

THE STEREOTYPE IMAGE OF THE MUSLIM WOMAN IN THE WESTERN WORLD: CALL FOR A NEW PERSPECTIVE

الصورة النمطية للمرأة المسلمة في العالم الغربي: دعوة لمنظور جديد

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ABSTRACT

In conservative societies, including Oriental countries, one can say that women are one of the main concerns of the conservatives; the woman in Oriental societies, especially with religious tendencies, represents a kind of 'sacred privacy'. With such peculiarity, the image of Oriental but Muslim women in particular in the eyes of Western artists has been a controversial topic through modern and contemporary art history, colonialism, as well as contemporary media where visual language is used, especially when the Muslim woman representation seems to be embarrassing, offensive or stereotyped.

As an Oriental insider woman, the researcher aims to discuss this controversial issue; within a self reflection essay, she will discuss and attempt to answer the raised questions through an artistic, social, analytical and critical approach. The aim is to present different perspectives, bring them closer together, and clarify the ambiguities in understanding the other, in order to reach a different middle perspective and to contribute to creating better chances for coexistence between East and West in a world that is supposed to be one.

KEYWORDS

Arts; Muslim-woman; migration; gender; orientalism

الملخص

في المجتمعات المحافظة، بما في ذلك بلاد المشرق، يمكن القول أن المرأة هي أحد الاهتمامات الرئيسية للمحافظين. تمثل المرأة في المجتمعات الشرقية، وخاصة ذات الميول الدينية، ما يمكن أن نطلق عليه "الخصوصية المقدسة". وبهذه الخصوصية، كانت صورة المرأة الشرقية.. لاسيما المسلمة.. في عيون الفنانين الغربيين موضوعًا مثيِّرًا للجدل عبر تاريخ الفن الحديث والمعاصر وتاريخ الاستعمار وكذلك عبر وسائل الإعلام المعاصرة حيث تُستخدم فيها اللغة البصرية، وخاصة عندما يتم تجسيد المرأة المسلمة في صور مُربكة أو مسيئة أو نمطية.

كإمرأة شرقية من داخل المجتمع، تهدف الباحثة إلى مناقشة هذا الموضوع الجدلي: باستخدام أسلوب التأمل الذاتي، ستناقش وتحاول الإجابة على الأسئلة المطروحة بهذا البحث من خلال منهج فني واجتماعي وتحليلي ونقدي. الهدف هو عرض وجهات النظر المختلفة والتقريب بينها وتوضيح الالتباس في فهم الآخر، من أجل الوصول إلى رؤية وسطية مختلفة وللمساهمة في خلق فرص أفضل للتعايش بين الشرق والغرب في عالم من المفترض أن يكون واحدًا.

الكلمات المفتاحية

فنون؛ مسلمة؛ هجرة؛ جنس؛ استشرق

1. INTRODUCTION

In conservative societies, including Oriental countries, one can say that women represent one of the most important axes of the conservatives' attention, whatever are their intellectual and ideological orientations: the woman's appearance, her presence, her reputation, her work or her clothes, all are subjects that occupy these conservatives' mind and urge them to reformulate everything that revolves around the woman in order to conform to the norms of the society; thus, the woman in Oriental societies, especially with religious tendencies, represents a matter of 'sacred privacy'; she is embodying the living honor of the whole family as well as the society. The researcher assumes that this peculiarity of the position of Muslim women in their Oriental societies and the importance they represent in determining the shape of conservative life, has contributed to feeding the modern and contemporary intellectual conflict between the Eastern and Western worlds over the visual arts that embody the Oriental women, especially when the Muslim women embodiment seems to be embarrassing, offensive or stereotyped.

Thus, the image of Oriental but Muslim women in particular in the eyes of Western artists has been a controversial topic throughout modern and contemporary art history, colonialism as well as postcolonial era and contemporary media where visual language is used.

As an Oriental insider woman, the researcher aims to discuss this controversial issue; within a self reflection essay, she will discuss and attempt to answer the raised questions through an artistic, social, analytical and critical approach. The aim is to present different perspectives, bring them closer together, and clarify the ambiguities in understanding the other, in order to reach a different middle perspective and to contribute to creating better chances for coexistence between East and West in a world that is supposed to be one.

2. WOMEN IN 'ORIENTALISTS' ARTWORKS

'Orientalism' is a term that describes how Europeans represented unexplored territories in regions of the eastern or Islamic world. Places like Turkey, the Middle East and North Africa were framed as exoticised, fictionalized places (Lyons, 2019). Orientalism in the Middle East and North Africa was also related to historical events, most of these events were connected to colonialism; for instance, the French expedition led by Bonaparte between 1798 and 1801 to seize Egypt; despite this expedition was at the bottom of its goal a military campaign, it has helped exploring the history of Ancient Egypt which is a great outcome; but it has also inspired Western world to search and to know more about the Oriental world, its cultures, its history and its people; this last outcome seems for some other opinions a negative one due to the way many artists, travelers and historians have depicted the Orient in their works.

From a point of view, the Oriental woman was one of the most interesting issues for Orientalist artists; it was said that the exotic and erotic ideation and visualization inherited by the thousands of nights and Biblical stories may have preceded military campaigns to haunt the concepts of many Orientalists; this visualization can be observed in many painting artworks of Occidental artists especially during the 18th & 19th centuries depicting women in Orient; they were largely portrayed nude or almost nude while creating an atmosphere of charm and focusing on the physical beauty of these women, their ornamental revealed costumes and surrounding architecture or backgrounds, and if not nude, then probably laying down in their dormitories doing nothing significant (figures 1 & 2). It can be said, such depictions were reflecting a kind of oneiric projection of a male desire.



*Figure 1, Egyptian Musician
by Charles Knighton Warren (b.1856)*



*Figure 2, Odalisque with Slave
by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, 1839*

Despite this exotic and erotic ideation, despite we know that many depicted oriental societies were of Muslim majority at that time, one can say that the Oriental woman in such artworks was not embodied in a way that focuses on her belief or religious ideologies in her society; it was rather an aesthetic, cultural and social depiction even when imaginary.

Also, despite Orientalists have painted many other scenes of monuments or oriental daily life, like markets, mosques, streets, palaces...Etc, such artworks in which women were depicted nudes have opened a huge gate to the historical controversy led by Eastern and Western critics and historians.

For some historians and opinion writers believe that Orientalism embodies a form of a European arrogance in recording the culture of others in a way that confirms the preference of European race in the history of humanity while serving colonial interest (For instance, see: Edward W. Saïd. 1978, or Alloula, M. 1986), while others see that Orientalism in its entirety expresses the Europeans' love of knowledge for the other in terms of acquaintance, integration, education and history (Ibn Warraq. 2007).

To be objective, the researcher believes that none of these opposing views can be considered an absolute truth. The facts cannot generally be so sharp; we believe that each of these stated views can only be true when applied to particular cases.

In light of the foregoing clarifications, the researcher thinks that due to the sensitivity of the woman's peculiarity previously explained, many Oriental intellectuals have seen a lot of negativity in Orientalism, especially concerning women issues; they have posed many denying questions about Orientalism intentions; among these questions:

- Why Orientalists gave this large focus on these nude female figures to be depicted in their artworks? Were these nude women known by 'harem' really nude as they were drawn in the courtyards of Oriental palaces? And if so, how have these male artists got in?

'Harem' is a sacred inviolable place for female members of the family, properly refers to domestic spaces that are reserved for the women of the house in a Muslim family especially in Ottoman culture. This private space has been traditionally understood as serving the purposes of maintaining the modesty, privilege, and protection of women. A 'harem' may house a man's wife or wives, their pre-pubescent male children, unmarried daughters, female domestic workers, and other unmarried female relatives. In royal 'harems' of the past, concubines of the

prince were also housed in the 'harem'. In former times, some 'harems' were guarded by eunuchs who were allowed inside. (Wikipedia).

Also, many historians have agreed about the way, humans were exposed in the slavery markets of this age: they were exposed nude, but in these artists' artworks, where were ordinary free women who were -of course- the majority of the Orient females? What limits have these Orientalists reached to present these works that among which we cannot really know if they were documentary or imaginary works?

Worth mentioning, the invention of photography in 1839 did little to contribute to a greater authenticity of painterly and photographic representations of the Orient. (Thürlemann).

Despite all these questions are interesting, they will not be answered in this article because there are so many books and researches that have tried to accomplish this mission (For instance, see Mabro, Judy. 1995; Nochlin, Linda. 1983; Irwin, Robert. 2006).

In this article, speaking of the image of the Oriental woman in the eyes of the 18th & 19th centuries Orientalists artists, within these previous questions, is actually an introducing point to a contemporary situation which seems to the researcher very similar in the visuals and where many Occidental artists in different fields are taken by the idea of depicting the world of the Oriental woman, in particular the Muslim one but within different perspectives and concepts.

3. THE MUSLIM WOMAN IN CONTEMPORARY OCCIDENTAL VISUALS: IS IT A CONTEMPORARY SORT OF 'ORIENTALISM'?

Many contemporary Occidental artists have been motivated by the condition of the Muslim woman since the September 11th terrorist attacks on the USA, then, the American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also during and after the Arab revolutions/uprisings 'The Arab Spring' starting in 2011. (Despite the 'Arab Spring' is a contemporary well known expression, used since the 2011 uprisings and revolutions, the researcher believes that the world 'Arab' is not the accurate one to describe the countries that witnessed these events; for many of these countries are not originally Arab, like Tunisia, Egypt or even Syria; those countries might use the Arabic language as contemporary evolved variant accents derived from Arabic after they were historically invaded by Muslim Arabs, centuries ago). Also, the flux of immigration during the last decade, coming from Muslim countries that are suffering of wars, toward the Western ones has grabbed the attention of Western artists to the Muslim woman; thus, it seems that during this present age too, it is the sociopolitical scene that made or hopefully inspired many Occidental artists to explore the Muslim world, especially its mysterious part for them: Muslim women.

Veiled or unveiled, the Muslim woman images in the world News during all of these mentioned events and more...had probably a great impact on the imagination of the Western mind, especially its creators; for instance, in the 2011 uprisings/revolutions, the Oriental woman had a great leading role, sometimes she was the guide, and other time she was a victim, but even as a victim, she had another role that can be considered dramatic and effective at the same time in inspiring masses of men during their uprisings.

All these images (figures 3, 4 and 5) received by the international media have so encouraged Western artists or visual creators to lead their own contemporary 'expeditions' to the Oriental female world. Thus, between the two different concepts of Orientalism art in the 18th and 19th centuries from one side and up to the Western artistic movements at the present time from another side, especially in many artworks considered feminist and also some media art, the

Muslim woman was at the center of discussions as if she was the symbol or the key of the whole Oriental world.



Figure 3, Egyptian woman brotherly kissing a soldier during the 2011 uprising



Figure 4, Al-Nahda female supporters, Tunisia 2013



Figure 5, Egyptian girl with flag during the 2011 uprising

4. RESEARCH APPROACH

The researcher assumes that the way in which Muslim women are portrayed in many contemporary Western artworks or commercial visuals could be an additional reason for reheating up the intellectual conflict between East and West, just as it has happened as a result of many Orientalist paintings and early photography in the 18th and 19th centuries. Therefore, some questions will be raised in this article, and the researcher will discuss and try to answer them through an artistic, social, analytical and critical approach:

- How does occidental art really see the contemporary Muslim woman? And how can it differ from one artist to another, especially when this one is a woman?
- Artists of oriental origins who are living in the West, how often do they succeed to deliver a closer, realistic image of the Oriental woman to the occidental society? And how often they may cause the opposite?
- Is a residence of few days or even few months in an oriental society enough to understand the real situation, the psychological, socio/historical and intellectual configuration of women in this society?
- How can some artworks present an unreal shallow view or a false image of Oriental women and therefore of the Oriental world? And how different kinds of media, commercial visuals, advertisements or comic publicities can add complexity to the situation in the name of bravery, creativity and breaking the walls of silence or freedom of expression?

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 A self-reflection analysis: the image of the immigrant Oriental Muslim woman between the countries of origin and those of the host

While trying to answer the above questions, we must acknowledge that stereotype images usually include a part of the truth about issues, but if these stereotypical images are generalized all along times; the truth will be distorted and will become unreal, especially in the eyes of simple people who usually receive such images in an everlasting shallow visual way without investigating them.

During my repetitive academic visits to some art colleges (écoles supérieures d'art) in France during the last years, I have noticed that many students there are taken by the idea of freeing the Muslim woman of her society which is probably known for its extremism to these students. The problem, if we can count it as a problem, is that those young future artists express their thoughts in a way to appear against the Muslim woman herself, as if they are mocking of her

costumes, of her attitudes, accusing her of hiding her desire behind her 'hijab', or as if she is only a tool of pleasure to her 'master', or a non-straight woman ('virgin-whore' complex); by focusing on her conservative clothes/'hijab' in a way that is completely opposite to her performed gaze or gestures and 'clichéd forms' that suggest sexual desire, or by stripping an intimate part of these conservative clothes, and when sympathizing with her, they depict her as a violated slave or a victim by her alleged master.

Worth mentioning, 'virgin-whore' complex has originally been known by 'Madonna-whore', it has been used in arts like cartoons or comic arts while depicting nuns and Christian known female personalities. (Wikipedia). Despite, conceptually and religiously, 'hijab' is way different from the nun costume, where the Christian nun has to keep her virginity or to retire permanently sex life, while the Muslim woman who wears 'hijab' can live her sexual life normally within a legitimate relationship, despite it; the virgin-whore complex has been stereotypically applied in many arts depicting both Muslim women and Christian nuns.



*Figure 6, life behind veil
photography by Colin Dixon*



*Figure 7, Veil, photography by Jananne Al-Ani
(Iraq, United Kingdom.)1997*

These students' visual concepts are probably the ready-made easiest stereotype gendered images of the Muslim woman and these attempts don't come from nothing, for there are many artworks around the Western world from different levels and values that have fed these thoughts, visually and conceptually (for instance, see figures 6 & 7); these two examples, despite the presence of veil in both of them, they don't represent the same thing, the two works are very different in nature, value and meaning: the first (Life behind Veil) can be considered as a kind of a commercial sensual photography, while the second (Veil) is of the professional Iraqi-British artist Jananne Al-Ani; it represents a self-reflection of the artist on her personal multiple identity; but in general, these two examples give us an idea about the flow of the controversial weird 'hijab' theme on the contemporary visual art market. Also, despite the difference between their artistic values, they might seem equal in the eyes of ordinary simple Muslim people; for them, both works are a mere violation of the sanctity of the veil and the Muslim woman.

This, of course, is also linked to the Oriental woman stereotype image presented by a large variety of mass communication of different political and ideological tendencies: drama & music productions, News channels, commercial advertisements, social media comics ...etc. In addition, between the Right wing who fears that the flux of Muslims to their Western lands will make them lose their identity and the Left wing who sees 'hijab' in general, against women's rights', between this and that, the Muslim immigrant woman in the Western societies

is probably the most controversial debate in the immigration issue which makes her feel uncertain, rejected and hard to coexist especially if she is wearing 'hijab', where she becomes more identified than those who don't.

All of this is somehow shaping the image of the Muslim woman in many Western contemporary artworks especially and unfortunately within many artworks which are supposed to be feminist and which were supposed to support this woman like any other woman in the world.

As a human and as an artist, I believe in the right of each one to express his opinions in a total free way, especially in visual art, where creation usually demands a no boundaries atmosphere, but as a human being (especially that I am a woman) coming from the society they might depict, I see many artworks taking the Muslim woman a superficial gendered take that does not necessarily resemble her, except in appearance and especially her 'hijab' which may appear ripped off in many of these artworks, as if it is her only problem in this life, without looking deeply into her basic issues and concerns, not even her proven success in her Eastern society, whether this society has closed or opened borders to the world, with great or limited freedom.

As a researcher, I think that this situation seems very similar to the Orientalism controversial we talked about in the beginning of this article; and as mentioned before, stereotype images usually include a part of the truth about issues, for it is true that many Muslim women are subject to oppression, having limited or zero freedom to chose anything in their lives including sex options, but this is not the whole truth; there are so many successful Oriental Muslim women/girls around the world who have transcended the strictness and severity of their societies, which are full of positive examples; as for the 'hijab' issue, despite it is obligatory in many Muslim countries, it has so many other faces that most of Occidental people don't know about: more than usual, women and girls chose it voluntarily, even if some observers see that this choice is due to some misunderstanding of their own religious texts, or due to a social large scale pressure, many of these girls still are choosing it on their own not due to any obligation. For instance, in Egypt where I live, 'hijab' is not obligatory: it has a simple form, for most women and girls who wear it, it is just a small headscarf hiding their heads with all types of feminine free contemporary Western familiar costumes, nothing to be compared with the black vast long cloak called 'abaya' which is an obligation for women in many Arab countries.

This type of simple feminine 'hijab' in Egypt seems to me as a kind of inner resistance from girls in the face of the Islamist 'Wahhabi' thought diffused intentionally in Egypt since the eighties of the 20th century and which was focusing on covering Egyptian women and girls with black, like in other Arab Countries, especially the Arab Saudi Kingdom; but because the cultural and historical heritage is different between the two countries, this fundamentalist thought couldn't find its way largely to the Egyptian scene; this simple feminine 'hijab' in Egypt may also be simply a kind of making things easier to adapt themselves to the contemporary life they are seeking for. And with these free costumes, especially in cities, Egyptian girls and women are conquering almost all areas and specialties of education and work (figures 8 & 9); they even enjoy an equal gendered pay in almost all governmental institutions, like mine, as a university member; in this context, when the Global Pay Gap survey came out at Davos, France

came a shocking 46th, way behind comparable economies (Britain is 15th, Germany 13th), and behind less comparable ones (Kazakhstan scored higher). (William, Zoe. 2011). Also, Egyptian and many Oriental women keep their family names after their marriage and this is an example of a social right that the Oriental woman has, while many Western women don't.

From my social status as a university member in a big country, considered majorly Muslim, I see many girls falling freely in love; they chose whom to get married to, they take big decisions on their own, and one can say that for many of them, 'hijab' is not an obstacle to live happily despite their modest environment.



Figure 8, Egyptian athlete girl



Figure 9, sculptor student at the faculty of Fine Arts, Cairo

As a Muslim Oriental woman, I am not advocating to promote 'hijab' which I am not committed to; I am not also stating that life is easy for those Oriental girls/women, especially those who are living in countryside and poor districts; for they have so many hard issues and severe problems to face in their societies on their everyday, but bringing up some of these different reality perspectives to the occidental world through art, researches and articles seems now to be a must, for a better understanding of the others and for a better coexistence on that planet. All of these updates of the real life of Oriental women don't seem appearing in many feminist Occidental contemporary artworks calling for freeing the Oriental woman from 'hijab' oppression as if it's her main problem. In fact, if 'hijab' means in any way that it is against women's rights, then one could say that mocking it in stereotype images in the Western world cannot help; on the contrary, it will make these women cling to more of it, even if it is against their personal desires. Worth mentioning, depicting Muslim women wearing 'hijab' in artworks is not a problem in itself; for their community, it is considered a positive identification; the problem we face today is in the way the Muslim woman is ridiculously portrayed, in the name of freeing her.

For instance, the work of the Iranian artist Shirin Neshaat, despite being feminist and obviously against 'hijab' and the woman's situation in her homeland after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, her work (figures 10 & 11) didn't seem mocking of the Muslim woman or even presenting her as a schizophrenic gendered personality like in many stereotyped western artworks we have seen during the last decade; nevertheless, her work at the time was new, shocking and has obviously inspired other artists around the world to follow her line, sometimes, with more exaggeration and without a real experience or deep knowledge of the Orient cores.



*Figure 10, Women of Allah. Speechless.
 Photography by Shirin Neshaat. 1996.*



*Figure 11, a scene from the film Rapture,
 by Shirin Neshaat. 1999.*

Another lack of knowledge appears in some social and activist feminist initiatives around the world that call on Orientals, especially Muslim women, to remove their 'hijab', but even their clothes. Well, as an inner member of this targeted community, one should explain that this is not what Muslim women need, despite the call seems right to its launchers, but it may be ruining the Muslim feminist issues in their inner battles, for militating mechanism might differ from one society to another; conservatives in the Oriental societies will definitely take this kind of Western calls to allege that feminism is only a western idea about taking off women's clothes. In the same time, such call can be considered an extremist feminist one that only focuses on the woman's body, which is not better than the obsession of fundamentalists about women's bodies (figure 12). Meanwhile, the Oriental Muslim woman like any woman on this earth has the same basic problems to discuss, the same concerns that are not limited to her right to choose her costumes which is definitely a right of hers.

In addition, it takes a lot to really understand the Oriental woman's issues related to her societies, nothing to be compared with short or long residencies of some Occidental artists in these Oriental societies; being a resident for few or more months in a conservative discreet society is not the best way to understand the complexity of everyday's concerns, especially within middle and poor classes of these societies where problems are too confidential to talk about, more rooted and more related to historical traditions before religions. For instance, in Egypt, many local traditions may apply equally to Muslim and Christian families, women and girls, like the FGM tradition. (FGM 'Female Genital Mutilation', is a bad tradition in Egypt, it has no connection to the ancient Egypt who worshiped the woman nor to Islam, but it was largely diffused in the last quarter of the 20th century due to the 'Wahhabi' extremist Islamist thought through the Muslim Brotherhood; historically, it has started to be mentioned in the scripts of the very late centuries B.C, it probably came to Egypt from Africa during the last decline eras of the Egyptian civilization). (Nour, Zeinab. 2018). This can explain how contemporary non-Muslim Oriental women seem absent in the visuals of the Western artists; this might be an absolute sign of ignorance to the real life of the Oriental world with its different cultures in general and of the Oriental non-Muslim women in particular, probably because of the immersion and immense preoccupation of many artistic Western minds with the superficial issues of the Muslim woman, her veil, and her religious world.

Indeed, there are some Occidental artists who have succeeded to discuss some Oriental women's issues, their artworks reflect a deeper understanding than others, creative exaggeration in their works was controlled by the concept they wanted to deliver; I would mention here the photographer Mouna Saboni, whom I met personally. Being a Franco-Moroccan female artist, has probably given her the advantage of better understanding the Oriental inner life, not to mention that being a female artist, has also given her the chance to meet and talk to many women and girls in some oriental countries she has visited, where she could listen, know and understand, then support them with her art (figure 13); her work has been able to depict the real nowadays problems and issues of the Oriental girls she has met, many of her works have dealt with sexual harassment issue, love stories and sexual discrimination in these conservative societies with a sense of impartiality and reason; but one has to be frank and say that this kind of in-depth creators are not taking enough their chances in the Occidental propaganda.



Figure 12, a Femen activist during a manifestation in Paris. 2012



Figure 13, Aya. Photography by Mouna Saboni. Egypt. 2015.

In the same context, there are so many artists of Oriental origins who have immigrated to the Western world; some were born there, or have moved there since their childhood with their families as refugees, or any other sort of residency; some of these artists have suffered greatly of schism in their identity between the ethics of the East and those of the West, some of them (or their families) have been persecuted in their Eastern homelands for reasons related to gender, beliefs or political opinions. As an art observer, I believe those artists among others have taken their part in drawing the stereotype image of the Oriental woman for the West; and whatever was the case, it was natural to express their own life experiences in a way that presents the East in its ultimate negative image. From their perspective, and their personal experiences, it is a kind of logic to present such bold artworks, depicting Muslim women depressed, oppressed or schizophrenic when it comes to a comparison between her 'hijab' (appearance) and her inner desires (figures 14 & 15). Beyond art, this comparison might be true in many cases and this article is not denying it in anyway. But as mentioned before, this fact is representing only one perspective of the whole truth for many years; now, many things have changed during the last two decades, where resisting bad traditions and fundamentalist religious trends in many Muslim societies has become stronger, and with the spread of social media, which - despite its many problems - provided new tools to many girls and women to express their opinions, and mostly important, has helped them obtaining various sources of opinions and knowledge regarding religion and social issues after long years of a monotone unchanging source of opinions, which was often affiliated with political regimes or fanatic

religious trends through the national televisions, radios and journals in their countries. Such recent successive changes do not appear in the frozen stereotype, gendered and ridiculed image of the Muslim or Oriental woman that has been engraved in the collective memory of the Western peoples, especially after the September 11th terrorist attacks, when mocking the Muslim world became a trend in many subjective media and related tools of expression (figure 16). (About Muslims in USA after 11/9, see for instance: Hussein, Shakira. 2016).



Figure 14, Self-portrait painting by the Iranian-British artist Sarah Maple.



Figure 15, "Between" by Hussein Chalayan. Turkish Cypriot/British fashion designer.



Figure 16, Sharia-Liberty Anonymous cartoon symbolizing the rise of counterjihad

Not to mention, the Western commercial visuals that took its part in drawing an ambiguous sexist image of the Muslim woman (figure 17); Even Western music production has sometimes taken the same way but with different alleged goals (figure 18); the matter that helped diffusing the stereotype image of Oriental Muslim women in the West on a large scale, which for years, has evoked a tone of hostility, lack of society's peace, and a difficulty of coexistence between the two sides, especially in countries that are hosting large immigrant Muslim communities.



Figure 17, Diesel's 'niqab' advertisement



Figure 18, French Montana's trailer. A Moroccan-American rapper. 2019.

Also, some and not many Oriental artists who were seeking fast international spread, they have chosen the short way to fame by riding the wave of stereotype images of the Muslim woman, which has added insult to injury because they were worth to be believed while they were supposed to represent more about what is really going on in their Oriental societies and not only repeating the shallow issues presented by some occidental contemporary art that might

still underpin racist or mocking assumptions, that even today, the Oriental woman needs to be saved by the white man from the oppression of the non-white barbarian man.

But these artists, whether the multiple identity (western/eastern) ones or the Oriental contemporary artists, are all playing as individuals; they probably exhibit their work on a limited scale comparing, for instance, to public art or to mass communication arts.

On an opposite side to these Oriental artists who have been contributing in the diffuse of the stereotype gendered image of the Muslim woman during last decades in the West, there has been another wave to ride within the so called 'Arab Spring', where many other Oriental artists have taken on the responsibility of articulating the deepest issues of women in their societies; new perspectives, new serious feminist trends have arisen in many oriental countries. That will be discussed in the following part.

5.2 Street art: a platform of freedom

Street art has been spreading around the world during last decades, it has become a kind of 'artivism' (a portmanteau word combining art and activism) especially in feminism issues, where artists and graffiti writers may use exaggerated or bold forms, weird elements, shocking or disturbing ideas and sharp language as a way to make their visual messages more influential while adjusting to different local and socio/political circumstances in their societies.

For instance, in Egypt, contemporary feminist street art has flourished only after the 2011 uprising, especially when Muslim Brothers' president has been in charge. (Nour, Zeinab. 2017). This art was linked to the defence of women's rights and presented powerful means of action and resistance for Egyptian artists (men or women) against the fundamentalism of radical Islam. Despite the history of modern art in Egypt has so many good initiatives and movements of feminism in general and feminist artworks in particular (Nour, Zeinab. 2017), one can say that the street art movement during and after the 2011 uprising (especially artworks made by female graffiti writers) has brought up more powerful feminist messages to the whole society classes and not just to the elite, it has notably discussed many contemporary issues beyond 'hijab' and superficial appearance of the Egyptian woman (figures 19 & 20). Rather, the movement has refused in some of its artworks to classify women based on their appearance and costume (figures 21 & 22).

We know that street art, in general, takes feminism with boldness and absolute freedom of artists, aiming to deliver their messages as powerfully as possible. And given that there is typically a conflict between women's rights and religious ideologies, cultures and traditions in most conservative societies such as countries in the Middle East, the researcher found out within a previous study (Nour, Zeinab. 2017) that feminism needs a special aesthetic treatment 'smart' when dealing with streets, in order to make the artwork acceptable to such a society, and in order to give it a longer life on streets which consequently will give it the chance to achieve an effective impact in time, especially if messages are repetitive.

Despite this positive artistic movement, and this special visual way of dealing with women's issues, especially in graffiti's artworks, we believe that until now, there are many issues that the Egyptian feminist street art has not been able to raise due to the sensitivity of the sexual nature of these issues in these conservative Eastern societies, of which Egypt is one of them; for instance, the FGM problem and the sexual life rights of the woman.



Figure 19, AUC's main campus, Cairo. Women carry gas kegs by Hanaa El Degham. 2012



Figure 20, Graffiti "Mother of martyrs". Moh. Mahmoud Str. Cairo. 2011 uprising.



Figure 21, feminist Egyptian graffiti depicting 3 female figures with different looking: "Don't label me"



Figure 22, feminist Egyptian graffiti of a captive girl; half face with 'niqab' while the other half is not covered: "Do not treat me just by the way I look, treat me as a human"

Like any place in the world, some bold exceptions of artists' messages may apply regardless any unwritten rules of a conservative society. But in general, it can be said that feminist street art in Oriental countries has found its way to the societies despite all difficulties, its strong deep messages will make social changes even-though slowly. This kind of serious messages, with objective perspectives, needs to be seen on a wide range, nationally to encourage women to speak for themselves, or to enlighten families, and internationally to help others beyond borders to know better about the Oriental woman and her real issues, away from the shallow 'hijab' issue.

Worth mentioning that Oriental cinema has also made great avant-garde efforts in covering the local insight woman issues, especially the Egyptian Cinema in the 20th century; many female stars have contributed in highlightening feminist issues; for instance, the role of actress/singer 'Shadia', in a very well known movie titled 'A bit of fear' in 1969, in which she was the only person in the whole village that could stand in the face of the tyrant, in a forced marriage story. The dramatic scene left a deep print on Egyptians' visual memory. She was a symbol of the brave woman who did what no other men dared to do, for the sake of her people and country.

Also, during the past two decades many films initiatives and individual efforts in various Middle Eastern countries, have played a great role to break into deep women's issues, whether through traditional dramas or through short, experimental or documentary films. (More resources can be found in the additional references including 'Shadia' scene).

On the other side of the world, feminist street art in Occidental countries was far ahead of the Eastern world, almost since the last third of the 20th century (Wikipedia); it has knocked every

closed door, it has become a way to share pain as well as engage collective fights; it has been taking women's rights as a reoccurring global cause and has been aiming at moving from prejudice to special understanding, courageous political decisions, and conscious, secular, reasonable thinking.

In this context, the image of the Muslim woman in the eyes of Western artists during last decades didn't just remain into galleries or modern and contemporary art museums; whether this image was realistic or imaginary, objective or provocative, sympathetic to the issues of Muslim women or sarcastic ... all of these images have moved to the heart of the Western public areas through different kinds of street arts, especially with the increase of the immigration flux from Muslim countries to Occidental ones.

Despite street art has a powerful impact, with its soft or bold messages, it appears sometimes to have a double-edged weapon; one is for defending human rights and raising the voices of marginalized people, while the other edge can cause damage to the understanding language between people of different ethnicity. For despite all what street arts have been able to offer to many feminist causes in the Western world, and because street art within the field of public art is a very dialectic subject, often considered together as a blessing and a curse, with many discordant visual and ethical opinions, because of this, many visual examples can be brought up in this article to show how such an active platform of freedom can unexpectedly present a hurtful speech to the society or at least to some of its classes.

For instance, if we look at the work of 'Princess Hijab' (figure 23), a graffiti writer in France; she delivers a message (especially at the beginning of her series) against French Government efforts to ban the 'niqab' in public spaces. According to the visual culture of the Muslim societies, one can say that such graffiti may not be seen as a pro-Muslim women artwork; on the contrary, it may be interpreted as it was against them.

Whereas, the image of women appearing in 'Princess Hijab's' graffiti, half nude, half in black 'niqab', could be simply meaning a mocking representation of a hypocrite Muslim woman playing half chaste and half prostitute 'Virgin-whore complex'; it does hurt and provoke Muslims from all trends and ideologies, whether they are for or against 'niqab'.

The question is: how can an artist claim to be serving a cause while completely ruining it from the point of view of the people she represents?

In fact, one way or another; the image seems to deliver a message that is going in the wrong direction. Such work – ambiguous and therefore prone to misunderstandings as it could be considered as a kind of aggression towards women - may be seen as controversial, but it questions the action margin of feminist female artist to create work that will be bold but not beyond boldness. In my opinion, it is an elastic, inaccurate and ridiculously exaggerated image that besieges immigrant Muslim women and limits them by the theme of the 'niqab', which is really representing a dilemma to our age, especially, under the stress and fear of probable worldwide terrorist attacks in the name of Islam; and despite this, 'niqab' is not the main problem of the occidental society or of the immigrating Muslim woman; whom her main concern might be in how to integrate herself or her Oriental family in the new society, or keeping balance between her conservative heritage and the principles of the new Occidental free hosting society; in many cases, she is standing as a wall in the face of many misunderstandings and hate speeches on her insider small family level, such graffiti is not helping her in this mission at all.

It also shows that within the field of street art, feminism is a very dialectic subject, bringing many discordant visual and ethical opinions especially concerning immigrant Muslim women's

image in Western streets, it can appear ambiguous and not really helping the society to live in peace; such visual works, if repeated, may increase the Islamophobia problem and feed the citizens' sense of fear which, unfortunately, has become a common sense lately in the occidental world due to terrorist attacks.

As a Muslim woman, I believe that 'niqab' is so different from 'hijab' in concept; the veil/'hijab' can be considered as a type of personal decision that an individual woman is free to make because it doesn't affect others, while 'niqab' is not: due to the present global security requirements, it seems not appropriate to be used in general, and particularly in Western societies where it represents a very strange concept, especially in official work places and public transportations; it may cause a lot of negative and fear feelings toward the person who appears moving as unknown black mass. Worth mentioning that 'niqab' is forbidden to be used by women in the Great Mosque of Mecca during 'hajj', it is the mosque that surrounds the 'Ka'ba', which is the most sacred place for Muslims and which has to be visited by men and women equally and mixed during 'hajj'. With such a fact, it appears to me that Islam has not asked for such costumes. This means that the Islamic religious spirituality represented by the 'niqab' is unfounded or at least irrelative. Despite all of this, portraying Muslim women in such stereotype ridiculous images is not helping anyone or any cause due to the mentioned reasons in these papers. Thus, such works of 'Princess Hijab', also question the difference that may exist between the philosophy of a graffiti writer who is a citizen on his/her own land or another citizen but from different origins, atheist or a believer...Etc. For these differences also can influence the form in visuals due to the deep or shallow artist's understanding of his/her historic visual culture, and its effect on the people whom the issue is related to. It also brings to one's mind the question of inter-culturalism within feminism, interrogating the form of an artwork done in the name of Islamic feminism in a non-Muslim society. The image of Muslim women in art in both countries (Muslim and secular), sits at heart of national identity debates, knowing that the problem is not about 'which artwork is better?', but about how often feminist issues in this artwork are shaped, presented and why, and also about the artist's aims: serving a cause or searching for a personal fame regardless the social consequences.

Actually, supporting Muslim veiled women, in their coexisting issue in the Western world has been proven by many other Occidental street artists. For instance, the work of BR1; an Italian graffiti writer; his work (figure 24) seems more objective in embodying veiled women in their daily life scenes: as mothers or family members or friends having fun together, which shows his intention in supporting these women in their Western immigration societies, as normal people and not as strangers or scary creatures.



Figure23, Different graffiti works of 'Princess hijab' in public places in France



Figure24, Graffiti in Torino, Italy by the graffiti writer BR1 (short for Bruno)

6. CONCLUSIONS

- Due to the sensitivity of the woman's peculiarity in conservative societies, her image's embodiment in Western artworks has caused a historical conflict between Eastern and Western historians and intellectuals; Orientalism was one of these conflict battlefields.
- There is a kind of similarity between the visuals of the 18th & 19th Orientalists artists on one hand and many Occidental contemporary arts on the other hand, when depicting the world of the Oriental woman, in particular the Muslim one, but within different perspectives and concepts. The first were probably taking their work into a kind of aesthetic depiction of the Oriental woman in charming, dreamy and sometimes exhilarating scenes, similar to the story books and oriental nostalgia. While the contemporary Occidental artists (whatever their art field is) who are taken by the depiction of the Oriental women, many of them are taking their works into a critique aspect, calling for freeing this victim woman, sometimes mocking of her and some other times depicting her as a secret sex machine with an emphasis on her veil that is torn or revealing her nakedness; the matter that brings up religion criticism or condemnation into the artwork itself and it is something related to the ongoing political and social events. Contemporary different kinds of media has caused to this situation to be diffused on large scale, especially when it is presented through mass communication tools owned by huge institutions and not just by individuals.
- The social and political events in Oriental societies have been a stimulus for many Western artists to explore the Islamic world, especially its mysterious part to them which is the Muslim women: whether in Orientalism that was usually linked to colonialism or in some contemporary arts affected by political movements in these Eastern societies, or by terrorist attacks, wars, migratory flows, or local uprisings. Contemporary different media types have caused this situation to spread on a large scale as well.
- This also shows how the Oriental woman, whether in modern or contemporary visual depictions of the Western artists was in the heart of the debate about Orient; and with immigration flux, new debates have been added to her image in contemporary arts like Islam's ideology and all other related issues, such as terrorism in the name of Islam, fundamentalism, immigration and lack of liberty; as if she is the key of all problematic by being the symbol of the Orient with all its outstanding issues; in this context, the Muslim woman in such visualizations has been burdened with the guilt of humanity problems, as she appears to be both guilty and victim at the same time, while real Muslim women in many witnessed cases stand as a wall against many social and economic problems in their societies, not to mention in

other societies like occidental ones where many immigrating Oriental progressive courageous women are playing a basic role in integrating their families with their new host lands. Therefore, contemporary stereotype image of Muslim women in the West has evoked a tone of hostility, lack of society's peace, and a difficulty of coexistence between the two sides for the benefit of no one.

- Probably, because of the immersion and immense preoccupation of some artistic Western minds with the superficial issues of the Muslim woman, her veil, and her religious world, contemporary non-Muslim Oriental women seem absent in the visuals of the Western artists; which represents a kind of ignorance to the real life of the Oriental world with its different cultures in general and of the Oriental non-Muslim women in particular.

- Many art students and artists in the Western world are taken by the idea of freeing the Muslim women from what they think is a kind of oppression, while it is not necessarily the case; media and many other fields in which visual art occurs have added weight to the situation.

- The stereotype image of the Muslim woman seems to be shaped and engraved in the collective memory of the Western world due to many intertwined net of mass communication; this image can be noticed, even in some highlighted feminist artworks, cinema, commercials, music industry, street arts... Ect. This also explains how some feminist art can be sometimes working in the opposite direction of Muslim women's real issues.

- Many Muslim women around the world are indeed suffering from different kinds of oppression and gendered discrimination in their societies, but it is not the only truth to be depicted by visual arts; for there are too many bright and positive images and examples in these societies thanks to many reasons, but above all thanks to the resistance and combat of the women themselves, from within their own societies to change their dire reality. These kinds of bright images should be highlighted worldwide to replace the stereotype ridiculous images of the Oriental Muslim woman that Western societies still use in their arts when depicting that woman.

In this context, despite Muslim women in general still suffer of many outstanding problems in their societies, they enjoy some human rights that many Western women don't have; for instance the equal gender pay in many governmental jobs, like in Egypt or even better like in Kazakhstan.

- There are some contemporary Occidental artists who have succeeded to discuss some Oriental women's issues, their artworks reflect a deeper understanding than others but unfortunately their works have not been highlighted as good as it should be.

- There are so many artists of Oriental origins whom by exhibiting their artworks in the Western world's art societies, have taken their part in drawing the stereotype image of the Oriental Muslim woman for the West, whether to express their own hard experiences or to critique the situation of women in their communities of origin; But these types of visuals, unlike mass communication media, often remain within limited reach of ordinary people which makes them less problematic and less shocking than those in the public arts.

- Feminist Street arts are linked to the defence of women's rights and have presented powerful means of action and resistance in both Western world, and in many Eastern countries, especially, those that witnessed social and political movements and uprisings during the last decade. In these Eastern countries, local street artists (especially female ones) have brought up more powerful feminist messages to the whole society classes and not just to the elite, they have notably discussed many contemporary issues beyond 'hijab' and superficial appearance of the Muslim woman. They still have much to do, especially concerning some inner intimate

silenced issues, but in general, this kind of deep understanding of the Oriental society should be highlighted to replace the stereotype ridiculous images about Oriental women, especially Muslim ones; nationally, to encourage women to speak for themselves, or to enlighten families, and internationally to help others beyond borders to know better about the Oriental women' issues.

It also shows that an Oriental woman - whether she is an artist or not - should have the opportunity and support to speak, write, and express her own issues, which is much better than others from other cultures doing it on her behalf. Also, Western feminists need to understand that militating mechanism might differ from one society to another, which means that using the Western tools in Oriental societies may ruin the whole issue.

- Feminist street art in occidental countries, despite being very progressive in its goals and impact on the societies while covering almost every concerning issue, sometimes, dilemma might occurs when depicting the Muslim immigrant woman in these Western countries.

- Feminist street art in Western societies, like mass communication media, can make matters worse for the image of Muslim women, because, if misused, it transfers the stereotypical image from the walls of private galleries to the walls of streets, where it can be seen by all people to be affected, especially the simple ones who don't usually investigate issues much.

- If Western street artists do not really understand the inner concepts and principles of Muslim societies, or if they only care about their own artistic propaganda, then they can send a message in the wrong direction; it can cause harm to the feelings of the immigrant Muslims and push them to further retrenchment and detachment from society on one hand, while, on the other hand, it may cause or increase the Islamophobia among Western citizens toward Muslim immigrants, especially veiled women; the matter that is not helping for any coexistence or peace in this society.

- In general, probably, such a controversial issue raised in this essay will not end in the near future; for it is related to many political, economic and social worldwide codes.

The enemies of coexistence and fundamentalists on both sides of the conflict do benefit from such issues; basically, the extreme right wing in the West and the Islamists in the East.

However, with the intervention of researchers, artists, intellectuals, educators and with more presence of women from all specialties, who are all enlightened and aware of the dimensions of the issue, as well as an intercultural dialogue and exchange between both sides, through research, analysis, workshops, art events and by supporting different respectful, humanist and responsible perspectives of expression, there will always be hope.

In addition, there is an urgent need that the moderate Muslims around the world call on the broad Muslim masses to reduce their hypersensitivity towards everything that seems offensive to them, especially when this offense comes from individuals or limited entities in their being; Muslim masses need to understand that these matters cannot and it is not required to be controlled, because this age is beyond the previous eras of gagging; besides, they are not just directed towards Islam, but often to all kinds of dogmas and restrictions across the world as a kind of self-expression; for instance, the researcher mentioned the example of using 'virgin-whore complex' against either Muslim women or Christian nuns; not to mention that even the Western woman can be generally represented in gendered stereotype images in different kinds of medias, as a part of a larger global visual consumerist mass culture, based on the objectification of persons; for instance, and regardless our opinion about it, the trailer of the Moroccan-American rapper 'French Montana' can be considered within this visual commercial

concept where a sexualized ambiguous image of Muslim women goes along with the same treatment of Western women, within a vulgar contest of sexist contents.

On the other hand, there is an urgent need to activate some ethical principles and standards that impose prudence and objectivity in criticizing the others and respecting their sanctities, especially when the criticism is issued by an official or a state media entity, or when the criticism is on a mass public level, like we saw in some street art examples. Actually, the good cultural struggle against the vilification of the image of Muslim Oriental woman, or any woman from any ethnics or belief, can be conducted in a solidarity humanist perspective for the deconstruction of stereotype images and for the defence of the dignity of persons and human beings in the diversity of their identities and cultures.

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