

Research paper

Seeing and Being Seen: Intersectional Ecofeminism, Methodological Insights, and Women's Embodied Experiences with Nature in the UAE

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ABSTRACT

This article is a reflexive piece that draws on the methodological application of intersectionality in understanding women's material relationship with nature in the highly urbanised context of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Drawing on situated knowledge and the deconstruction of binaries, such as nature/culture and green/desert, the article emphasises the importance of attending to embodied ways of knowing. Feminist research practices are adopted to explore what it means to be both subjected to the gaze and a constructor of the gaze, investigating the various perspectives that emerge when women guide the gaze. The article draws on a subset of four qualitative semi-structured interviews selected from a broader sample of 18 interviews conducted with young adult and middle-aged Emirati women. This article aims to discuss the value of integrating feminist thinking into studies of women and landscape, while also highlighting how situated and grounded experiences can contribute to and expand on existing theoretical feminist concepts. This piece contributes to contextualising methodological approaches to the application of intersectionality and ecofeminist theory into a non-Western, highly urbanised setting, and advocates towards a more nuanced and situated ecofeminism.

Keywords: ecofeminism, intersectionality, nature, postcolonial Middle East feminist studies, UAE

Textual representations of the Arab Gulf's landscape date back to travelogues published in the first quarter of the twentieth century by travellers and explorers such as Thomas and Thesiger, who are known to be the first to cross Arabia's deserts. The English diplomat and explorer Thomas (1932, p. 1) sought to 'unveil the unknown southern Arabian desert', anticipating that his expedition would evoke the 'imagination of Oriental fertility.' In his book *Arabia Felix*, Thomas (1932) writes:

Strange that the epithet 'Happy' should grace a part of the earth's surface, most of it barren wilderness (...) but there lies in the central south, bordering the Indian Ocean, a land at once of rare physical loveliness and of ancient fame (...) To have laboured in Arabia is to have tasted inevitably of her seduction (...) Yet Arabia has remained the forbidden land. Throughout the centuries scarce twenty European explorers have been able usefully to penetrate to her inhospitable heart (p. xxiii-xxiv).

The characterisation of the landscape as both 'happy' and 'forbidden', along with terms like 'loveliness', projects a gendered portrayal of the landscape, evoking the desert as a mysterious, alluring female figure; beautiful yet inaccessible, enticing and unattainable. Penetrating the 'inhospitable heart' underscores the metaphor of conquest and the masculine drive for supremacy and dominance over a feminised land. Rose (1993, p. 87) writes in the chapter *Looking at Landscape: The Uneasy Pleasures of Power* that works on problematising the

gaze towards landscape within cultural geography have argued that ‘the gaze of the fieldworker is part of the problematic, not a tool of analysis’, because it implies a specific way of seeing. Highly ‘romanticized and stylized representation’ of the life in the Trucial States (now United Arab Emirates), as the anthropologist Bristol-Rhys (2010, p. 33) notes, especially photographs by Donald Codrai taken between the 1940s and early 1960s and Thesiger were influential in constructing simplistic images, showing ‘natives’ as nomadic Bedouins, as a way of representing and telling a story of the ‘authentic’ life of the past, where men shown with falcons on their wrists, coffee pots on campfires, and women leading camels. These depictions, while they represent one aspect of the pre-oil period, have largely overlooked the complex social realities of those who inhabited different landscapes, such as coastal towns and agricultural regions that existed alongside desert settlements. Since the early 1970s, with the discovery of oil, the West became interested in the position and role of women in the Arab Gulf as the advent of the oil era catalysed significant growth in trade and opened the region to Western influence, bringing drastic changes in lifestyles and traditional values (Al-Sayegh, 2001). As Al-Sayegh (2001, p. 18) writes, researchers from various fields frequented the area, ‘hoping to write about the societal changes that were taking place’ and ‘women’s issues were the most appealing’ because to the Western eye, traditional values related to gender segregation and veiling were considered signs of backwardness, and the prevailing perception of women’s role before the oil was relegated to the domestic private sphere (AlMutawa, 2016) making these themes a focal point for debates around modernity and development. Together, narratives about the unknowable land and women being relegated to private spheres contributed to sweeping generalisations.

All of this points to the fact that there are other stories to be told, stories that complicate dominant narratives and open space for alternative ways of seeing and knowing. This article is a reflexive piece that draws on the methodological application of intersectionality in understanding women’s material relationship with nature in the highly urbanised context of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It draws on critical inquiry into feminist theory, particularly questioning ecofeminism, and engaging with the recent work on reformulating it through an intersectional lens (Gaard, 2011; Kings, 2017). Although ecofeminist ideas have intersected with various fields, their application across different spatial scales, geographic, and climatic conditions on a global scale has been limited.

Within this research, I draw from several strands of feminist thought to frame my approach. First, I draw from feminist critiques of the gendered ways of looking at landscape, which have long questioned who has the power to look, who is looked at, and under what conditions (Mulvey, 1989; Rose, 1993; Shohat, 1991). Building on this, I turn to intersectionality, which was developed by feminists as an analytical tool ‘hoping to address and resolve the most fundamental and contentious of concerns within feminist scholarship—i.e. the existence of differences between women’ (Kings, 2017, p. 64). In particular, I situate my research within postcolonial Middle Eastern feminist studies, —a body of literature that emerged as corrective projects as many Middle Eastern feminist scholars recognised that ‘stereotypes of the Middle Eastern woman have been crucial to negative depictions of the region and its culture(s)’, they sought to reveal the complex realities of gender and woman in the Middle East and to explore how Middle Eastern women represent themselves (Abu-Lughod, 2001, pp. 103-104). However, my research takes a spatial approach wherein intersectionality not only highlights the differences between women but also how these differences can disrupt simplified perceptions of the land and binary spatial categories such as public/private, visible/invisible. I apply feminist spatial thinking to explore how differences among women lead to different spatial experiences that, in turn, offer more complex and nuanced readings of landscape. From this perspective, the landscape is not a neutral or singular backdrop, but a multilayered space shaped by intersecting histories, social positions, and ways of inhabiting.

This article is based on a subset of four qualitative semi-structured interviews selected from a broader sample of 18 interviews, conducted with young adult and middle-aged Emirati women. This article does not aim to extensively report the full empirical findings of the research but rather discusses the value of integrating feminist thinking into studies on women and landscape, while also discussing how situated and grounded experiences can contribute to and expand existing theoretical concepts. This piece contributes to contextualising methodological approaches to the application of intersectionality and ecofeminist theory into a non-Western, highly urbanised setting, and advocates towards a more nuanced and situated ecofeminism.

GENDER STUDIES AND MIDDLE EAST FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP

In their article on gender and geography, Garcia Ramon and Monk (2007, p. 1) note that advancing the scholarship on gender within the discipline of geography, which dates back to the 1970s, ‘is primarily the work of women’, whose presence in specific geographical contexts has influenced both the focus and context of research on gender-related themes. There is in fact a rich feminist scholarship within the postcolonial Middle East, most of it is focused on North Africa and the Levant region. In her seminal essay “*Orientalism*” and *Middle East Feminist Studies*, the Palestinian American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (2001) writes that Edward Said’s *Orientalism*

was not intended to be a component of feminist scholarship or theory; however, it has engendered feminist scholarship in Middle East studies and beyond. As Kanna et al. (2020, p. 2, citing Abu-Lughod, 1998) write:

Postcolonial Middle East feminist studies have been reflexive about how to counter stereotypes on women's oppression by showing how imperialism, nationalism, capitalism, and class have contributed to shaping projects of "modernity," "tradition," or "authenticity" that impact gender norms and relations.

Some of these early works include *Europe's Myths of the Orient* by Kabbani's (1986) critiquing the construction of erotic stereotypes in literature and painting, as well as Zahra Arat's (1998) *Deconstructing Images of "The Turkish Women"* (cited in Abu-Lughod 2001), and a collection of essays in the edited book *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Abu-Lughod, 1998) as well as feminist scholarship on gender and place including Mahmood's (2004) *Politics of Piety*.

However, work on gender and place, particularly in the Arab Gulf, is still limited and has mainly emerged during the last two decades. Some of these works include a collection of essays in Sonbol's (2012) *Gulf Women* presenting discourses on the life of women in the Arab Gulf from the pre-modern to modern periods, Le Renard's (2014) *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power, and Reform in Saudi Arabia*, and *Beyond Exception: New Interpretation of the Arabian Peninsula* drawing on postcolonial theory, feminism and racialization to challenge dominant portrayals of the Arabian Peninsula as politically exceptional or culturally uniform (Kanna et al., 2020). In the context of the UAE, very few works have discussed state feminism and the perception of women in leadership positions (AlMutawa, 2020; Sinha et al., 2023). Other works on gender and place in the UAE include Bristol-Rhys's (2010) *Emirati Women: Generations of Change*, Reichenbach's (2015) *Gazes that Matter: Young Emirati Women's Spatial Practices in Dubai*, and Rana AlMutawa's (2022) *Navigating the Cosmopolitan City: Emirati Women and Ambivalent Forms of Belonging in Dubai*. These studies on gender and place have mostly focused on modern urban commercial spaces like malls and cafés, which have been central to discussions of leisure and social spaces in contemporary urban life in the UAE.

An article by Al Oraiimi (2011), a professor in gender studies at UAE University, points to some of the reasons behind the limitations of feminist scholarship in this context. Al Oraiimi (2011) writes that only in 2002 did the term 'gender' enter UAE's social agenda as a response to the United Nations report on the low level of women's participation in decision-making, which is historically rooted in the UAE's patriarchal society. Al Oraiimi further states:

The term entered quickly and pervasively into our traditional culture, the Arabic language and our religious frame of reference, but we have still not developed a fixed mechanism for dealing with it (...) But we, as Arabs and Muslims, live in a different situation and have our own approach to dealing with women's issues (2011, p. 82).

Based on interviews with a group of distinguished women in the UAE, as describe, though their professional background is not clearly stated in the article, Al Oraiimi (2011, p. 84) found that there is a lack of acceptance to terms or concepts such as 'feminism' and 'gender' as they are both western concepts, 'they incite women against men,' and they are an unnecessary call for equality since the UAE's constitution is seen to provide equal opportunities in terms of health, education, and pivotal professional roles for women. This suggests that progress is seen as complete, where bottom-up critiques and activism that feminists have garbled with are seen as unnecessary. It also points to the reason behind the apprehension of engaging with feminist theories. Today, the UAE authorities underscore women's pivotal roles in the workforce within various sectors, as a state-led success story and a key achievement of this young country (Heard-Bey, 2021), promoted through the appointment of women in leadership positions. AlMutawa (2020) argues that the recognition women in leadership positions receive often depends on their adherence to established religious and cultural norms set for them. The caveat here, however, as AlMutawa (2020) argues, is that while gender-framing can legitimise women's public roles by aligning them with prevailing cultural values, it may simultaneously reinforce existing hierarchies by relying on them, leading to sexist assumptions, such as the notion that caregiving is a woman's primary role, and limits the emergence of alternative perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

In this research, I engage with intersectionality and feminist theories in two ways: first, as a trained architect writing from a feminist perspective, and second, as an Emirati woman. My professional background in architecture and educational background in urban design and landscape have informed not only how I engage with spatial forms, but also how I understand the relationship between space, power, and identity. As an Emirati woman, my perspective is shaped by direct experiences of the UAE's social and cultural context, as well as the contradictions, negotiations, and nuances within it. Therefore, this section is not only about how I gathered the narratives, but also how I positioned myself in relation to the narratives that the participants shared; how I listened, remembered, and wrote.

The theoretical foundation of this research is rooted in feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and intersectionality. My approach draws from and builds on early feminist scholarship on the gaze (Kabbani, 1986;

Mulvey, 1989; Rose, 1993; Shohat, 1991), particularly examining 'what it means to be both the subject of the gaze and a constructor of the gaze' and what different perspectives emerge when women 'guide the gaze' (Dando, 2007, p. 17). This dual positioning, of seeing and also being seen, resonates deeply with my approach as both a female researcher engaging with narratives of other women and someone who shares some aspects of the participants' identities. Being seen in this sense is grounded in lived experiences tied to embodied ways of knowing—understanding a presence that is felt, sensed and lived through the body, rather than a detached observation. During the research, I have acknowledged that the women I spoke with are not merely subjects of inquiry but co-creators of knowledge. While writing, I was attentive to how their narratives enter the space of academic authority, not as subjects of analysis but as voices that may contribute to informing or refining theoretical frameworks such as ecofeminism. In this sense, I reminded myself what kinds of knowledge become possible when we 'see' and 'listen' differently.

Intersectionality has served as a key methodological lens. Within this, generational difference was acknowledged as one of the factors that shape women's experiences and perceptions in distinct ways. When discussing narratives of middle-aged women, I'm referring to the oil-boom generation that delineates those who grew up living through the oil-boom in the region from 1973 to 1983; a period marked by rapid urban and social transformation, witnessing the shift from a traditional society to a globalised one. Young adults' narratives refer to the second generation, which is the post-oil generation that delineates those who were born after the federation of the UAE in 1971, where economic transformation had already established a modern lifestyle driven by Western models of progress. Linking generational difference to the urban and social transformations provides a historical lens that explains differences and the change in traditional values and perceptions. Additionally, as I began conducting interviews with the participants, my initial questions focused broadly on understanding the participants' use of outdoor recreational and leisure spaces starting from their childhood, particularly spaces that provided them with a sense of being within nature. This was a deliberate methodological choice, rooted in my interest in understanding how the participants experience and engage with the land itself and how they experience different landscapes in relation to leisure and socialisation, rather than urban commercial spaces like malls and cafés, which are often the focus of discussions on leisure and social spaces in contemporary urban life within the literature on the UAE.¹

Additionally, the word landscape in Arabic is *manthar ṭabīʿī* or *mashhad ṭabīʿī*, which translates to natural scenery or a view of natural scenery, where *manthar* or *mashhad* means scene and *ṭabīʿī* means natural, rather than a reference to a physical lived space.² In this sense, the meaning of the word landscape in Arabic evokes aesthetic representations of nature rather than material and embodied experience of land. This understanding includes a combination of both a landscape found, not built, and visual constructs.³ This was the approach taken in applying the core components of intersectionality into empirical and spatial research. As Kings (2017, p. 66) argues, 'intersectionality promises to avoid the common traps of "essential difference" by looking beyond the categories which dominated essentialism debates in the 1980s and 1990s.' Following this, I theoretically engaged with intersectional ecofeminism, wherein categories such as nature are not fixed. This approach is also in line with Agarwal's (1992, p. 123) critique of ecofeminism, arguing that the relationship with nature needs to be understood as being rooted in material realities and specific forms of interaction and that concepts of nature, culture, gender, and so on, are historically and socially constructed and vary across and within cultures and time periods.' Additionally, my methodology draws on feminist epistemology, particularly Haraway's (1988) situated knowledge; knowledge that is partial, embodied, and accountable to specific positions. Haraway (1988, p. 589) argues for 'epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard.'

My positionality as an Emirati woman with roots in the context I'm studying positions me primarily as an insider. With that awareness in mind, I avoid claims to project a 'native' and 'authentic' insider's point of view. Consequently, I aimed to frame my methods in terms of reflexivity rather than objectivity. My intent throughout the interview process was to understand the plurality of experiences and represent women's voices of their own spatial experiences and perceptions of landscape. As opposed to emphasising a dichotomy between the insider and the outsider or the observer and the observed, I have adopted Kirin Narayan's approach (1993, p. 671) that is centred on moving 'against the fixity of a distinction' between 'native' and 'non-native' and focusing instead on the researcher's shifting and situational identities. Therefore, I approach the narratives of participants as situated, varied, and shaped by intersecting factors such as generational difference, marital status, motherhood, and geographical background within the UAE. Additionally, I approach this research with an awareness that my own position defies simple categorisation of native/non-native and insider/outsider. Sharing linguistic, cultural, and geographic commonalities with the participants I interviewed positions me as an 'insider' or 'native' researcher. However, following Narayan's (1993) approach, I recognise that identities are made up of multiple strands, some pulled forward in certain contexts, others tucked away, depending on the situation. At times, some aspects of my identity, such as my urban upbringing, position me as an outsider, particularly during conversations with Bedouin

women where differences in lived experiences are more pronounced. Additionally, Emiratis are generally recognised by the national attire, *abaya* and *shayla* for women and *kandura* for men, which is widely seen as a representation of authenticity and national identity. Yet in the contemporary context, wearing it is more of a social expectation or a matter of personal preference rather than a religious obligation. Such a visual marker, which I do not necessarily share, operates as a marker of identity; therefore, to the outsider's eye, my position may appear ambiguous or even distant from the context I'm part of. Therefore, I approach intersectionality as a way to think beyond binaries and to attend to both complexity and difference. It allows for accounting for the multiple, sometimes contradictory, layers that shape one's experiences. Additionally, I acknowledge that this research focuses on a relatively privileged minority, Emirati women as female citizens of the UAE, who constitute around six per cent (Heard-Bey, 2021) of the total population of around 10 million (Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, n.d.). Emiratis benefit from privileges that come with citizenship, including free education and healthcare, subsidised housing, and government employment. Employment opportunities for Emiratis are shaped by the policy of Emiratisation, which is a state-led initiative that prioritises the recruitment and retention of citizens, mainly in the private sector. According to the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation regulations (2024), companies that fail to comply with the Emiratisation regulations and to achieve the specific quota face financial penalties. Additionally, employment opportunities are complemented by state housing policies, through which the government allocates specific neighbourhoods to Emirati citizens, either by land grants or subsidised housing programs. This social position, as one of privilege coupled with minority status, shapes everyday experiences of space in nuanced ways. The aim is not to universalise the narratives, but to foreground difference; how privilege, power dynamics that shape space, and identity intersect in situated ways.

SENSORY EXPERIENCES AND EMBODIED WAYS OF KNOWING

In common parlance, people do not only use the word desert (*Sabha* in Arabic) to describe the landscape. *Sabha* is a generic term that carries a geographical connotation, often associated with aridity. Within the Arab Gulf, *ba'ar* denotes open land or wilderness beyond cultivated areas and settlements. It is a more colloquial term that refers to the desert through a social lens. It is the desert as lived and experienced, framed as more than just a terrain; it is a sensory, embodied experience of landscape. This understanding reflects how people relate to and experience the land. Responses by two young adults, both from Bedouin backgrounds, one raised in Hatta and the other in Al Dhaid, which are both agricultural areas in the UAE, highlight the nuanced and place-based ways in which the landscape is described with subtle variations and textures. *Ramla* refers to sandy areas, emphasising their texture, while *argoob* refers specifically to sand dunes or undulated terrain, which is more about describing the form. *Badiyah* is an open space within the desert often associated with Bedouin settlements. *Seyh* (*seyouh* plural) is a flat expansive plain with gravel and clay fertile soil, typically the areas on the periphery of farms:

Seyh is different than ba'ar. Seyh is often found on the periphery of farms. It's characterised by light gravel and is rich in trees (...) especially Samr (acacia tree) and Sidr (juzube tree) (...) Al-ba'ar is mostly sand with wide pores lacking the minerals needed for plants. So, the most common tree in the desert is the Ghaf, which can live for a long time, and sometimes you might find Sidr or Samr trees. Seyouh, although they are gravelly, have soil that is rich, similar to the soil in farms (P_16).

Just as people do not speak of the desert in general terms, they refer to specific places as well as practices when describing experiences of being within nature, such as the Hajar mountains of Hatta, the date palm farms in Al Dhaid, or private home gardens. This mirrors that the concept of nature is not a universal category; it is a particular situated understanding shaped by place-based experiences. One of the participants described the rural setting of Hatta, where she grew up, an inland exclave of the emirate of Dubai located in the Hajar mountains in the eastern part of the UAE:

I spent my childhood in Hatta (...) the whole area was farms, wadis, and seyooḥ [open plains] (...) I grew up in the countryside (...) I remember how we used to go out walking, collect pebbles, sit under the date palms, pick fruits from the trees around us. It was a childhood immersed in nature, surrounded by nature (P_16).

While both the desert and nature are often framed through a visual register, they are experienced in deeply embodied ways. The relationship to the land exceeds the visual; it is shaped through sound, touch, movement and memory, all of which are modes of sensing that root people to the land.

When I asked the participant, who grew up in Al Dhaid, an agricultural area within the emirate of Sharjah, to describe her experiences within nature, she recounted her experience in family-owned farms and privately owned lands, mediated by social connections with other tribes. I began to gain a deeper understanding of her experience, one that my own background did not expose me to, as she recounted:

Do you know what's al-raqq? You may not fully understand what I'm saying because I come from a Bedouin background. [I responded that I didn't know what it was]. It's underground water (...). There's a trail that very few people know about, very, very few. Maybe only the people from that area know it. There's water there, water that flows, summer or winter, it's always running. I used to put my backpack on and I'm not the type to wear a t-shirt and trousers. I'd go in my kandura [traditional

ankle-length dress], just like that, with sneakers (...) As you walk, you come across *tunwi* [water well]. Do you know what a *tunwi* is? And if it had rained, you could even shower a bit in that water, it's nice [laughed], with your clothes on, just like that. You'd dry off by the time you reached the car. The *tunwis* are hand-dug, not excavated with machinery. The people from that area dug them themselves (...) I don't drink bottled water anymore. I just can't. We drink water that we go and fetch ourselves. People who hear me say that ask, 'What era are you living in?' And I just tell them, 'That's how I am, I love it.' (...) my husband's friend told us, 'come, we have a *tunwi* with sweet water.' So we kept drawing from it, and we still do to this day (...) [I asked if it's for everyone] it's not for everyone. You know the term *al-hiyur*? They have lands that are reserved for them and their families. They get upset, and fights can even break out if someone trespasses or comes without permission. We know someone from that area, so whenever we run out of water, we go. They own the land, and the *tunwi* was dug by their great-great-great-grandfather, you know (P_17).

The participant's narrative articulates a form of customary tribal laws and traditional knowledge that governs water wells within privately owned land. The wells anchor a network of ancestral routes and communal territories. As the participant described, her access is contingent on tribal ties.

A middle-aged participant (P_12) recalled growing up in Umm Hurair neighbourhood, one of Dubai's older urban districts along the Creek. She described her surroundings by recalling that, before urban public parks started to open, she played on the beach and in the neighbourhood. She recounted her experience being within nature with a sense of nostalgia in a way that contrasted with young adults' narratives, whose accounts were less concerned with reviving the past or re-experiencing old traditions. However, foraging for the sorrel plant was described as a collective activity; a wild edible plant (often tastes sour) locally known as *humayd* that grows in the desert after rain:

We've always gone to al-ba'ar. It's part of our traditions and customs (...) even if we have farms, during the holidays, everyone camps in al-ba'ar. We go back to the traditions of the past. We camp and cook using firewood, not on gas stoves, to revive the heritage (...) It's something we continue to love (...) we walk around, in the winter days when it rains, humayd grows. We don't sit still; we walk around looking for humayd (P_12).

The participants' narratives show how generational differences, place of upbringing, and Bedouin or urban backgrounds lead to differentiated perceptions and experiences. Generational differences position participants within different historical moments of urban change, while the place of upbringing influences what is perceived as ordinary versus national collective heritage. Both young adults, (P_16) and (P_17), of Bedouin backgrounds raised in agricultural areas (Hatta & Al Dhaid), describe proximity to farms, strolling through date palm plantations, and practising gardening as part of daily life, rather than a revival of past practices. Their descriptions of different parts of the desert associated with agriculture alongside those considered non-agricultural highlight that the landscape is not perceived as uniform but as overlapping terrains, each carrying specific social and material practices. This perspective unsettles the overarching binary opposition between desert and green, where cultivation is positioned as the opposite of the desert rather than a variant terrain *within* the desert. The middle-aged participant from Dubai (P_12), who grew up in an urban neighbourhood, frames the recreational activity of going to *al-ba'ar* as a day outing, in a landscape perceived as a public common, which contrasts with participant (P_17), whose access extends to privately owned lands where others without similar social ties may be seen as outsiders. The participant from an urban area frames going to *al-ba'ar* through the discourse of cultural revival, in the midst of a rapidly modernising context. In this way, desert outings are seen as a means of reclaiming traditions threatened by urban expansion and modernisation.

IN ONE'S OWN GARDEN

Gardening emerged as a key theme during the interviews with some participants. Gardening offered an embodied relationship with the land. Responses by two participants illustrated that gardening was not only about cultivating plants, but also cultivating a sense of autonomy, care and connection to the land. The participant (P_16) from Al Dhaid explained that gardening is an important practice for her and that gaining full agency over the garden only became possible after she got married and moved into her own house, whereas in a shared household, gardening felt like a conditional activity:

I started gardening after I got married, when I had my own independent house (...) [I asked: and before that, you didn't practice gardening?] Oh, I did practice gardening before that, it is not that I didn't. But you know it is different in your own house, no one will object and pull the tree that you planted. You see, we used to practice gardening at my mother's house, but she was a bit ... one day we'd plant something, and the next day she'd change her mind, ask us to remove it, and replant it somewhere else. That used to make me feel sorry for it—seeing it die. There's something special about the plants you grow yourself. Honestly, I sometimes feel like when I'm sick, or when I have a child to take care of and I neglect my plants, they get sad. I tell myself, ya Allah (oh god), it's different when you personally water them. There's a relationship between you and the plants. Man ittakala 'ala ghayrihi qalla khayruhu [an Arabic proverb expressing self-reliance and dependence; whoever relies on others has less of their own good] (P_17).

The cabbage story shared by another participant, who is middle-aged, single, and living with her mother, speaks volumes about agency. (P_18) grew up in the urban neighbourhood of Al Rashidiya in Dubai, which used to be a national housing district. The participant's story highlights the tensions between individual gardening desires and collective household decisions, showing how the act of landscaping, even within a private garden, can be regulated, contested, or limited. This account extends the discussion of gardening as a form of agency and autonomy, while also emphasising that gardens are not merely sites of visual aesthetics, but spaces where values and priorities are negotiated:

It is extremely important! [Having a garden] (...) My mom loves plants (...) But at the same time, I can't call it a garden because it is synthetic grass (...) mom wants the backyard to look beautiful throughout the year (...) I really love natural plants, and I feel it is important. If it was my house, I would have done that (...) let me tell you this story, it upsets me whenever I remember it. So I grew some vegetables; mint, rocca many many things, potato, tomato, chili, and there were some things which I didn't know what they were so I was waiting for them to grow (...) For example, the cabbage; cabbage was one of the things. So I waited for about five months for it to grow (...) I was waiting patiently for that one cabbage (...) and my mother called in the gardener and told him take it, take it, and I told my mom I waited for it for so long! She said: yeah you can buy it you know. I was like nooo, I will buy it for him [the gardener] but this one is for us (P_18).

The participants' narratives highlight how gardens operate as layered domestic landscapes whose authorship shifts across time and social thresholds. This first participant (P_17) described how she felt a sense of autonomy in relation to cultivating the garden after marriage, when competing household claims no longer constrained her interventions. Gardening, as described in the narrative by the second participant (P_18), was shaped by familial dynamics. Traditionally in the UAE, single women and men reside with their natal families until marriage. Upon marriage, women often move into the husband's household, while men either remain within or near the family's home or establish their own household. However, these norms are gradually shifting in response to broader processes of modernisation, as increasingly, work and education require relocating to other emirates, leading some to live independently prior to marriage.

For the first participant, gardening practices are embedded in a continuity of everyday engagements with cultivation, rooted in the rhythms of agricultural regions. In the second narrative, the preference for artificial grass in the garden reflects the value for neatness and a controlled version of nature; nature without unpredictability and beauty without decay. In this sense, the garden becomes a curated surface, valued not for its ecological authenticity but for its capacity to sustain a particular visual image of beauty under extreme climatic conditions. This preference for an idealised landscape echoes landscape development approaches at the city scale led by private developers aimed at creating manicured green spaces to attract investment and promote properties. In this framing, greenery itself becomes a commodity.

LINKING THE NARRATIVES TO INTERSECTIONAL ECOFEMINISM

Using ecofeminist intersectionality in a situated and context-specific way challenges 'the common traps of "essential difference"' (Kings, 2017, p. 66). This section shows how this approach opens up ways to move beyond fixed categories like 'nature', 'privacy', and binary readings of landscape as desert versus green.

Theoretically, the narratives tie to the continuation of ecofeminism within an intersectional framework (Kings, 2017). They respond to Agarwal's (1992) critique of ecofeminist earlier work, as in ecofeminism ignored women's material relationship with nature and positioned 'woman' as one unitary category that disregards the differences between women and that understandings of nature, culture and gender are 'historically and socially constructed and vary across and within cultures and time periods' (123). Indeed, as the participants' narratives illustrate, nature is not necessarily experienced in a literal sense; it can be sensorial, and the factors and range of circumstances that influence women's vastly different experiences are not limited to the sole category of gender, but to other intersecting factors such as land ownership, internal hierarchies, and socio-economic status. Since this research extends intersectionality into the realm of spatial analysis, the narratives inform ecofeminism in a spatial sense by expanding on the category 'nature', where 'nature' is generally not 'seen' but experienced through the senses within urban and non-urban spaces across public, semi-private and private spheres.

Privacy emerged as a prominent theme across various landscapes and among all participants, though the preference for it varied among the participants. It was individual and situational. The need for privacy in the context of the Arab world and Muslim women is often misunderstood through a reductive lens that equates it solely with seclusion, invisibility or patriarchal control. Such misperceptions stem from the 'veiling and unveiling' narratives, which are terms by which 'the East has long been apprehended (and devalued)', what Said (1978) referred to as 'the dogmas of Orientalism' (Abu-Lughod, 2001, p. 108). The participants' narratives challenge the notion of privacy as a fixed or universally defined category. Bolleter (2015, p. 633, citing Andraos, 2007, p. 53), writing from a landscape architecture perspective, notes that privatised spaces offer a greater degree of freedom for female Emiratis, 'whereas in the west, the privatisation of public space is considered to amount to a reduction in "civil liberties and freedom of expression."' Indeed, this sense of 'freedom' is not just about being shielded

from the public eye, but rather about having agency over the spaces women inhabit and the spatial boundaries they establish by and for themselves. The desire for private gardens or the preference for privately owned farms as spaces of recreation and leisure, for instance, is not always rooted in social or religious norms. Such choices, within certain conditions shaped by intersecting factors, may reflect privilege and acts of agency. Ownership of date palm plantations carries social power, even if not profitable; such ownership confers cultural prestige (Doherty, 2017). This sense of agency is shaped by privilege that is mediated by factors such as property ownership and socio-economic status. As Mahmood (2004, p. 15) states in the chapter *The subject of Freedom*, If the ability to enact 'change' is historically and culturally specific, then the sense of agency cannot be universal or a fixed concept, what may appear as acts of conformity 'from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency', which can only be understood through the specific concepts, norms, and structures that define a particular culture and place. When privacy becomes a monolithic symbol for veiling and unveiling, it overlooks its social and individual dimensions, perpetuating a blanket narrative that disregards complexity and context.

A common goal of ecofeminism is to deconstruct dualisms such as nature/culture, body/mind, human/animal in favour of a more interconnected non-hierarchical view of life. Relying on fixed categories reduces complexity. Thus, ecofeminism provides a productive framework to deconstruct 'the false binary', described elsewhere (Mhmood, 2021), between desert and green as well as conventional ways of understanding spatial categories within arid regions. In particular, the narratives have revealed that the appreciation for gardens is not merely symbolic or aesthetic as a contrast to the arid desert, but rather sites of embodied engagement with the land. Additionally, it has been noted (Mhmood & Sunikka-Blank, 2025) that the construction of artificial lakes and human-made oases within the desert landscape is closely linked to efforts to preserve the national identity in the face of rapid urbanisation, as participants regarded these 'edits' to the landscape as essential for maintaining the culture and fostering a sense of belonging for future generations. However, interpretations of the proliferation of gardens in the Arab Gulf or the broader Islamic world often emphasise their visual or religious resonance, as echoes of the Islamic paradise (Bolleter, 2015, 2009; Brookes, 1987; Ouis, 2002). As Bolleter (2009, p. 28) writes, 'the greening project takes on moral and religious overtones within the context of the UAE', as the image of paradise in Islamic culture stems in part from the idea that descriptions of the Garden of Paradise serve not only as a vision to strive for in the afterlife but also as a model to be recreated on earth (citing Brookes, 1987). However, an intersectional ecofeminist reading foregrounds the material and relational aspects of these landscapes. Rather than approaching the garden as a replication of a religious ideal, women may value gardens because they offer a tangible relationship to the land, one that is not alien to the desert but part of it. Additionally, considering my positionality as a trained architect who practised in the UAE, I engage with but move beyond the symbolic reading of gardens as representations of the 'Garden of Paradise', which is often emphasised in academic literature. While this framing is not without value, it does not fully capture the reasons why people themselves value gardens and greenery, nor does it reflect the motivations of private developers. During the time I worked in Dubai for a private developer, references to desired landscaping design were primarily focused on recreating an idealised landscape, one that mimics and evokes a particular experience, similar to that of green parks and gardens in Europe. In light of the current charged political situation and media coverage contributing to a skewed and essentialist public perception towards Islam and other religions, while my own position is neither one of alignment nor rejection but one that seeks to recognise complexity and difference, for private developers operating within a capitalist mindset focused on attracting investors and tourists, it is perhaps more profitable to divorce religion and it is more 'attractive' to associate landscape design with liberal contexts and universal ideals of aesthetics.

CONCLUSION

This piece has explored how the application of intersectionality and feminist research practices provides a more nuanced understanding of women's embodied relationships with nature in the highly urbanised context of the UAE. By reflecting on the methodological process, this article emphasises the importance of engaging with embodied ways of knowing and deconstructing binaries such as nature/culture and green/desert. The study contributes to the growing body of research on integrating intersectionality within ecofeminism. To address the critiques of essentialism and ethnocentrism often associated with earlier ecofeminism works, ecofeminist intersectionality needs to be utilised in a contextually specific and situated way. The article shows how this approach can open up ways of moving beyond fixed categories like 'nature', 'privacy', and binary readings of landscape; desert versus green.

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Author contributions

The author was responsible for all aspects of this research, including conceptualization, methodology, data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation.

Data availability

All data supporting the findings of this study are included in the manuscript.

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The author reports no use of AI in preparing this article.

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¹ For example, within the social sciences and ethnographic studies, scholars have documented how malls in Dubai can serve as spaces of belonging and social contestation (see Almutawa, 2020, “Glitzy” Malls and Coffee Shops), how Emirati themed leisure spaces and restaurants serve as places of belonging (see Reichenbach & Ibrahim, 2019, “Pulling at our heartstrings”: Emirati-Themed Leisure Venues as Places of Belonging), and how young Emirati women negotiate access to public spaces such as shopping malls and coffee shops (see Reichenbach, 2015, *Gazes that Matter: Young Emirati Women's Spatial Practices In Dubai*).

² See Elsheshtawy, 2024, *A Glossary 2.0* for translations of architecture and urban terms from Arabic to English.

³ For more on this, see Doherty, 2008, *The Landscape of Dubai's Urbanism* on the meaning of landscape in Arabic and the efficacy of the image of landscape in shaping patterns of urbanisation.