
Reclaiming the Image of the Arab Woman: Feminism and Empowerment Through Photography and Art

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Arab women are continuously fighting to break stereotypes and reclaim their own image and perceived virtues and attributes, which have oftentimes been falsely perpetuated as something other than themselves. The works of female-identifying artists, activists, and photographers have brought to light some of the stigmatic practices and visualizations that stem from Orientalist art originally intended for the Western gaze. This continuity in sexualization, suppression, and censorship of the female image and voice through Orientalist art has created a juncture from which female-identifying artists like Lalla Essaydi (Morocco), and Manal Al Dowayan (Saudi Arabia) have leapt to advocate for the reclamation and revision of stereotypes represented in such art. The works by these artists are highlighted and analyzed in this paper to express the intention behind their depictions of Arab women through an artistic and advocative lens, being the empowerment and feminist approach to reconstruct the obscured image of a woman in the Middle East, through both an observative lens and through the use of primary and secondary sources. Formulated from a number of sources pertaining to Contemporary Arab Feminist Art and Orientalist paintings originating in the 19th Century and archived interviews with the artists, the research exemplified in the following discourse discusses that of the inherently feminine and masculine art forms, and how these contemporary artists are working marry ideas of sexuality and blur the lines of what the distinctly gendered things and cultural norms represent and hybridize the radicalization of gender norms to completely represent the female identity sans extreme sexualization and misogyny.

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Since the late 1700s, orientalist art has been established on a basis of feminine suppression and sexualization. Orientalist art, in both literal and cultural studies, has been understood as the imitation and depiction of aspects that stem from the Eastern world, usually engaged with, and completed by inhabitants of the Western world. 19th century Orientalism, originating from the arrival of the French and British in Egypt and North Africa around 1799 CE, was the preliminary organized study of Eastern regions and adopted the title of “Orientalist” to characterize this area within various topics including forms of art, literature, poetry, and the sciences. While European artists and scholars were well versed in their respective art forms, their knowledge of the Middle East was lesser than that in their studies of mastery, and in turn adopted an outsider’s perspective in forming works about people who are superficially and funda-

mentally different from themselves. With the ignorance that comes with European imperialism in the 19th century, the interest in acknowledging cultural differences and regional functionality was not present at the time. This, in turn, created an image of the Middle East region that distorted and exaggerated the cultural, religious, and social diversity of those who resided there, and starkly contrasted it with Western communities. These comparisons created a stigmatic image of a person from the Middle East as being dangerous, uncivilized, exotic, and often backwards in their way of thinking and intellectuality. Such images have been carried forward to perpetuate grossly inaccurate stereotypes that dictate our way of thinking in the present day.

The characteristics of Orientalist art have led to the expansion of the belief and perception that Arab women are exotic and used that as a juncture from which artists could

depict the mysterious and distant women for the purpose of feeding the Western gaze. "At one time, literature and art created by Western Orientalists, was purely for Western audiences." The intention was to create an image to bring to the West, so outsiders could have a glimpse into another culture and lifestyle, without actually having to experience it for themselves. French and British artists (among those who colonized Eastern countries in the early 19th century) like Jean-Léon Gérôme used their education in painting to lift the literal and figurative "veil masking the Orient in the Ottoman and Middle Eastern lands without effort. And instantly, in rich and vibrant colours, the Orient was exposed. To be feasted on and absorbed." The challenge with exposing this region's culture and identity without understanding or explaining it fully is such that works that are thematically centered in exposing its characteristics do not account for the complete disregard for cultural values and ignored responsibilities in representation that come with representing whole groups in such a general manner .

The presence of art that stems from the Islamic faith is extensive yet has invariably steered away from human representation within the work. One would not find portrayals of grand historical and biblical events, nude paintings, or more generally any human representation at all, and most certainly not a look into the domestic interiors of one's home, like one might find in Orientalist art. The Orientalist art form enveloped a general imaginative depiction of the entirety of the Middle East, under one title, being the 'Orient.' Art originating from the Muslim faith was seen as a form of worship for the faithful believer, and in turn had a great difference in intention and purpose for those who took part in artistic works within the faith. These works, vastly different than those of the European styles present in the Western world, were known stylistically as "aniconism," the "opposition to the use of icons or visual images to depict living creatures or religious figures," which has particular reference to Jewish, Byzantine, and Islamic artistic traditions.

Islamic art, specifically, has intentionally avoided the representation of the human

form and focused on alternative styles like arabesque and geometrical patterns in tiling, arabic calligraphy, illuminated art in Quranic manuscripts, and vaulted ceilings and muqarnas present in mosques, as a way to support both the observer and the creator/owner of the art in their acknowledgement of the beauty and vastness of God. Islamic architecture and art was intentionally ambiguous, so as to invoke wonder and curiosity in the viewer, and to contain the art to mostly symbolic and natural representation, rather than explicitly acknowledging the human form, for it would significantly drive its importance and hold it to a similar standard to that of God. The Islamic faith has been resistant to the representation of living beings, as the belief that the formation and creation of living forms is a skill unique to God, regardless of the medium in which the form is being created. With this being said, "the role of images and image makers has been controversial. The strongest statements on the subject of figural depiction are made in the Hadith (Traditions of the Prophet), where painters are challenged to 'breathe life' into their creations and threatened with punishment on the Day of Judgment. The Qur'an is less specific but condemns idolatry and uses the Arabic term *musawwir* ('maker of forms,' or artist) as an epithet for God. Partially as a result of this religious sentiment, figures in painting were often stylized and, in some cases, the destruction of figurative artworks occurred."⁹

With this, one should keep in mind that art in the Middle East, including Islamic art, was devoid of representations of the human form, let alone the female form, until the West started to take the Eastern art world by storm. Even so, the creation of art was a male-dominated field and left little room for female artists to present and draw attention to their works. What little did break through is still widely unknown and underrepresented, like the works of Amy Nimr and Inji Efflatoun, Egyptian modern artists whose work was done within the mid-20th century. Both women were activists and feminists, among many other female Arab artists from the time, who fought for feminine equality and representation through both their works and their social

activism. Arab women like Nimr and Efflatoun were of many who sparked the resulting works in the 21st century that are forcing people to rethink their image of the Arab world, specifically Arab women and their place in the world of artistic representation. Lalla Essaydi, a Moroccan photographer and calligraphy artist, is one of those women living in the 21st century who is changing the depiction of Arab women in art and taking back the image portrayed in Western Orientalist art that so drastically skewed the vision of femininity and humanity in the East. Her work established a butterfly effect of reclamation and empowerment of the female voice and body in a male-dominated field, including artists depicted in the following analysis through the women's artwork and social activism.

Lalla Essaydi, an artist who helped to foster the surge of modern-day feminist art, is a Moroccan photographer who is focused on reclaiming male dominated art forms and the Orientalist representation of Arabs in them. Essaydi was born in Morocco, and later moved to the United States to pursue an MFA from The School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University in 2003. While she has worked with numerous media, including painting, video, film, and with installation, her photographic efforts are the focus of this section. Her photography is focused on re-iterating and revising the images of Arab women from the former paintings of self-proclaimed Orientalist artists Jean August Dominique Ingres, Eugene Delacroix, and Jean-Léon Gérôme. Essaydi acknowledged the challenge that the perception of gender, identity, and culture has had in skewing Western (and Eastern) views of Arab women, and her works push to rectify that. The art of Orientalism had the tendency to obstruct women and place an image in reference to lifestyles in harems, portraying them as a commodity and hid women behind veils and walls, inevitably silencing them. Essaydi's works, including a particular exhibition eponymously entitled *Revisions*, are about the revising of stereotypes and reclaiming them as their (the women's) own, for their own entity, and in their own truth. The works in Essaydi's collections are numerous and follow a similar theme in such that the primary representation is that of Arab women.

Essaydi's collections can be found on her website and in various galleries around the world. Her artworks are representative of a lengthy and thoughtful artistic process- extensive photographic shoots intended to represent women: many of them (the models) being members of her family and social and professional entourage. The presence of varying portfolios on the site in which Essaydi showcases her work allows one to analyze the different styles of which she works with throughout the photographic process. Lalla Essaydi's collaboration with different artistic styles and media to create her image establishes a strong juxtaposition of the feminine and masculine, through both literal and associative representation. Her images propose the reversal of gender roles originally represented in works from the 19th century, which is now known to be labeled as 'orientalist art,' and push for a revised representation of the originally mysterious, dangerous, and sexualized Arab woman.

In the forefront of the imagery in her photography, one will find Essaydi's models donned in henna, a traditionally feminine art form throughout many Eastern countries, not necessarily a sole identifying characteristic of the Arab world. A henna paste, used for over five thousand years throughout countries like Pakistan, India, Africa, and Middle Eastern countries, originated as a paste or salve used in holistic medicine. This was used to cover open wounds, burns, and to treat ailments such as aches and pains that were more internally sourced, as well as as a calming and cooling substance that was spread over the body in times of extreme heat and discomfort. Now, in understanding the significance of holistic medicine and the place and properties of henna in this setting, one can recognize the parallel between the social and psychological connection found in femininity and care-giving. Without diverging far from the intent of the discourse, the psychological association of femininity in care-giving stems from the image of motherhood and the maternal nature of a female entity. The practice of holistic medicine was led in large waves by women and self-proclaimed witches (those who practice identifiably holistic and earth-based medicine), by communities and supports the

insistence that the existence of maternal instinct connects with the association of being taken care of (and in this case, the use of henna in medicinal practices) and that care and tools used in caretaking are inherently feminine.

While today henna is used in practices of celebration, the perceived connotation remains the same. The use of henna, both as an art form and an integral component in Eastern celebration, is strongly centered around a feminine figure. Henna's decorative use is in the form of a paste applied on a bride's body in preparation for a wedding, or a person celebrating their birthday or other date annually celebrated. The juxtaposed Arabic calligraphy in Lalla Essaydi's photographic works merge the two art forms and create a marriage of the inherently feminine and masculine. Arabic calligraphy has been observed "traditionally [as] a man's art," and in Islam, calligraphy is regarded as one of the highest forms of visual representation of culture. The art form developed and grew in a traditional method of education, with focused instruction towards mastery in a group of students, who typically tended to be of the male sex. One will find biographic entries of the pedigree to which men have been recognized for their "prowess in calligraphy," contrasting with the devastatingly low number of entries for calligraphers who are female. The art form has, simply put, been historically dominated by male-identifying scholars and figures.

With this information, Lalla Essaydi's photography takes a new form and emanates a newfound value in representation of the feminine form. Her work in reclaiming the image created by Orientalist artists like Eugene Delacroix no longer reframes the image at the surface level (the sexualized and mystified depiction of a Middle Eastern woman), but rather calls into question historically gender-segregated practices within academic and cultural settings. Essaydi forms an image with the original statement, furthering it by covering her models in henna, although, it is not in the format that we all recognize (as a decorative and intricately patterned body art), but rather Arabic calligraphy inscribed in the ever-staining plant-based paste. Essaydi's use of two intrinsically feminine

and masculine details together in a marriage of sexuality blur the lines of what the two distinctly gendered things represent and hybridize the radicalization of gender norms.

Essaydi's efforts in the reconfiguration of the original orientalist images don't cease beyond this instance. Her photographs reference specific works of the 1800s in both model posture and poise, like "The Odalisque," an oil painting on canvas done by Eugene Delacroix in 1825. The image is of a lounging Middle Eastern woman who has little clothing covering her body and is represented in a sprawled form of body, and a flippant, outward-looking gaze. "The Odalisque" is one of the styles of Orientalist images that Essaydi works so carefully to revise. Delacroix's image portrayed through oil paint on canvas was that of reference to a mistress or lover, one only intended for the gaze of a more powerful figure. "During the 19th century, odalisques became common fantasy figures in Orientalism and many erotic paintings from that era included them." The connotations that seep from these images about the Middle East support substantial misinformation and categorization of those who reside in and come from the Middle East and suggest ideas about the people that now need to be disproven. Images created like those of Delacroix silenced women and placed an image associated with harems upon them and turned them into a perceived commodity as they hid them behind veils, walls, and an unmet gaze.

Lalla Essaydi works to undo this through her portfolios and collections. As the perception of gender, identity, and culture has skewed Western views of Arab women, Essaydi's image has been to revise these stereotypes in a similar presentation, but while shifting the boundaries in which they are contained. "People come expecting the Orientalist image of women, and get Essaydi's reiteration of it, forcing them to look back at themselves and change their expectation of what the art is doing, and what it is meant to do (in Essaydi's eyes: understand the dynamics of the Orientalist gaze and why it's so dehumanizing and silencing towards women.)" Essaydi explains that she invites viewers to resist stereotypes, and through her works, reevaluate the

previous image in mind of the Middle Eastern woman. The work that Essaydi continues to do falls under the term of “Contemporary Arab Women’s Art,” emerging in the late 1990s as an intervention to challenge the stereotypical media representations of Arab women. Essaydi, along with other artists like Manal Al Dowayan, use their art to overcome misrepresentation, gender inequalities, and “continue to assert their presence and a renewed sense of identity through their diverse art practices.”

The work doesn’t come without its hardships, of course. Although Lalla Essaydi was born into a privileged Moroccan household, her work was barred by numerous adversities that were a strong hindrance to her success in the early stages of her work. Not only was this due to her gender identity, but also due to the fact that the expected image that she would uphold for her family and her society were very different from that of which she wished to pursue. Essaydi “grew up in a predominantly female domestic environment, where a woman’s role was defined as marrying and having children.” Essaydi faced strict gender norms, societal expectations, and historical precedents that perpetuate problematic perspectives towards women. The women represented in the cycle of images Essaydi wanted to break were “women [who] were nameless and faceless objects of male desire; they had no personality.”²⁴ Essaydi spoke of herself and of other women in the Arab world when expressing that they did not see themselves in such paintings. “Her aim, she said, is to break the stereotype by ‘appropriating the imagery or the style’ of Orientalist painters.” It is exactly within these images that Essaydi pulls her influence for her own work.

Essaydi’s efforts to break away from stereotypes were not fondly looked upon by media outlets throughout the Middle East. Her work wasn’t accepted at first, and her success required patience and careful planning. Essaydi’s photographic efforts were considered to be of high risk, as she was not only placing herself in a position of greater insecurity in safety, but her models were also in need of careful protection from the public eye throughout the beginning stages of the work, as it was not widely accepted by any

means throughout the society in which she lived and worked. The longer she pushed, however, the work began to gain ground and reach beyond herself and her community. “When my work started being known in the Middle East and the media started writing about my work, that validated it,” Ms. Essaydi said. “It’s accepted now in Morocco.”

Lalla Essaydi has a great influence on the surge of Arab Feminist art, but she is not the only one leading the charge. There are women all throughout the Middle East working in similar mannerisms as she, and in various styles that draw attention to the work they are doing, and the messages they wish to relay to the general public. Manal Al Dowayan, a Saudi Arabian artist who specializes in photography, also creates moving installations with great emotional and intellectual value to invoke solidarity among women and call attention to issues faced by women in the Middle East. Dowayan focuses her work on the gender-biased customs that primarily impact women in Saudi Arabia, although that does not defer from the idea that her work is also applicable elsewhere. “Her works spring from lived experiences” and are supported by her positionality on issues regarding gender within the country.

Dowayan’s intentions in her art, align with her personal goals, as she works to pull power back to the women around her and attempt to reclaim things like their names, their independence and their freedom from what society has taken from them for their own. In recognizing personal autonomy and name-sake, Dowayan curated a piece of her own, entitled “Esmi,” meaning “my name,” as a way to highlight the societal attitudes towards women’s names in Saudi Arabian society. On Dowayan’s site, where one can find detailed descriptions encompassing her art and her exhibitions, she explains that “men find it offensive to mention the names of the women in their lives and women also hide their identity so as not to offend the other members of her family. This is a custom occurring solely in Saudi Arabia and has no historical or religious foundation.” Without a reputable foundation for the suppression of the women and their identities, Saudi Arabia strays from the origins of respecting those who are most beloved

to you expressed by both The Prophet and The Quran. “Both mention women’s names and have never associated a woman’s name to shame or something that should be hidden.”

The purpose of “Esmi” is such that Dowayan pushes to question the society that is working to hide women’s names, and to address the social taboo that has become of speaking a woman’s name in public. Her work was developed from large, wooden beads hung from thick rope (all constructed and hand-made by her team, a group of Bedouin women from eastern Saudi Arabia) with the names of various women involved in the work inscribed on the beads for viewers to see and experience. Dowayan’s choices in her work focus the viewers gaze on social issues throughout the Arab world, and through other collections of hers, similar to the background of “Esmi,” as she wants women to be both seen and heard. In photo series entitled “The Choice” and “I Am,” Dowayan depicts portraits of Saudi women in a way that she is questioning cultural traditions that “prevent Saudi women from expanding their roles in society.” Her projects work in collaboration with other women, like the aforementioned Bedouin communities, and engage with them in the defiance of what she considers to be the “intentional erasing” of the female presence in Saudi society. “By removing a woman’s name, obscuring her face, lowering her voice... it becomes easy to dehumanise her,” says Dowayan.

Dowayan’s inclusion of real women in her works stem from an intention of inclusivity and acknowledgement of the social stratification of gender throughout the Middle East. The Bedouin tribes, for example, play a large role in the development of the aforementioned installation, Esmi, in the creation of the woven rope used to suspend the wooden beads from the ceiling of the gallery space. Throughout the generations, the influence of Bedouin women has shifted, but their value in society remains great. Bedouin society lives in a pastoral, nomadic manner and focuses its efforts towards the community in which they reside. Describing the relationship of Bedouin women with the rest of the Middle East comes with difficulty, as the social fabric and status of the women have changed over tertiary generational gaps.

Throughout the passage of time and as urbanization occurred, each generation of women has had to undergo adjustments in lifestyle and growth within the society, according to texts describing the time before 1948, until present day. Bedouin women have extensive descriptions of their existence, depicted in a strong and unified image of the past that holds their ancestry in their present. The past paints images of spirituality and connection to the land on which they lived, and the strength of the connection that brought them strength and control within their community. The stories of past generations of Bedouin women represent strengths in control over their lives and autonomy of self, which is what is represented in the works of Dowayan when including Bedouin women in the installation of Esmi. Dowayan is shedding light on an incredibly obstructed female group: one that has been worked against for numerous decades, filled with women who had to choose between personal ambition, individualism, and collectivism. The once highly respected community of Bedouin women, praised for their strength and intelligence, was now being criticized for their personal advancement and desire to continue their education, pushback against a patriarchal system, and develop personal autonomy outside of the community. The rest of the world was not nearly as supportive of these endeavors, and Dowayan used this adversity to represent the importance of these women within her art.

The disempowerment of the community of women Dowayan is attempting to represent through Esmi is due to the isolation of these women from their traditional crafts; the works of the Bedouin women used to support the family, until present day in which they have been overtaken by a patriarchal society, of which they are almost completely dependent upon due to the urbanization of the community and its surrounding societies. Dowayan’s art encourages the representation of these female groups, among others within Arab society, ensuring that their names are heard, and their presence is known and understood, without compromising their tradition and culture. Esmi is only one wall of many in the insurance of the female voice and identity.

In the development of the extensive collections and installations created by both Dawayan and Essaydi, conversations have been initiated throughout social groups, scholars, and institutions under the study of social and gender norms in place within Arab society. The common thread between the two artists, and others working to draw attention to concurrent works, is the commentary on social construction and the role of women in the Middle East. The artists discuss hopes of breaking down stereotypes and exposing others to new perspectives, and reclaiming the names, the identities, and the bodies that belong to each woman, and the autonomy that they require in attaining and retaining those personal rights. The artists turn away from the sexualization of women and paint them (whether that be literally or figuratively) in a different light, insofar that the art is no longer for someone else, but for the personal representation of women, by women. By breaking beyond the veil-imposed, per se, the emergence of representation in name, and humanistic portrayal of Arab women by modern artists reframe the origins of stereotypes initialized in Orientalist art in the 19th century. The materialization of the mystique and dramaticism of an Arab woman in Orientalist works by Jean-Leon Gerome, Ingres, Delacroix, and others are pushed back by the renewed dedication to changing the image, and creating a space for realistic and representative artworks are present in modern society, taking back the idea of what it means to be an Arab woman, autonomous in her own body, image, and namesake, under her terms.

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