructed and how the body actively is involved in these processes.

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