The early definitions of the “Islamic city” have been challenged over the past three decades by a range of post-modern methodologies emerging from several disciplines, among them urban studies, art and architectural history, Middle Eastern studies, geography, women’s studies, and most recently, the history of gender. The process of bringing together and then scrutinizing the more traditional theoretical frameworks that had often produced highly dichotomized discourses in these disciplines was a challenge to scholars engaged in the study of the complex identities and often elusive definitions ascribed to the Islamic city. By the end of the 1980’s scholars like Janet Abu-Lughod, working on Cairo as a case study, had begun to observe that urban space in this city, and the way it was utilized, shaped and produced by different genders was not a simple case of dividing public-private geographies and assigning them to males and females, respectively.

Initially gender was, for Abu-Lughod, among a “list of forces” which contributed to the identity of the Islamic city. “What Islam required,” she wrote, “was some way of dividing functions and places on the basis of gender and then of creating a visual screen between them. This structuring of space, “was different from what would have prevailed had freer mixing of males and females been the pattern…. Semiotics of space in the Islamic city gave warnings and helped persons perform their required duties while still observing avoidance norms.”1 Implicit in Abu Lughod’s initial analysis of the semiotics of Islamic urban space was, first, a division of the concept of gender into male and female sexes, and second a vision of urban space as divided into public and private spheres. Yet, after watching the poor women of Cairo move through the familiar passageways of their neighbourhoods, less veiled but still following the strict protocols of gendered space, Abu-Lughod observed that certain behavioural patterns did not fit comfortably into a

public or private category but required a third sphere, a “semi-private” space. In this tertiary realm, the accepted gendered behaviour was more fluid, the loyalties of family stretched beyond tribe or kin, and both women and men could move with greater ease through the spaces of the harah.\(^2\) Abu-Lughod’s work was an important landmark in the late 1980’s, as it began to challenge the public-private dichotomization of space that had been so conveniently imposed upon the Islamic city. But in her reassessment of the public-private dichotomy as a methodological tool to understand the Islamic city, she perpetuated a definition of gender which neatly separated the sexes into male and female. Thus while allowing for additional space in the Islamic city for a semi-private sphere; there was still no room in Abu-Lughod’s Islamic city for a “third sex.”\(^3\) A challenge to the traditional view of genders as falling into two neat categories of male and female was taken up by scholars of women and gender studies like Joan Scott who were grappling in the late 1980’s with the constraints and limitations of this particular methodological framework.\(^4\) Against the background of Abu Lughod’s important postcolonial work and Joan Scott’s challenge to our traditional definition of gender, I would like to revisit the Islamic city in the light of more recent scholarship on gender and urban geography which has called into question this strict dichotomization of space into private and public and the division of gender into only the male and female sex.\(^5\)

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